

SHARING SECRETS

Giving it away can really add up when it comes to your bottom line



This is a story about a piece of information going viral long before anyone heard of anything other than viruses going viral. This bit of news went viral by word of mouth, the original method of spreading a hot piece of information.

Although it originally appeared in 1986, the document resurfaced recently online as a PDF. It's an image of a piece of paper stained with egg, butter and flour, attesting to its validity by showing that it had been used in the kitchen, and was therefore tried and true. The document was a recipe for one of Mrs. Fields' famous cookies.

Before sharing the recipe, the author explains how she had the chance to buy one of Debbi Fields' recipes for "two-fifty." The Fields



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company was already hot and hugely successful. A recipe was worth paying for, especially since the cost was nominal. She charged it, and when the statement came, that assumed \$2.50 turned out to be \$250.

Livid and primed for revenge, the author sent it off in a chain letter so that no one would have to pay for this recipe again. The best part of this story is that it was a hoax, but it raises an interesting question. What is a recipe worth?

If we did the math based on Fields' success, presuming the recipe was authentic, it was worth considerably more. Technically. But actually, even if it was authentic, giving the secret away was unlikely to put even the mildest dent in Mrs. Fields' sales. Her customers would not stop buying her cookies even if they could make them at home.

This is equally true of a commercial competitor. Fields' customers were now buying the brand. The cookies were an afterthought, albeit a significant one.

What keeps this story interesting is the notion of "the secret recipe" in an age when online recipes number in the millions, and successful chefs and bakers are finding markets for glossy hardcover books pouring out their secrets. In the U.S., these are just some of the famed bakeries sharing their wealth: Hummingbird, Magnolia, Bourke Street, Blackbird, Three Dog and Butch. In Canada, the best known give-it-away baking books have come from Linda Haynes, co-founder of Ace Bakery, which launched in 1993, went international in 2005, and which she and her partner sold to Weston in 2010 for \$110 million.

Should an independent bakery publish its recipes? As if there's even time to do a conversion for home use, I know.

It's worth noting that in 1976, Fields did publish a modest pamphlet of

recipes. The marketing savvy around that move was obvious to her. Although she was giving something away, the foundation of her success was safe, and her goodwill built added value.

The fact remains that no recipe can capture the unique subtlety of individual execution, be it mechanical or artisanal. By sharing her recipes, Fields was giving her business the power of genuine goodwill, and that impacts the bottom line.

If you're an independent bakery, and you recognize that your customers are awed by what you do – and believe me, they are – it's worth considering publishing in some form. To publish means to make public, so you can take many approaches. If you're wired with a website, a newsletter, a Facebook page or a Twitter account, you already have a platform. But there's a lot to be said for analog publishing, perhaps in the form of a monthly printout from your computer. Make a featured recipe a



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point-of-sale handout slipped into a bag of bread or rolls or sweets – icing on your customers' cake, you could say. A cookie of the month, new bread you're trying out or a best-selling favourite, any of these will work. Even recipes for the sandwich fillings in your deli counter, if you have one.

Keep it easy to maintain. Monthly is plenty often enough, and before long, you'll have enough for a pamphlet, which you can sell for next to nothing, which is how it should be sold. This is a marketing tool, not a revenue stream. Your customers are never going to stop coming to you for what they love about your shop. Those recipes are going to be Sunday afternoon projects for family enjoyment, and you and your shop are going to be right there, with feel-good to spare.

Don't be surprised if your recipe giveaways get some buzz. They will. People who care will share them. That's icing on your cake.

If you don't have time to convert recipes for home use, create a student contest at a professional school and credit the winner on your printout. The give-away feel-good will just keep on giving. / **BJ**

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