

## **Friendly's, In the MEMORY-MAKING BUSINESS**

### **Sherleen Mahoney**

#### **Friendly's revitalizes its brand to become, once again, an iconic American restaurant**

Friendly's is staging a comeback. The 79-year-old company, which was once an iconic American restaurant brand where families made lasting memories over ice cream, promises to become that once again.

To revitalize the Friendly's brand and stay relevant, CEO John Maguire says it must accomplish three things: create great guest experiences delivered by warm and friendly employees, offer great food, and create clean and energetic restaurant environments. A brand with these qualities that also is woven into the heart of its communities is poised for success.

Friendly's has a rich history of providing warm and neighborly service to its guests. After all, that's why in Springfield, Mass., in 1935, the Blake brothers—Prestley and Curtis—named their ice cream parlor Friendly (the apostrophe and "s" came later). They knew guests wanted friendly service. This is the simple founding principle Maguire wants to reconnect with in order to successfully move forward.

In addition to providing the friendliest service, Friendly's aggressive comeback plan also includes improving the quality of their food and ice cream and remodeling all their restaurants.

#### **Five-Cone Service**

In order to be true to its name again, Friendly's has launched a retraining program to re-certify all its restaurant employees. Prospective employees must now take an online personality test. The company wants only the friendliest people in the industry working in their restaurants: people who want to create a fun environment, value hospitality and offer exceptional service to every guest.

"We want our people to take the time to connect with our guests, share their passion about our ice cream and food, and be proud of where they work," said Steve Weigel, Friendly's COO. "It's not just about collecting a paycheck or a tip off the table. It's about making memories for every guest. That's why we call everyone who works at Friendly's a memory maker. It's everyone's job to make a great memory for our guests. We want them to walk away saying, 'Wow; that was a great experience. We had a great conversation, and I learned something about the person I was with.'"

Employees strive to deliver "five-cone service." As employees personally connect with guests and receive glowing comments and reviews, they will earn cones on their nametags. Managers also collect data from receipts to award cones.

"We look at that information every hour of every day, and based on performance and guest feedback, cones are awarded," Weigel said. It takes approximately two years to earn all five cones.

"We don't want it to be easy because we want people to strive for something and continue

working on it for the future,” Weigel said.

Along with the friendliest staff, Maguire wants the environment to be casual and fun for everyone, including the employees.

“We have our own birthday song, we personalize balloons for kids and we make sure we engage with the kids and make them feel special,” Weigel said. “We also want our people to embrace the child in all of us. We encourage our people to use their individuality and be themselves with our guests. We hold contests in our restaurants to encourage competition and build sales. For example, we have sales contests that revolve around add-on items, like enticing guests to order a Fribble instead of a fountain beverage, adding a soup and side salads or a larger sundae. The scoopologist title is also fun and denotes that these people are real artists.”

Friendly’s isn’t just for kids, either. The environment is suitable for every occasion, from kids’ outings to corporate meals.

“We have the same high-quality menu items that our competitors have, but we feel we have superior items that are great for anyone,” Weigel said. “For the corporate employee coming for lunch, we have great value, wonderful food and the chance to sneak in an ice cream treat. For families, we have the best kids’ meal value in the industry, employees who love families and, of course, we have ice cream.”

### **Winning Combination**

Anyone who is familiar with Friendly’s knows about its unforgettable ice cream.

“We make all our own ice cream,” said Todd Barto, Director of Franchise Operations for Friendly’s. “Ninety percent of our toppings are made in-house. Our hot fudge is the original recipe since the 1930s, and we’re the only restaurant chain in the country that makes our own whipped topping. We like to joke that our Happy Endings vanilla hot fudge sundae has only one ingredient that isn’t made by Friendly’s and that’s the cherry—we leave that up to nature. That’s what separates us from our competition.”

Out of the 28 flavors Friendly’s offers, the most popular is vanilla, followed by Hunka Chunka peanut butter.

Although it’s hard to divert from the ice cream, Maguire wants to remind customers that Friendly’s made-to-order, all-American fare, such as burgers, melts and salads, are an important part of the brand’s offerings.

The new menu is smaller; it has been scaled down to those items that are true to Friendly’s, and it features improvements, such as fresh, never frozen, beef for the hamburgers, haddock for the Fishamajig sandwiches, high-quality chicken tenders and real ice cream in the Fribbles.

“It’s what we should’ve been doing all these years,” Weigel said. “We want people to remember the ice cream, but also when they have food with us to walk away saying, ‘That was the best item we’ve ever had.’”

## **Remembering the Roots**

The word that best describes the remodel is transformative. It's simultaneously modern and retro, and it has breathed new life into the restaurants.

"The remodel is not about putting paint on a building; it's going in and looking at the service, the kitchen equipment and upgrading the whole facility," Weigel said. "The remodel looks different, yet it's our past."

Inside, the iconic Friendly's red is found throughout the front of the house. There are bold red accent walls and booth and seat cushions. Nostalgic black-and-white photographs of the communities capture memories from a simpler time. With every remodel, the design team works with the local Chamber of Commerce or libraries to obtain historic community photos.

"The best is when our customers recognize their family members in the photos," Barto said. "I've had guests tell me, 'That's my dad in that picture' or 'That's my daughter there.' I had a gentleman tell me that he remembers when the town looked like that in the 1950s."

"Those are the memories and the connections to the community that we want to be a part of again," Weigel said. "Friendly's is not just a corporation; it's a community restaurant, where you go to meet people and to make a great memory with your kids or grandparents or any loved one."

The remodel has also improved the ice cream fountain area. New ice cream flavor boards include photographs of the signature sundaes, and the addition of an ice cream bar brings the ice cream experience closer to the guests. Barto says guests of all ages love watching the creation of their sundaes from the scoopologists.

Small changes to improve the guest experience have been made as well, such as replacing black serving baskets with dinner plates. "It's a little fancier, but it still offers the same value," Barto said.

In the back of the house, the Formica prep tables have been upgraded to stainless steel, and the kitchens have new Ovention ovens, which can cook Friendly's entire menu with 100-percent consistency. With the ability to bake, the new ovens also allow the restaurants to expand the menu to possibly include baked macaroni and cheese, pizza, meatloaf, flat breads and cobblers for ice cream.

Outside, the restaurants received new signage with a new logo that incorporates a blue ice cream cone, new awnings, new paint, accent landscape lighting and new parking lots.

So far, 55 company and 38 franchise restaurants have been remodeled. "The transformation of the remodel has created a friendlier atmosphere," Barto said. "Thanks to the new open concept, we see our guests communicating more with each other."

"After our remodel, our customers' first impressions have been, 'Wow! I was here last week; what happened?'" added Iyad Husein, General Manager of the Friendly's in Metuchen, N.J.

“Guests will also spend five minutes admiring all the new photographs and art work.”

“We’re very excited by the remodels,” Barto said. “Our CEO is very focused on living the vision of the Blake brothers, and the design and facilities maintenance teams have done an outstanding job giving us a platform to succeed in.”

The company is also launching a new prototype restaurant, the first of which will be opened by a franchisee. The prototype incorporates the new upgrades, menu, kitchen equipment and service enhancements.

“It will be designed to be every bit as comfortable, but it will also deliver a faster experience for those guests in a rush,” Weigel said. Friendly’s is currently researching the restaurant technology of the future, such as kiosks to order ice cream and electronic tableside ordering.

“We’re looking at solutions that keep us relevant, offer great dining experiences and speedier service,” Weigel said.

### **Maintaining a Historic Brand**

There are unique challenges with maintaining a brand that is almost 80 years old. Friendly’s has unique systems that were once considered innovative, but today, can pose maintenance challenges. Some of the equipment has expensive parts and a lack of qualified service people to fix them. That’s why the facilities department applies an organized approach when deciding to repair or replace its aging systems. They perform high-level reviews of repairs that exceed a certain amount and track the number of repairs for older items.

When facility problems arise, the corporate restaurants use an in-house work order system. “It puts the control into the general managers’ hands to prioritize their issues,” Weigel said.

The company has a list of approved vendors who are dispatched to fix the issues. The general managers communicate with the facilities department when the work is completed for the payment to be processed. The franchisees use a national work order system for their issues.

In the kitchens, the most important piece of equipment are the grills. To prevent failures, the facilities team has preventive maintenance systems as well as manager-driven checks in place to ensure they are in great condition. Redundancy is built in wherever possible, and the restaurants use multiple-burner models to reduce the risk of a total failure.

“Our job is to maintain the long history of creating memories for our guests, while moving forward to create a new, positive and proactive environment for our operators,” said Jeff Wolanin, Director of Facilities for Friendly’s.

### **Teaming Up For Success**

Friendly’s has teamed up with the New England Patriots to be their official ice cream and family restaurant. This partnership includes the “Patriots Win – Friendly’s Kids Win, Too” promotion. This means in Massachusetts and the surrounding New England states, after the Patriots win on a Sunday, the next day, kids get a free Level 1 kid’s meal with purchase of an adult meal.

“The Patriots are a great sports team with a good reputation; they are the perfect match for us,” Weigel said. “This partnership says we’re back and we’re better than ever, and we’re partnering with this incredible sports team to create great memories during football season.”

The company has been an Easter Seals partner for 33 years and has raised close to \$30 million.

### **A Second Chance**

Maguire’s strategy seems to be working. In the Boston market, sales were up 9.1 percent during a six-week commercial campaign, during which Maguire invited customers to come back to Friendly’s. Transactions were also up 4 percent as compared to the same time last year.

“We’re seeing the turnaround now,” Weigel said. “We’ve spent a lot of our time in the Boston area, our hometown, to get back on our feet, and now, we’re going to continue to remodel all our restaurants by the end of 2015.”

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator.