Episode Book

EPISODE #5786

Colgate, Harley, and Bic: Famous Brands' Forgotten Flops

PUBLISHED	8 October 2026 at 16:36 UTC
DURATION	22:00
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/famous-brand-product-flops/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
SOURCES	18 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:40 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Everyone knows the Colgate frozen lasagna story. Except the lasagna never existed — the box was a mock-up built by the Museum of Failure in 2017. What Colgate actually sold was dried chicken and crabmeat entrees, test-marketed in one Wisconsin city, and later a soybean snack pulled for causing flatulence. This episode digs into big brands' forgotten product disasters: Harley-Davidson's Black Fire cologne line, which ran for nearly a decade before being quietly shelved, and Bic Cristal for Her, the pink pen that cost more and became a national punchline. Along the way: why brand loyalty can turn on itself, why gender segmentation works in razors but not pens, and what corporate erasure looks like when a company denies a product that never existed to avoid discussing the one that did.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

The thing I keep circling back to is the confidence. Not the failure. The confidence.



Herman

The boardroom where somebody stood up and said "perfume" and nobody stopped them.



Corn

Harley-Davidson. A company whose entire identity is a V-twin engine and the smell of hot oil, and at some point in the nineties a room full of adults decided that what that brand needed was a cologne called Black Fire.



Herman

Twenty-five to sixty dollars a bottle, woody aromas with hints of tobacco. I want you to picture the meeting.



Corn

I'd rather not.



Herman

And that is exactly what Daniel's asking about today. Corn, take it away.



Corn

Daniel wants a countdown, and he's got a rule for it. Big established brands only, no startups. Products a famous company launched with total corporate swagger and then quietly pulled, ideally inside a year, the ones the company now hopes everybody has forgotten so thoroughly that you'd struggle to find them in their own history.



Herman

And he's explicit about the ones he doesn't want. Skip New Coke, skip the flops everyone already knows by heart.



Corn

He name-checked three to get us started. Colgate and frozen lasagna. Harley-Davidson and perfume. Bic and pens for her. So let's start with the first one, and I should warn everybody up front, it's not the story they think it is.



Herman

Start with the lasagna that never existed.



Corn

Because here's the thing. The Colgate Beef Lasagna, the box everybody's seen, the red-and-white Colgate logo over a photo of frozen pasta, that box is a fabrication. It was made by the Museum of Failure in Helsingborg, Sweden, which opened in 2017. Not a photograph of a real product. A mock-up.



Herman

And the museum's founder, Samuel West, has been pretty candid about it. He said the reconstruction was based on images they found online, and even those could have been constructions. He's since floated the theory that either Colgate has a bad memory or the museum got pranked by some branding consultant who started an urban legend years ago.



Corn

So the museum built a fake box to illustrate a story, and the internet ran with it as documentary evidence.



Herman

And it worked. Google Trends shows searches for "Colgate Lasagne" only start after 2017. The phrase barely exists before the museum puts up the display. So this isn't a folk memory of a real product. It's a legend with a timestamp.



Corn

Which raises the obvious question. Did Colgate sell frozen food at all, or did we all just get got?



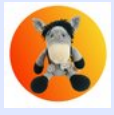
Herman

They absolutely did. Colgate-Palmolive in the sixties was a conglomerate, and that's not a small thing. George Henry Lesch takes over as chairman, Procter and Gamble is beating them senseless in the domestic market, and the strategy of the day is diversification. You already own food companies, so food is the logical adjacency.



Corn

And the real product?



Herman

Colgate Kitchen. Dried chicken and crabmeat entrees. Not lasagna. Five products, test-marketed in 1964, and here's the detail I love, only in Madison, Wisconsin.



Corn

One city. They test five dried chicken products in one city in Wisconsin and pull the whole thing a year later.



Herman

There's no national rollout. There's no ad campaign anybody remembers. It's a regional experiment that failed and got filed.



Corn

Then in 1975 they try again with Bambeanos.



Herman

Roasted, flavored whole soybeans. Launched 1975, discontinued by May 1976, and the official reason is the best sentence in corporate history. It gained a reputation for causing excessive flatulence.



Corn

They discontinued a food product because of the gas.



Herman

It cost Colgate seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars to develop and market. It sold fewer than twenty-five thousand cases. And then there's the litigation. Colgate pulled out, and their roasting contractor, United Roasters, sued. A jury awarded United Roasters five hundred and seventy-one thousand dollars.



Corn

So the soybeans cost more in court than they did in development. That's the whole arc. You wanted to know what the company was thinking. Nobody was thinking about the soybeans.



Herman

And they made other things in this period. Puddin'Head chocolate pudding, an apple chip called Snapples. There's a whole food division that just evaporates.



Corn

Which brings us to how hard they've worked to forget it, and this is where the story gets strange. Prospect Magazine went at Colgate about this. They found 1966 trade press coverage of the food ambitions. They put it to the company.



Herman

And the director of corporate communications, Thomas DiPiazza, says flatly: "There was no Colgate Lasagne." When they show him the trade press evidence, he says, "Where are you headed with this? An article? For whom?" And then he closes off communications.



Corn

He never mentioned the lasagna again. He conceded that there was a period when Colgate-Palmolive was a conglomerate with a diverse array of businesses including food companies, and that's as far as it goes.



Herman

Which is a fascinating response, because he's defending a position nobody actually holds. The journalists know the lasagna is fake. They told him the lasagna is fake. He denies it anyway, because the real thing, the dried crabmeat entrees, is somehow worse to admit.



Corn

The denial is itself a kind of erasure. The company's official position is that the flop you've heard of didn't happen, and the flop that did happen, they're not going to bring up.



Herman

And the fake one is now more famous than the real one. The Museum of Failure's Beef Lasagna gets taught in marketing lectures as a brand extension disaster. Colgate Kitchen gets a Wikipedia footnote. The story outlived the product and then replaced it.



Corn

Which gives you a pattern before we even get to the bikes. Colgate shows us a flop erased so thoroughly that the internet had to invent a replacement. Harley-Davidson is the opposite. Harley has a flop so embarrassing they can't even pretend it didn't happen.



Herman

Because you can buy it on eBay.



Corn

So tell me what the company was thinking.



Herman

So in the nineties Harley decides it isn't a motorcycle company, it's a lifestyle brand. This is the era of the party drinks, the infant clothes, the Christmas ornaments. And somewhere in there, 1996 by most accounts, though some sources say 1994, they launch a line of perfumes and colognes.



Corn

Under what name?



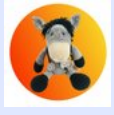
Herman

There's a "Hot Road" line. Scents called Black Fire, Destiny, Legendary, Hot Rod, and Territory. Marketing copy promises woody aromas with hints of tobacco. Twenty-five to sixty dollars a bottle. The Museum of Failure dates the line as running from 1996 to 2005.



Corn

So nine years. That's not a flop that gets pulled in a season. That's a flop with a product roadmap.



Herman

It limped along. And the reasoning is the interesting part, because it's coherent on paper. Harley's asset is loyalty. The most tattooed logo in America. The theory was that owners would buy anything with the bar and shield on it.



Corn

And that's the trap, isn't it. The loyalty was real, and it's precisely what killed it.



Herman

Core riders looked at a seventy-dollar bottle of Territory and saw the brand being turned into a souvenir. The word people used at the time was that Harley was Disneyfying itself. The thing that made the brand magnetic was that it stood for something specific, and the perfume proved it didn't.



Corn

The asset became the liability.



Herman

And the retreat was total. RideApart's line on it is that the line was quietly shuffled off into the dustbin of failed branding exercises and everyone agreed never to speak of them again. Not on the Harley site, not in the dealerships. If you want a bottle now you go to eBay or a discount perfume site, and the bottles are still in the original packaging, which tells you everything about how much use they got.



Corn

Which is a different kind of forgetting to Colgate's. Colgate denies the lasagna. Harley just stops stocking the perfume and lets it become a collector's item for people who collect things nobody wants.



Herman

And this is where I'd put the pivot, Corn, because Harley's perfume failed because the brand was too strong. Bic's pens failed for almost the opposite reason. Bic had no business being in that argument at all.



Corn

So walk me through the pens, because I remember the Amazon reviews more than I remember the pens.



Herman

Bic Cristal for Her launches in 2011. Pink and purple pens, and the marketing copy is real, they said the pens were designed to fit comfortably in a woman's hand.



Corn

Did the previous pens not fit?



Herman

The previous pens were a hexagonal barrel that had been in production since 1950 and that people write with for hours. There was no ergonomic problem to solve. The product is a black pen in a pink shell.



Corn

With an attractive barrel design.



Herman

Now here's the part that matters. It comes out in 2011 and nobody notices for a year. It goes viral in August 2012 after a Jezebel writer, Margaret Hartmann, posts about it. And then the floodgates open.



Corn

The Amazon reviews are the actual product here.



Herman

TIME quoted one reviewer going by breemeup. I'll read it, because it is one of the great pieces of internet writing. "Finally. For years I've had to rely on pencils, or at worst, a twig and some drops of my feminine blood to write down recipes." That's it. That's the whole genre in one review.



Corn

That's better than anything the marketing department wrote. And there's a pricing detail, isn't there?



Herman

That's the part that killed them. Business Insider found the For Her pens cost more than the equivalent black Bics. Adweek put it at nearly twice as much for what are ninety-nine percent identical products. So you're not just pink-penning the market, you're charging a premium for it, and the pink pen contains the same ink.



Corn

And Forbes had a former brand manager write a defense.



Herman

David Vinjamuri wrote a piece explaining what they were actually thinking, and the answer is unfashionable but honest. Gender segmentation works. It works in razors, it works in deodorant, it works in shampoo. Bic looked at a tactic that had succeeded in adjacent categories and applied it to a category where the underlying product was identical between users.



Corn

The pen is the rare product where there's no physical difference to sell against. Everybody holds a pen the same way. The only lever left is the pink and the price.



Herman

And Ellen DeGeneres does a bit on it, which is the moment it stops being a marketing misfire and becomes a national joke. Which is the real punishment. Not the sales figures, the fact that it becomes a punchline you can't retire.



Corn

How hard have they worked to forget it?



Herman

It just quietly disappears. No announcement, no apology, no statement. It was never going to survive a search engine. You type "Bic for Her" today and you get the reviews.



Corn

Right, and I want to broaden this out now, because Daniel asked for a countdown, and the pens are only one entry. What else is on the list?



Herman

General Mills, 1993. Fingos. A hexagon-shaped cereal that was meant to be eaten dry with your fingers, no milk, straight out of the box.



Corn

That's a snack, not a cereal.



Herman

That's exactly what it was, and they spent thirty-four million dollars telling America that. One of the largest campaigns ever mounted for a cereal launch. The marketing manager, Barry Davis, told the New York Times they were breaking the traditional bounds of advertising cereal because they were trying to break the bounds of how people use cereal.



Corn

How did it go?



Herman

Dead by 1994. And I have to mention this because it's the kind of detail nobody would believe if you invented it, but in Hungarian, the word Fing means fart.



Corn

So the name was a problem in one market and the concept was a problem in all of them.



Herman

Coca-Cola BlāK. Coffee-flavored cola, mid-calorie, launched in France first, hits the US in April 2006, and it's gone by 2008 after Beverage Digest reports the pull.



Corn

Then Crystal Pepsi.



Herman

1992 to 1994. Clear cola. It captured one percent of US soft drink sales in year one, about four hundred and seventy-four million dollars, and then it disintegrated. And here's the part people miss. Coca-Cola launched Tab Clear specifically to kill the category.



Corn

A kamikaze product.



Herman

Sergio Zyman, Coke's chief marketing officer, said Pepsi spent an enormous amount of money on the brand and regardless, we killed it. Both of them were dead within six months. Coke sacrificed Tab Clear to take Crystal Pepsi down with it.



Corn

That's the most expensive act of spite in beverage history.



Herman

And the Crystal Pepsi guy, David Novak, has been remarkably honest about it since. He said it was the best idea he ever had and the worst executed. His line is, and I'm quoting, "It would have been nice if I'd made sure the product tasted good."



Corn

Which is the sentence you want framed above every product launch in history. There's a category of decision where nobody checks whether the thing actually works, and then thirty million dollars later everyone's surprised.



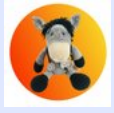
Herman

Heinz EZ Squirt, 2000 to 2006. Colored ketchup. Green, purple, pink, orange, teal, blue, in squeezable bottles. Gone by 2006.



Corn

McDonald's Arch Deluxe.



Herman

1996. An upscale burger for adults, backed by an estimated two hundred million dollars in advertising. It's routinely called the biggest marketing flop in McDonald's history. The food was fine, that's the thing. Eater's written about it, the burger itself was good. The campaign told customers that McDonald's was too sophisticated for kids, and the customers who actually eat at McDonald's did not want sophistication.



Corn

And Tropicana.



Herman

2009. They strip the orange and the straw off the carton and go minimalist. It's pulled after fifty days. Sales drop twenty percent. Tens of millions of dollars gone in under two months.



Corn

Fifty days. That's the fastest reversal on this list, and it's a packaging change, not even a product.



Herman

So, take stock, because there's a pattern here and it's worth saying out loud. Every one of these is a company with enormous equity in one category assuming that equity transfers to the next category over. Colgate assumes toothpaste trust transfers to dried crabmeat. Harley assumes motorcycle loyalty transfers to cologne. Bic assumes pen ubiquity transfers to gendered marketing.



Corn

And what's the mechanism of failure? Because the surface story is always "the product was bad."



Herman

Sometimes the product was bad. Usually the product was fine and the permission wasn't there. A consumer has a slot in their head for what a brand is, and the slot has walls. Colgate belongs in the bathroom cabinet. The moment it appears in the freezer aisle, the consumer doesn't evaluate the lasagna, they evaluate the betrayal of the slot.



Corn

And the stronger the brand, the harder the walls.



Herman

Right. Harley's whole identity is that it isn't soft. So a perfume isn't a product failure, it's an identity failure. The stronger the brand signal, the less room there is to move.



Corn

There's a smaller thread here too, and it's the one that I find funny. The failures that get scrubbed hardest aren't the ones that lost the most money. Tropicana lost tens of millions in fifty days and the whole thing is one of the better documented case studies in the field. Harley's perfume, which ran for nine years, is basically a folk story. So the erasure isn't proportional to the loss.



Herman

No, the erasure is proportional to the embarrassment.



Corn

It's proportional to how much of the story the brand can't explain away. Colgate can absorb dried chicken as a sixties conglomerate footnote. What Colgate cannot absorb is a pink pen.



Herman

Speaking of which.



Hilbert

There's a tin of meat sticks in my garage, and the brand on the tin has nothing to do with meat.



Corn

I'm going to need more than that.



Hilbert

A trade show, a few years back. Company had built a name on one thing, and decided the name would carry a meat snack. Protein Sticks. Original and Mesquite.



Herman

What was the company?



Hilbert

Doesn't matter. What matters is the texture. Close to a damp cigar. That's the product note. Original and Mesquite, and the Mesquite was worse, because it added a flavor to something that already tasted like the tin.



Corn

And you were working the booth.



Hilbert

I was working the booth.



Herman

What was the actual thinking on their end? Did they have a reason, or was it just a hope?



Hilbert

Bigger spend on the booth than on the product. They had a mechanical bull.



Corn

Of course they did.



Hilbert

The bull was the attraction. Whole convention, that's what people remembered. I'd run the thing for eight hours, and the queue never emptied. You know how many people asked about the Protein Sticks? Two. One of them wanted the tin, not the food. Product was gone inside a year. The bull, I believe, is still out there.



Herman

That's the whole pattern in one booth, though. They spent the money on the story they wanted to tell about the product instead of the product itself.



Hilbert

They spent the money on the bull.



Herman

On the bull.



Corn

What happened to the stock?



Hilbert

I kept a case. It's in the garage. Figured an emergency would come, and I'd have something to trade with the neighbors. The neighbors have declined. Twice. Most recent one, I opened a tin to make sure I still had a case worth keeping, and they've gone soft. That's worse than the original. The original had the texture of a damp cigar and it held it. These have aged past that into something else.



Corn

You're not bartering with them.



Hilbert

I'm not bartering with them. They're staying in the garage. That's not a decision, that's just where they are.



Herman

Eight hours a day on the bull, and the only thing anyone took home was the memory.



Hilbert

The bull outlasted the product. That's the whole thing. The one part of the operation nobody was selling is the only part that's still standing.



Corn

If I understand you, the flop that gets scrubbed isn't the one that fails. It's the one that fails in a way that's funny.



Hilbert

It's the one that fails in a way you can't explain. The two guys who asked, they didn't ask about the meat. They looked at the tin, then they looked at the bull. That's a worse day for the brand than any sales number.



Herman

Which is Colgate exactly. The real product, the dried crabmeat, is forgettable. The mock-up lasagna is unforgettable. The brand can survive a dry chicken entree. It cannot survive a photograph of the lasagna on every marketing syllabus in the country.



Corn

Maybe the real product of the nineties wasn't the perfume. It was the receipt.



Hilbert

The receipt's the only thing that lasts.



Corn

Which leaves us with a question about the whole exercise, and I want to put it to you, Herman. If these companies are so good at making us forget, what does it mean that the internet keeps remembering for them?



Herman

The Colgate lasagna that never existed is now more famous than the Bambeanos that did. That's the entire case in one sentence. Erasure used to be total. A product would be pulled, the ads would stop, the trade press would move on, and five years later there'd be no trace unless somebody had kept the box.



Corn

And now?



Herman

Now the box is on eBay. The bottles are on discount perfume sites. The Amazon reviews are permanent. So the scrubbing strategy has a hole in it. You can't erase a thing that somebody photographed, and in the nineties nobody was thinking about the photograph. They were thinking about the campaign.



Corn

As brand histories get more searchable and more contested, the scrubbing gets harder. The Museum of Failure exists precisely because somebody decided these flops were worth preserving. Samuel West built a museum out of exactly the material these companies were trying to lose.



Herman

That flips the incentive. In the old model, a flop disappears if nobody keeps the packaging. In the new model, a flop disappears if nobody decides it's interesting. Which is a much harder thing to control, because there's no accounting for what the internet decides is interesting.



Corn

So the next time a big brand launches something inexplicable, and they will, and there's probably a version of it happening somewhere this year with an AI feature bolted onto something that never needed one, remember that in five years they'll hope you've forgotten.



Herman

You probably will.



Corn

But the internet won't. The internet keeps the receipt. Hilbert's got a case of them in the garage.



Herman

He does. And a mechanical bull somewhere out there, still getting ridden by somebody.



Corn

That's the show. Producer Hilbert Flumingtop does the producing, as ever, and the case of meat sticks does not come up again.



Herman

It's coming up again.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. The human-AI collaboration podcast. If you enjoyed the countdown, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts. If you've got a flop of your own you want investigated, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. That address is real. The lasagna was not.



Herman

See you soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

1. **Museum of Failure [primary]**
   Colgate Kitchen Entrees
   https://museumoffailure.com/exhibition/colgate-kitchen-entrees

2. **Museum of Failure [primary]**
   Harley-Davidson Perfume
   https://museumoffailure.com/exhibition/harley-davidson-perfume

3. **Prospect Magazine**
   What a viral fake lasagne taught me about failure, 2020-01-27
   https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/philosophy/39799/what-a-viral-fake-lasagne-taught-me-about-failure

4. **Wikipedia**
   Bambeanos
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bambeanos

5. **Milwaukee Magazine**
   The Harley-Davidson Product No One Remembers, 2017-06-01
   https://www.milwaukeemag.com/harley-davidson-failed-perfume/

6. **RideApart**
   The Rise and Fall of Harley-Davidson Perfume, 2017-06-06
   https://www.rideapart.com/news/253742/the-rise-and-fall-of-harley-davidson-perfume/

7. **Grunge**
   The Harley-Davidson Product You'd Never Expect Them To Make, 2022-08-11
   https://www.grunge.com/961428/

8. **Telegraph**
   BIC ridiculed over 'comfortable' pink pens for women, 2012-08-28
   https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/9503359/

9. **TIME**
   Bic Creates Pens 'For Her', 2012-08-31
   https://newsfeed.time.com/2012/08/31/bic-creates-pens-for-her-amazon-reviewers-turn-on-the-snark/

10. **Business Insider**
    Bic Charges More for Pens Targeted at Women, 2012-08-28
    https://www.businessinsider.com/bic-charges-more-for-pens-targeted-at-women-2012-8

11. **Forbes**
    Bic For Her: What They Were Actually Thinking, 2012-08-30
    https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidvinjamuri/2012/08/30/

12. **Adweek**
    Bic for Her' Pens Deluged With Sarcastic Reviews
    https://www.adweek.com/creativity/bic-her-pens-deluged-sarcastic-reviews-amazon-143145/

13. **Mental Floss**
    Remembering Fingos, 2020-03-12
    https://www.mentalfloss.com/food/fingos-hybrid-cereal-snack-disappointment-90s

14. **Wikipedia**
    Coca-Cola BlāK
    https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coca-Cola_Bl%C4%81K

15. **Wikipedia**
    Crystal Pepsi
    https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crystal_Pepsi

16. **Wikipedia**
    Heinz Tomato Ketchup (EZ Squirt section)
    https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinz_EZ_Squirt

17. **Eater**
    The Arch Deluxe Was a Hell of a Burger. It Was Also McDonald's Most Expensive Flop.
    https://www.eater.com/22584033/

18. **The Mindlab**
    Museum of Failed Products (Tropicana)
    https://themindlab.co.uk/blog/museum-of-failed-products/