



Earlier this week, KFC removed Colonel Harland Sanders' original handwritten recipe of 11 herbs and spices that go into the company's signature fried chicken from its safe storage place. The 68-year-old recipe had been resting in a locked filing cabinet inside a vault at the company's Louisville headquarters, and it was only removed under the watchful eyes of many guards so the company could

upgrade the security around the piece of paper. Why all the fuss? Are these measures just publicity-seeking theatrics for KFC? Why does KFC need to keep the recipe under lock and key anyway?

The KFC recipe is part of a larger class of corporate knowledge known as trade secrets. Broadly defined, a trade secret is a process (think of things like Web search algorithms), formula, practice, design, or other secret information to which the public doesn't have access that allows a company to gain a competitive advantage over the rest of its industry. In this case, KFC feels that its spice blend enables the company to make particularly delicious chicken that's differentiated from the rest of the fried-chicken market. The public seems to agree; KFC raked in over \$5 billion in domestic sales last year. If another chicken company got their hands on this spice blend, they could conceivably replicate the delicious fried poultry and effectively eat away at KFC's market share. As such, KFC maintains its recipe as a trade secret to keep competitors at bay.

Why not just get a patent to protect the recipe? Because then the cat would be out of the bag on what the 11 spices are. In order to acquire a patent, a company has to give pretty exhaustive information on what it's patenting to the United States Patent and Trademark Office. If the office granted a patent, the information would then become public. Although KFC would have a temporary monopoly (usually for 20 years) on that particular recipe, every chicken shack owner in the country could start toying with the recipe, making little tweaks to it, and potentially coming up with something even better. None of that would be good for the Colonel. But by keeping the recipe a closely guarded secret, the company can theoretically keep its advantage forever. Since apparently no one has the first clue what the 11 spices are, much **less** the proportions in which they're mixed, the company can feel safe as long as it guards the recipe.

Does this mean we'll never see another restaurant selling KFC's chicken? Not quite. One downside of a trade secret is that it's perfectly legal for competitors to try to reverse engineer someone else's product. You want to make KFC chicken legally? Get in the kitchen and tinker with spice blends until you figure out the one that tastes just like it. Alternatively, if a chef serendipitously came up with the spice blend independently without sneaking a peak at KFC's recipe, she could start legally trafficking in the bird.

The KFC spice blend is just one example of a jealously guarded trade secret, though. Here are a few other notable ones:

The Coca-Cola formula, which is known by the code name "Merchandise 7X," is possibly the best-known trade secret in the world. The formula, which dates back to the drink's 1886 invention by Joseph S.

Pemberton, is written on a piece of paper that resides in an Atlanta bank. Despite decades of attempts to figure out the formula, no one has succeeded yet; these failures are why the knock-off store brand sodas you buy never taste quite like the real thing. Coke is not afraid to go to great lengths to maintain the secrecy of the formula. In 1977 the Indian government demanded that the company reveal the recipe to keep its ability to sell the beverage in India. Coke decided it would rather leave the market altogether rather than give up its secret; you couldn't buy a Coca-Cola in India until the government relented in 1993.

McDonald's Special Sauce was originally conceived for a burger to compete with Big Boy's signature burger in Pittsburgh, but it was so popular it had to get a national audience. The sauce is pretty analogous to Thousand Island dressing, but the actual formulation remains a secret sought by beef aficionados everywhere.

AdWords is Google's advertising product that places pay-per-click banner and text ads throughout the Web and provides site-targeted ads. The system is certainly successful; it pulled in over \$16 billion last year. How do the ads get placed on individual pages, though? Good question, but it's one that will remain a mystery since the algorithm is a trade secret.

- **This article was originally published by Ethan Trex at Mental Floss.**

Find the word or phrasal verb that matches the definitions.

- _____ A state of excessive and unwarranted concern over an unimportant matter.
- _____ Copy.
- _____ Disadvantage.
- _____ To adjust or work with something in an experimental manner.
- _____ Finding something valuable accidentally.
- _____ A copy or imitation.
- _____ To cease resistance.
- _____ Similar, alike.
- _____ A person who likes, knows about, and appreciates something specific.
- _____ Accumulate, collect.