General Mills Uses Open Innovation To Help Create New Brownies

With trusted brands including Pillsbury®, Gold Medal®, and Betty Crocker®, General Mills knows a thing or two about baked goods. So a delicious, nutritious, 90-calorie brownie would seem to fall right in the company's wheelhouse. But it turns out, that wasn't *exactly* the case.

While at-home bakers have relied on General Mills' brands for decades, there's a big difference between producing world-renowned flour, baking mixes, and pre-made refrigerated dough and producing a shelf-stable, ready-to-eat, baked good.

This was the challenge faced by General Mills' Snacks division when it wanted to add a tasty, wholesome brownie to the popular line of Fiber One® [1] products. While the Fiber One team created the idea and concept, and General Mills' R&D department had the expertise to make the perfect dough for this brownie, they knew that they didn't have the existing internal expertise and baking manufacturing capabilities to bake it. The company decided to enlist an open innovation partner to save time and reduce risk in developing Fiber One 90-Calorie Brownies [2].

The General Mills team, including contract manager Steve Bauer and innovation entrepreneur Jenny Mcaab, began actively seeking an outside partner with the technical know-how and capacity to take the dough they had created and scale the Fiber One 90-Calorie Brownies to production. Through networking with existing outside partners, the company became aware that Hearthside Food Solutions [3], an external manufacturing partner that General Mills has worked with for years on other product innovations, had the needed capabilities.

Hearthside's personnel had the baking experience and pilot plant facilities needed to perfect the baking process and take production to full scale. The company also had multiple locations with the right equipment available. All of these factors contributed to a smooth startup, while maximizing efficiency in terms of time and General Mills' investment.

By collaborating with an outside partner with Hearthside's capabilities, General Mills' Snacks division estimates it saved nine to twelve months in terms of taking the product from concept to launch. If the company had produced the brownies itself, it wouldn't have had access to Hearthside's ability to extensively test formulations, which allowed for consumer testing earlier in the product development cycle.

"From concept to launch, our partnership with Hearthside to develop Fiber One 90-Calorie Brownies proved to be win-win for both parties, which is exactly what open innovation is all about," said Jeff Resch, senior scientist for General Mills' Snacks division, who led the product development team. "By tapping into the best of each of our capabilities, we were able to introduce a better product faster."

Hearthside has shared in the marketplace success of Fiber One 90-Calorie Brownies with an increase in its business with General Mills and the opportunity to enhance its baking capabilities as it gained new expertise in baking higher-moisture content products and improved finished product weight control. The company continues to partner with General Mills to leverage its manufacturing and baking expertise to bring innovation to market faster.

Introduced in June of this year, Fiber One 90-Calorie Brownies are available in Chocolate Fudge and Chocolate Peanut Butter varieties. Each brownie contains 5 grams of fiber, offering a wholesome option to traditional sweet snacks. The products have already proven to be popular in terms of sales and consumer buzz, fueled in part by a "Magic Brownie Adventure" viral video [4] featuring 70s and 80s icons Cheech & Chong.

General Mills believes that connected innovation is all about looking inside and outside the company to find smart people with the right capabilities to drive business forward. To facilitate that effort, the company created the General Mills Worldwide Innovation Network (G-WIN) [5] to actively seek partners who can help deliver new levels of taste, health, and convenience in its products.

The mutually beneficial partnership formed between General Mills and Hearthside to develop Fiber One 90-Calorie Brownies illustrates what makes open innovation a best practice that businesses can rely on.

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