

## A new twist Auntie Anne's re-brands

By Nancy Weingartner

**A**untie Anne's soft pretzels have been a heavenly treat since 1988, but the company was having a devil of a time getting non-pretzel eaters to realize they weren't the typical fare.

The company was launched when Anne Beiler, a Mennonite, sold the hand-rolled, soft pretzels at a farmer's market to support her husband's vision to open a free counseling service for families in their community. The company was sold to Sam Beiler in 2005, and with the next generation came an opportunity to freshen anything that might have gone stale over the years.

According to Scott Rubin, a franchisee with 50 stores, the idea for a re-branding campaign came about at a regional officers meeting.

"Not that anything was broken," Rubin says. "We're doing this because we want to be a step ahead." Plus, he adds, the product deserved a more light-hearted approach.

Re-branding, however, is not something to be taken lightly, so the company did its due diligence. Research revealed that customers viewed Auntie Anne's as reliable and consistent. "That's good, but we wanted to be viewed as magnetic, fun, passionate," says Grant Markley, the Gap, Pa.-based company's COO and CFO.

They hired The Richards Group out of Dallas and put together a team of corporate employees and franchisees to oversee the process. The results of the 18-month journey are in the process of being rolled out to 750 stores.

A noticeable change is the updated logo. The pretzel was restyled, and a gold halo and the tagline—Pretzel Perfect—were added to capitalize on customers' perception that the pretzel was so superior it belonged on a pedestal. "They called it 'perfect,'" says Judith Shaffer, chief marketing officer.

The old-fashioned typeface was deemed hard to read and was replaced with a more contemporary font etched with gold, which makes the name look not only angelic, but golden.

They kept the blue and white checkerboard customers identify with Auntie Anne's, but warmed them with gold and other jewel tones.

Framed posters will add a touch of humor to the stores. A favorite is: "Spoiling dinner since 1988." Another for airport locations depicts two pretzels and the saying: "You only get two carry-ons. Make 'em count."

Adding humor may not be a big deal to most companies, but it wasn't something that the brand was known for. "We've always been fun, we just never conveyed it," he says.

Employees will have more fun at work, too, because they had a hand in choosing the new uniforms. Instead of the ubiquitous polo shirt,

## What Auntie Anne's did right

1. Included franchisees in the process
2. Created excitement about the re-branding by rolling it out at the system's national meeting in Nashville
3. Asked employees what they wanted to wear and then offered a variety of choices appropriate for all ages. Added skull caps and bandanas so young employees could personalize their look. Corporate even decreased the size of the logo on the back of the shirts because employees said they didn't want to be a "big billboard for pretzels" when they took their lunch hour at the mall, says franchisee Scott Rubin.
4. Kept the identifying blue-and-white motif, but warmed it with jewel tones.
5. Incorporated humor and a sense of fun into their ads and posters.



choices include a bowling or camp shirt, long and short-sleeved shirts, a skull cap, bandana and baseball cap. Uniforms are no longer unisex and will have some fit to them, Markley says. Plus, workers can wear jeans now.

### A new twist on sampling

While existing customers may gush about the product, the challenge is getting non-customers to try it. “Lots of people assume they won’t like them, so a ‘buy-one, get-one-free coupon’ won’t attract new customers, says Rubin.

The solution was to take the existing sampling program—where employees stand in the aisles offering bites of pretzels to passersby—to designating a free pretzel day.

“I thought when they presented free-pretzel day, a hush would fall over the crowd, but it didn’t,” Rubin says about the announcement at the annual meeting.

Rubin has already tested the concept at one of his stores and was “pleasantly surprised” at the results. During the six-hour window, his staff handed out 1,600 free pretzels. Since Rubin was directing traffic to the site, he says he heard lots of positive comments from people who would normally never try the product.

The thought is that if they can get the product in the consumer’s mouth, they’ll have a customer.

If you’re reading this, you’ve missed Free Pretzel Day. The chain held it

August 19, and at press time anticipated giving away about 1 million pretzels systemwide. Auntie Anne’s will help subsidize the franchisees since they’ll be losing about six hours of sales, says Shaffer, plus they declared it a royalty-free day.

The major expense of changing out the signage will be delayed. “We wanted to minimize the cost to stores,” Shaffer says.

Re-branding is a lot of work. “But worthwhile,” Rubin says, adding that he has to do it times 50, since that’s the number of units he has.

Founder Anne Beiler wasn’t surprised the new owners wanted to change things. “It gives them a feeling of ownership,” she says. “(But) if they would change the pretzel, I would have a problem with that.”

Most likely customers would also.

As long as the chain with her name on every building, cup and napkin continues to focus on the “3P’s”: people, product and purpose, Beiler’s not concerned with a new font on the logo or new uniforms.

The golden lining in all of this, however, is that because they got buy-in from franchisees, plus brought in a professional branding company, they won’t have to do the process again for awhile.

“I hope we never have to do a brand repositioning again,” says Shaffer. “I think we’ve got it.” [FT](#)



**Everything from** packaging to uniforms has an updated, fresh look.