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There's a stack of news clippings here labeled "McDonald's" that is getting so thick we finally had to move the Gary Condit file. Ba-da-boom. But seriously. I spent all week trying to write something funny about America's Most Successful Fast Food Chain, by way of introducing a just-leaked story that spotlights the company's latest misadventure. The problem, I finally realized, is that you can't parody something whose reality is so hilariously surreal.

McDonald's is so massively global, everybody in the world either eats there or stops by to picket. "You want fries with that?" is still the beginner's punch line of choice. The training center in suburban Chicago really is called Hamburger University. It's the only company at which an employee can reach management level without reaching puberty.

McDonald's generates news like the President of the United States catching a cold; the most mundane details are magnified. McRib goes back on the menu, and the pork industry goes into overdrive. The chain remains the world's largest purchaser of potatoes. People still whisper – awestruck – about the guy who invented the Egg McMuffin actually getting a bonus.

And the flops have been spectacular. The Arch Deluxe, Edsel of cheeseburgers. The McDLT, living proof that lettuce and heat lamps don't mix. And somewhere in a white-walled institution there is a former executive, heavily medicated now, reduced to uttering only a single word: "McPizza."

Because big companies make big targets, a freak accident involving McDonald's fresh-from-the-blast-furnace coffee and somebody's lap was translated into a \$2.7 million initial judgment – and a new era of product warning labels, like one on a Batman costume that actually reminds parents: "FOR PLAY ONLY: Mask and chest plate are not protective: Cape does not enable user to fly."

McDonald's lawyers are busier than ever these days, as plaintiffs line up at the drive-through. Those legendary fries, for example, originally got their distinctive flavor by being cooked in beef fat. The company cooled vegan complaints by switching to vegetable oil spiked with "natural flavor" – until a recent lawsuit by a non-meat-eater revealed that "natural flavor" was actually a euphemism for beef fat. Hey, hand me that cape.

Written by Garry Lee Wright
Tuesday, 17 July 2001 18:00

McDonald's steps in it even when company leaders try to do the right thing, such as a few years ago – after an analysis showed adding extra pickles delayed orders as much as 15 minutes – when the chain announced it would explore using computerized kitchen help, a.k.a. robots. At the time, this column revealed they were also changing slogans, with the leading candidates being “You deserve a break today, so we fired those losers in the back” and “McDonald's: When you're just too damn hungry to wait for a human being.”

Even corporate figurehead Ronald McDonald seems unintentionally funny, unlike real clowns (e.g., Krusty or Bozo) who *sound* like clowns; Ronald is obviously some schlub with makeup. (This was confirmed as I was waiting backstage with a comedian who confided that he actually worked part-time as a Ronald McDonald. Apparently, you're supposed to keep that a secret, because he whispered this as if he were confessing a homicide; I expected the police to recover the body right next to a pair of floppy shoes.)

What would McDonald's founder Ray Kroc say about so much unintentional humor? Remember that while he owned the underperforming San Diego Padres, Kroc once got on the stadium p.a. and apologized.

So it's hard to top this with the latest Golden Arches news that according to leaked internal McDonald's memos, 11 percent of customers on a typical day are dissatisfied enough to lodge a complaint with the chain, and almost 70 percent of the complainers are dissatisfied with the way their complaints are handled.

Ready for the top two complaints? Rude employees, and being out of Happy Meal toys.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, here's Buddy Hackett.

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