

CH-CH-CH-CHIA!

Even if you've never actually owned one, you probably know what a Chia Pet is, thanks to the TV commercials that blanket the airwaves each holiday season. Here's the origin of one of America's most popular pieces of pop-culture kitsch.

THE SEED OF AN IDEA

In 1977 a San Francisco advertising executive named Joseph Pedott made a trip to Chicago's annual housewares show to drum up clients for his agency. As he toured the convention, Pedott quizzed exhibitors and attendees on what products were popular that year. One executive, a buyer for a chain of drug stores, told him about some little animal-shaped terra-cotta planters imported from Mexico that sold pretty well as gift items. The planters had grooves etched into their sides and came with a pack of *chia* seeds. When the seeds were soaked in water and planted in the grooves, the animals grew chia "fur."

The little planters had been a part of Mayan culture for at least 200 years, but they'd been imported into the United States for only two. A Chicago importer named Walter Houston discovered them on a trip to Mexico in 1975 and had been selling them in Florida and the midwestern United States under the brand name "Chiapet." But they weren't a very profitable item, and he doubted they ever would be.

Pedott disagreed: He thought that with the right marketing push, Chiapets could sell very well indeed, at least for a season or two before the novelty ran its course. Rather than recruit Houston as a client for his ad agency, Pedott bought the rights to the Chia-pet product line outright so that he could sell the little planters himself. In 1982 he rolled the product out nationwide under the slightly changed name "Chia Pet." And what kind of pet? In 1982 there was only one kind: a ram.

AS SEEN ON TV

The biggest change that Pedott made to the Chia Pet line wasn't the way he spelled the name, it was the way he sold the product. Walter Houston hadn't spent a lot of money on advertising—he

just pitched his product to stores, and if they liked it, they took a few and put them on their shelves. Marketed that way, the Chia-pet line didn't offer much promise to Houston or the retailers. Customers didn't know what Chiapets were, or even that they existed at all, so no one was exactly breaking down the door to buy them. Chiapets might sit on store shelves for weeks or months on end, taking up valuable retail space that could have been used to sell items that were in greater demand.

This was where Pedott's advertising background proved so valuable: In just 30 seconds, the catchy TV commercials he created introduced the Chia Pets to viewers and explained what they were and how they worked. And thanks to the famous "Ch-ch-ch-Chia!" jingle, invented during a brainstorming session when someone playfully stuttered the product's name, the TV ads indelibly (and annoyingly) imprinted the Chia Pet name in the public mind.

Once those ads hit the airwaves, customers could walk into stores and ask for Chia Pets by name. And they did, by the tens and then by the hundreds of thousands. Whatever resistance retailers had to stocking the little rams—soon to be accompanied by bulls, bunnies, puppies, kittens, frogs, and countless other critters—melted away when the Chia Pets started flying off store shelves.

PERMA CHIA

About the only miscalculation Pedott made in his marketing strategy was that he assumed sales would drop off after a few years. They never did—nearly 30 years after the re-branded, re-marketed Chia Pets hit store shelves in 1982, his company, Joseph Enterprises, still sells about half a million of them a year, including licensed cartoon characters (beginning in 2000) and selected American presidents, including two different versions of President Barack Obama ("Determined," with a serious look on his face, and "Happy," with a smiling "Commander in Chia" look). The Obama Chia Pets are the first to depict a living person, and they're also the most controversial Chia Pets ever: In 2009 both the Walgreens and CVS chains pulled them from store shelves after customers complained. (No word on whether the complaints were from Democrats or Republicans.)