

# Post-it Notes

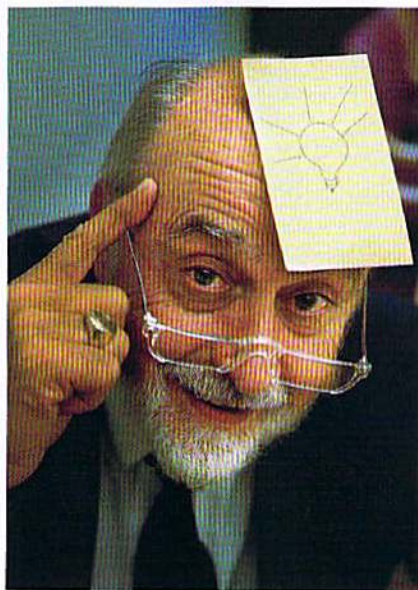
*Fumbling with his church hymnal gave chemist Art Fry an idea that turned into the ubiquitous office product*

BY ALEXANDER ROSE

**S**TAPLES OFFERS A NEAT stack of 90 three-by-three-inch Post-its for \$1.42, a 50-page, five-by-eight-inch scratch pad for half that. For sheer economy, the scratch pad offers far more—4,000 square inches of writing space compared with a measly 810 square inches offered by the Post-its, which are generally used on just one side. Yet no mere scratch pad possesses the Post-it's comforting stickiness, its virtuous encouragement of brevity, or its ability to adhere to anything and yet leave no residue when peeled away. Customers will pay, as manufacturer 3M knows, a premium for these special pieces of paper.

And then there's the pop-cultural cachet of the Post-it. What mere scratch pad has ever been exhibited as a "humble masterpiece" at the Museum of Modern Art—or used by a feckless boyfriend to dump Carrie Bradshaw, heroine of *Sex and the City*? The poster for the movie *Office Space* depicts a hapless employee plastered head-to-toe with small yellow squares. And the grande dame of contemporary taste herself, Oprah Winfrey, has anointed them as essential tools for her book club. Not bad for a product that, but for the remarkable tenacity and creativity of a couple of obscure chemists, might never have existed.

The story began in 1968, when 3M scientist Spencer Silver developed a simple adhesive consisting of "inherently tacky elastomeric copolymer microspheres." Judged by industry standards, it was a failure:



chemists generally strove to *enhance* an adhesive's stickiness—its power to bond ever more tightly to objects—whereas Silver's microspheres formed, by his colleagues' standards, an

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adhesive simply too weak to attach one thing to another securely.

To 3M executives, the feeble adhesive was merely a lab-conjured curiosity, serving no practical purpose, solving no existing problem. His enthusiasm undimmed, however, Silver managed to come up with a possible use: a faux corkboard coated with the stuff could serve as a "post-it bulletin board." Instead of using tacks

to affix notes, office workers could just press them on. But a major flaw appeared the moment the boards went on sale. The corkboard gathered not only paper in its gentle grip but dust as well. The product soon vanished.

But Silver would not give up. He demonstrated the adhesive at every company presentation he attended, and he never stopped evangelizing. At one such event five years later, Art Fry, another 3M chemist, watched him show off his glue. Like everyone else, Fry was intrigued by the substance but could see no immediate application.

Inspiration came sometime later. A man of faith as well as of science, and an enthusiastic member of his church choir, Fry marked each Sunday's hymns with small bookmarks, which inconveniently fluttered away whenever he turned the pages. Paper

clips and tape only scarred the hymnal. But he found that bookmarks coated with Silver's adhesive held their place and could be pulled off without causing damage.

*Scientist Art Fry, above, found an application for a weak adhesive after he grew irritated that bookmarks kept flying out of his hymnal during choir rehearsal.*

Fry had stumbled upon one of the critical elements of successful invention: if the obvious does not work—here, applying adhesive to the preexisting corkboard—try the obverse. In this case, the obvious had failed because it was hard to markedly improve the traditional combination of corkboard and tacks. But by glazing individual pieces of paper with the adhesive—that is, doing the opposite of what seemed intuitive—Fry created an entirely new product.



Now people could use terse, targeted notes to highlight a document's crucial points—after which, task accomplished, they were not

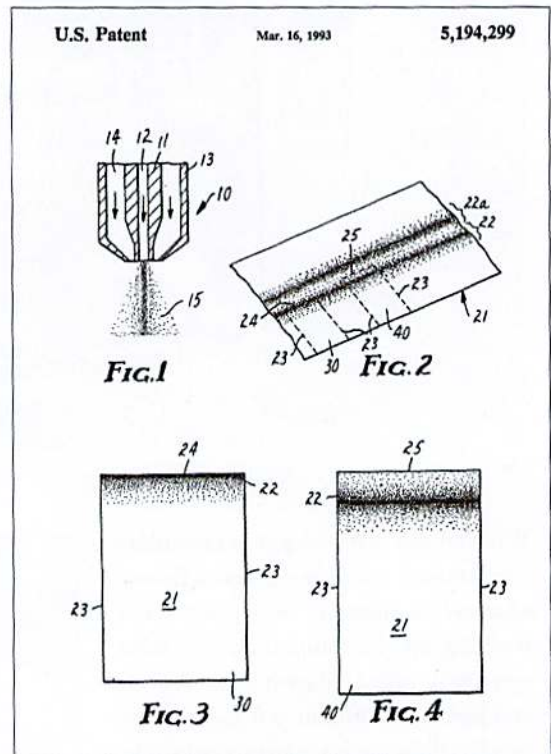
recycled but thrown away. Almost overnight, Fry was besieged by co-workers pleading for ever more of the sticky squares.

The powers at 3M, however, once bitten by the bulletin board fiasco, were twice shy of the notion that these little scraps could offer more than a niche product. Surely nothing could replace the good old scratch pad.

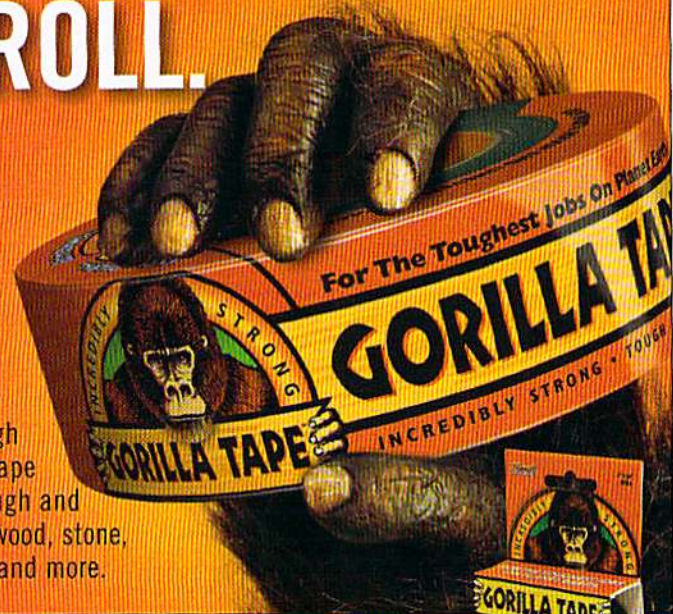
His colleagues loved them. Because the sticky notes were described as bookmarks, however, his office mates naturally used and reused them. Recycling products was not a good business strategy for a company like 3M, which thrived on persuading consumers to buy more of its products.

But Fry, like Silver, was not ready to give up. Soon afterward, while reading a technical report from his supervisor, he had a few questions about the data. Usually he would have typed a memo, attached it to the report, and sent it back to the author, who would have responded in kind. This time, however, Fry cut out a square of his coated paper, stuck it to the relevant page, drew an arrow pointing out the problem, and scrawled his question on the note itself. His supervisor replied using the same piece of paper, and a new method of communication was born.

3M chemist Spencer Silver, top, invented the adhesive that his colleague, Art Fry, used to create the Post-it, which he patented in 1993 as a "repositionable pressure-sensitive adhesive sheet material," above right.



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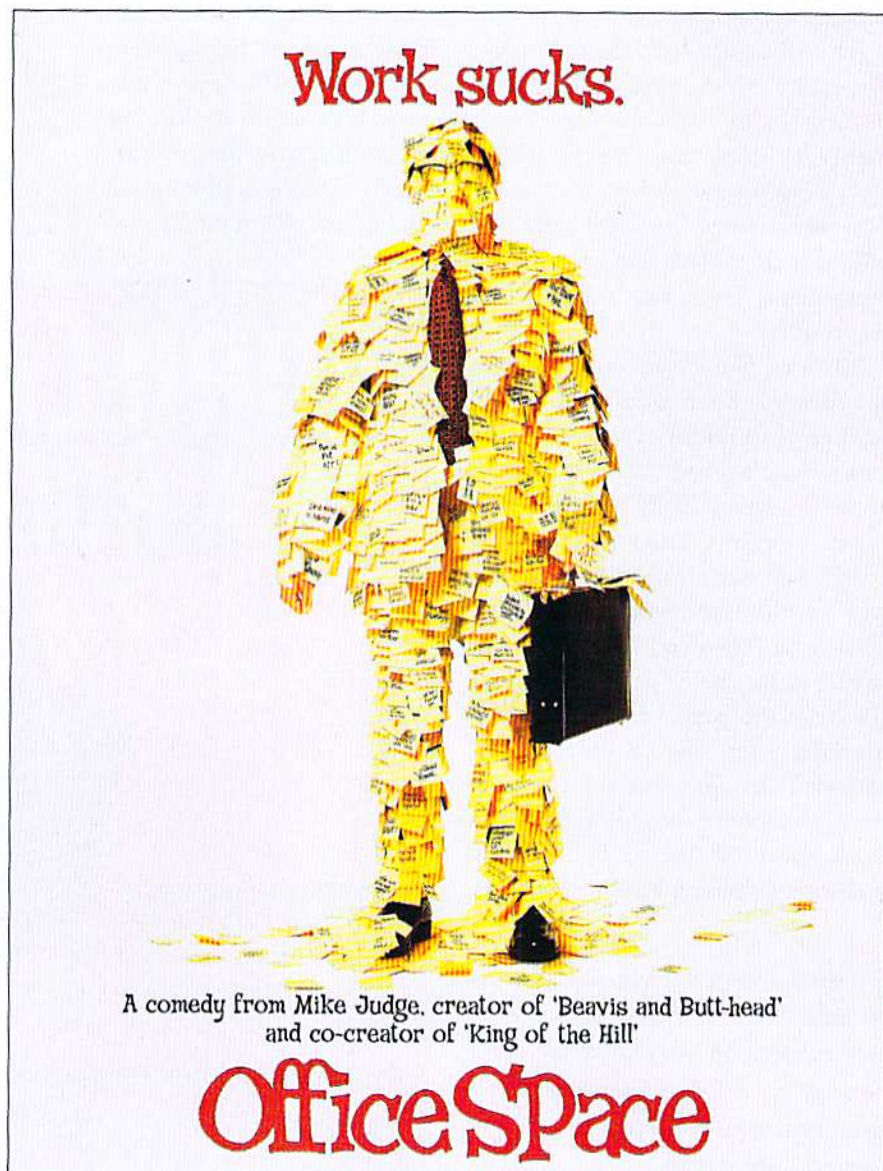


The immensely popular Post-it has blossomed into a large 3M product line, left, which now includes eight standard sizes and 62 colors. An indispensable office product, the sticky note engulfed a disgruntled software engineer in the 1999 film *Office Space*.

Indeed, so successful is the brand that 3M recently reintroduced self-stick bulletin boards to its Post-it lineup—surely an irony, but also a genial tip of the hat both to Art Fry, who retired in 1992 after nearly 40 years with the company, and to Spencer Silver, who followed him four years later. 💡

Why would anyone pay a considerable amount more for a few adhesive squares? In addition, management was working on the assumption that what were now called “Post-it Notes” (“Jot and Jerk” and “Mount and Show” were two failed alternative monikers) would be run off as rolls, like Scotch tape and many other 3M products. Once Fry persuaded his superiors to sell them in stacks, which made writing easier, the Post-its’ advantages over cheap scratch pads became startlingly evident. In the late 1970s marketers blitzed Boise, Idaho, with promotions and tutorials on the best ways to use this radical new product. Unlike the ill-starred bulletin board, Post-its were an instant success from the moment they were rolled out nationally on April 6, 1980, in one color (the now iconic canary yellow) and two sizes (three by five inches and one and a half by two inches), the larger of which cost 98 cents for a hundred-sheet stack.

Today 3M produces more than a thousand spin-offs from the basic format, generating a significant portion of the company’s profits. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but in 2009 3M’s consumer products and office division (which also includes Scotch Magic Tape and Scotch-Brite sponges and pads) posted revenues of \$3.47 billion.



COURTESY OF 3M (TOP); 20TH CENTURY FOX/THE KOBAL COLLECTION (LEFT)