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General Mills Turns To 'Raja Of The Country Of World Peace' To Certify Its Costlier, Non-GMO Cheerios

By **Drew Kershen** and **Alan McHughen**

Recently, cereal makers General Mills and Post announced that they had reformulated their flagship brands (Cheerios and Grape Nuts, respectively) to avoid genetically-modified (GMO) ingredients. Cheerios will henceforth state “Not made with genetically modified ingredients.” A box of Grape Nuts sports the “Non-GMO Verified” logo.

Curiously, General Mills and Post did not simply introduce an additional version of Cheerios and Grape Nuts to attract GMO-wary consumers, but killed off the original flagship brands, thus alienating brand-loyal consumers of the popular cereals. These reliable customers, estimated at 75% or more, must now bear several novel and undesirable consequences.

Brand-loyal consumers were not consulted prior to the untimely demise of their favorite cereals, and now must either purchase the reformulated versions, or choose competitors’ brands. Reformulating a product under the original name might be fine on safety or nutritional grounds, or even on solid marketing evidence, but instead, General Mills and Post pandered to ideological campaigns and organic, elitist pressure from people who probably don’t, and won’t, buy General Mills or Post products in any incarnation. And the reformulation is unlikely to attract the die-hard, zero-tolerance anti-GMO consumer, as reformulated Cheerios has an asterisk next to its non-GMO claim stating that “trace amounts” of GMO ingredients might be present. Post has purchased “Non-GMO Verified” status for Grape Nuts, but that standard still allows GM ingredients up to 0.9%. Unsurprisingly, the companies do not tell prospective new customers—presumably the anti-GMO target market to infill from the loss of disgruntled previously loyal customers—that Cheerios and Grape Nuts still likely contain some GM ingredients.

The consequences get even more curious.

Comparing the labels of the original to the reformulated versions reveals the following facts. Original Cheerios provided 25% of the Daily Value of Riboflavin (Vitamin B2) but the non-GMO version has only 2%. Cheerios original had 0% saturated fat and now Cheerios non-GMO has 3% saturated fat. Original Grape Nuts provided substantial Vitamins A, D, B12 and Riboflavin, but non-GMO Grape Nuts has *zero* Vitamin A, D and B12, and only 4% of Riboflavin, down from 25% in the original formulation.

Moreover, a 24-ounce box of Grape Nuts, in its reformulation, shrank to 20.5 ounces, but kept

the same price. It will be illuminating to see if consumers, even loyal ones, will be happy to pay a 12-15% price increase for a nutritionally inferior product.

As bizarre as it seems, it gets worse. When investigators looked at who likely assisted General Mills and Post acquire non-GMO ingredients, the investigators uncovered the “Non-GMO Project” and its director/advisor John Fagan, whose formal title is *Raja of the Global Country of World Peace with Responsibility for Food Safety and Purity for Healthy Invincibility*, affiliated with the Maharishi movement in Fairfield, Iowa. John Fagan also is the founder of Genetic-ID, a business that performs tests to verify that food products meet the various non-GMO standards. Genetic-ID earns millions by generating scare campaigns and brand-name threats relating to GM ingredients.

With John Fagan involved in ingredient sourcing and testing reformulated products, maybe including Cheerios and Grape Nuts, the investigation takes another bizarre turn. Fagan promotes Vedic organic products and proclaims that foods do not need “chemical vitamins” because the Maharishi products he promotes have higher levels of “consciousness” which consumers receive when they eat these products. Fagan’s magical foods gain this higher level of consciousness through the specific sound vibrations generated by specially trained Vedic Pandits who chant at certain vibrations over the crops and ingredients of food products. Vedic Pandits used different sound vibrations at different stages of crop growth; these vibrations replace “chemical vitamins” and “fertilizers” so that the plants—believe it or not—express increased levels of intelligent consciousness.

Leaving aside that these Vedic Pandits, trained from the age of 8 or 10 until adulthood in India, now living in Iowa on R-1 (religious) visas that exempt them from U.S. minimum wage laws, are working for housing, food, recreation and fifty dollars per month without freedom to leave the Maharishi complex, honest investigators may be skeptical about the effectiveness of specific sound vibrations to replace vitamins. While Vedic chanting may well soothe the soul, incredulous investigators may doubt that Vedic chanting soothes the need for nutritious food with actual vitamins at affordable prices.

It will also be curious to see whether this radically innovative approach to marketing—pandering to baseless demands from non-customers while alienating loyal long term patrons—helps or hurts the bottom line at General Mills and Post.

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