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BLOOMIN' SUCCESS

Sherleen Mahoney

Bloomin' Brands continues to focus on brand investments and process improvements

IN the mid 1980s, three friends—Tim Gannon, Bob Basham and Chris Sullivan, all with experience in the restaurant industry (Steak & Ale, Bennigan's and Chili's)— dreamed of opening their own restaurant: a concept that would stand apart from the rest and leave customers with a unique and memorable experience.

In the 80s, there was a push toward eating healthier, lighter food and less meat, but according to market research, that only applied to eating at home. When eating out, statistics showed customers were most likely to dine on beef and prime rib. Armed with this information and their restaurant experience, the friends decided to open a steakhouse that served high-quality food at reasonable prices in a casual atmosphere. But they still needed a distinctive angle.

While they were contemplating the theme, the wildly successful 1986 movie “Crocodile’ Dundee” was permeating popular culture. Anything Australian was automatically linked to Paul Hogan's loveable character with the Aussie accent, and “G'Day, mate!” was introduced to the American vernacular.

It was also the year of Australia's bicentennial, and the America's Cup was taking place in Australia. With all the media coverage, “Down Under” was becoming the No. 1 travel destination. The founders thought if Americans were this interested in Australia, perhaps they'd love an Australian-themed restaurant that served American food and captured the laid-back and fun-loving atmosphere of the country.

AMERICAN FARE, AUSSIE FUN

When Outback Steakhouse opened in March 1988—the same year the highly anticipated “Crocodile’ Dundee 2” was released—in Tampa, Fla., customers were treated to a unique restaurant that weaved American food with Australian fun.

The décor consisted of quirky artifacts and bright colors. Ceilings and walls were painted orange and purple, reminiscent of the setting sun upon Australia's famous Ayers Rock. Boomerangs and kangaroo posters were hung on paneled walls, along with shark jaws, surfboards, and stuffed koalas and crocodiles. The waiters wore bright, colorful shirts with lots of flair.

Founded with the “No Rules, Just Right” motto, Outback Steakhouse strove to go above and beyond to please customers, even allowing them to order off-the-menu items. Outback Steakhouse had accomplished its goal of opening a restaurant with a memorable identity that served great food.

ONLY THE BEGINNING

Since the first Outback Steakhouse opened, Bloomin' Brands has expanded to include Carrabba's Italian Grill, Bonefish Grill, Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar and Roy's.

Today, Bloomin' Brands is one of the world's largest casual dining companies, with approximately 86,000 domestic team members and more than 1,400 restaurants in 48 states and 20 countries and territories.

FRESHENING UP

While the “Crocodile’ Dundee” decor worked for more than a decade, in 2007, Bloomin' Brands thought it was

time for a fresh, new look.

Working with external consultants; internal design, construction and operations teams; and, of course, customers, Outback explored new concepts that would make sense from a facilities standpoint, please customers and stay true to the culture.

"We spend a lot of time taking care of our people and making sure we have quality food. It was time we brought our facilities up to the same standards," said Jon Ahrendt, Director of Business Development at Outback Steakhouse.

The team created several modern designs for each restaurant to pick and choose from. The designs fit each community and accommodate different store's unique traits, such as the range of property and building sizes.

"Every store is so different and so unique," said Tara Chambers, a manager at the Grapevine, Texas, location. "Your food is the same, the level of service is still extremely high, but the atmosphere of each store is different because it mirrors your community."

Bloomin' Brands, as well as Outback team members, were ready to retire the dated "Crocodile' Dundee" design. They moved into the 21st century with a classic Australian look.

Today, Outback is more than halfway through remodeling their entire fleet. They expect to finish in 2014.

The remodel includes new floors, colors, lighting, floor plans and design elements—not much was left untouched. Out of all the new elements, Outback is most excited about the new wait and bar areas.

WAITING AREA

The waiting area has been transformed into a modern lounge. Large mahogany leather sectionals with overstuffed cushioned backs, trendy accent tables and ottomans, and elegantly dimmed lighting allow customers to wait for their table in comfort and style.

To emphasize the freshness of Outback's ingredients, a seasoning wall proudly displays the restaurant's 17 fresh seasonings and bold flavors, along with the restaurant's signature steak knives and fresh onions for their popular Bloomin' Onion appetizer.

THE BAR

In the bar area, the purple ceiling has been replaced with modern light fixtures and a silver and blue metal design element that looks like moving water. Wooden shutters bookend the bar, creating faux windows that overlook beach scenes. Multiple flat-screen TVs were introduced, and a partition that separated the bar from the dining room was removed. This allows the bar energy flow to into the dining room to create a more lively, open and inviting feel.

The partition was also used to keep cigarette smoke away from the dining area. Since the new concepts remove it, all Outback restaurants, regardless of local codes and ordinances, will now be non-smoking.

THE DETAILS

The colorful safari uniforms that were often peppered with flair items have been replaced by sophisticated all-black uniforms.

The artwork and artifacts were updated as well. Framed photographs of beach scenes, landscapes and wildlife now tastefully represent Australia's beauty. Additional wall art features Outback's wood-fired cooking style and seasonings.

Chambers said the Grapevine team was really excited about the remodel.

"It was like Christmas morning every time we came to work," she said. "And it's really neat to watch our customers' faces as they come in, explore the whole restaurant and discover new things."

Additionally, she said team members take more pride in their work, and customer survey ratings have been exceptionally high.

CONTINUOUS REFRESH

The first Bloomin' Brand remodel effort has motivated the company to maintain a very keen eye on keeping all their concepts fresh. They don't want to go another 15 years without refreshing a restaurant.

"Every five years, each location will get some kind of upgrade or refresh," Ahrendt said. "It's not a 'set-and-forget' model; it's a continuous improvement process. Our goal is to continue to remain relevant. As our

customers' needs and wants change, we're going to stay relevant with them."

The company is currently considering a remodel of Carrabba's Italian Grill and Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar.

Ahrendt said he's confident Outback's refresh has been successful, based on the positive feedback from customers and employees and the substantial and sustained lift in traffic.

"That says a lot to the refresh and to our employees, who are doing a great job cooking for and serving each one of our customers," he said.

BUDDING ENERGY CONSERVATION EFFORTS

When possible, Bloomin' Brands prefers to operate as a self-sustaining company when it comes to finances and energy use. According to reports, when money is saved in one area, it is applied to the growth of another area, such as a refresh, a remodel or building a new restaurant.

Bloomin' Brands began focusing on energy conservation efforts in the summer of 2011. With the aid of an external consultant, Bloomin' Brands built a strategy for energy conservation that was based on the best practices of energy conservation leaders in a range of markets. For example, Bloomin' Brands looked to Home Depot and Staples, which are established green companies.

Staples received high marks for offering more than 10,000 environmentally friendly products, working with suppliers to reduce packaging and the impacts of product design and manufacturing, and investing in renewable energy. In 2011, 50 percent of each Staples store come from renewable sources. In addition, the company introduced a fleet of 53 all-electric trucks.

Home Depot's notable achievements include installing energy management systems for lighting and HVAC units, engaging in rainwater reclamation for their Garden Centers and creating an Eco Options program, which offers products that are energy efficient and foster sustainable forestry, water conservation, clean air and healthy homes.

Learning from the best, Bloomin' Brands devised a strategy that involves three initiatives:

- . Establish strong best practices and guidelines for restaurant team members.
- . Ensure mechanical equipment is working properly.
- . Identify existing technology that is the right fit for Bloomin' Brands.

A fourth, over-arching goal that complements the initiatives is to achieve solid, calendared energy reporting. Today, the company creates a report that it shares with its partners that show trends for the previous three years.

"It's been a fun project for us, as well as an eye opening and educational experience," Ahrendt said.

These initiatives are driving a pilot program that is currently testing heat transfer technology. One restaurant is using compressed gas produced from the HVAC that reaches beyond 100 degrees for water heaters.

Bloomin' Brands is also testing an energy management system that monitors specific pieces of equipment. The data is used as a source of truth for current and future energy programs.

Similar to the continuous improvement of the restaurants, Bloomin' Brands will apply the same principle with its energy conservation programs.

BLOOMIN' HEARTS

For the past several years, Outback Steakhouse has partnered with Friedreich's Ataxia Research Alliance (FARA) to help fund research and clinical trials seeking to stop, reverse the effects of and cure Friedreich's Ataxia (FA).

FA is an inherited disease that progressively damages the nervous system. Symptoms include muscle weakness, loss of coordination and impairment of speech, hearing and vision.

Outback regularly holds fund raisers, charity events, golf tournaments and bike rides to raise money for FARA. Specifically, Outback partners with FARA's Ride Ataxia Program, a day of cycling that raises awareness and collects donations for FARA.

In March, an Outback Steakhouse in Denton County, Texas, hosted a Ride Ataxia in which 700 riders raised \$135,000.

In addition, Chambers said the Grapevine, Texas, restaurant auctioned its old artwork and artifacts and raised

\$2,500 for FARA.

HOOKED ON A CAUSE

Another area of social responsibility that is important to Bloomin' Brands is sustainable fishery and the healthy stewardship of marine resources.

Bonefish Grill shows its dedication to sustainable practices by following the reports and recommendations of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and government regulations. In addition, Bloomin' Brands regularly consults with conservation groups, such as Ocean Trust, an award-winning ocean conservation foundation building science, conservation and industry partnerships for the sustainability of the oceans, and the company's own Seafood Advisory Council. Lastly, the company believes in working closely with fishermen who promote sustainability, ocean conservation and healthy practices.

Last year, Bonefish Grill employees in North Carolina teamed up with the Reef Ball Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to making new aquatic habitats by helping folks build artificial reefs and teaching about the value of natural reefs, to create reef ball molds. Reef balls are artificial reefs used to restore coral reefs and create new fishing and scuba-diving sites. They are made out of marine-friendly concrete and are designed to mimic natural coral reef systems. They create habitats for fish and other marine and freshwater species. The team created reef balls for Cape Fear, which will provide a habitat to support 300 pounds of biomass per year, and each one is expected to last 500 years.

CONTINUED SUCCESS

While Outback Steakhouse continues its renovations, Bloomin' Brands is working on growing its other brands. The company plans to expand Bonefish Grills this coming year, especially on the eastern seaboard and open more Carrabba's Italian Grills and international Outback locations.

The founders' instinct to pinpoint popular trends and to give customers what they want is an important contributor to Outback's success. This consideration has been hardwired into Bloomin' Brands' strategy as the company continues to refresh and grow its brands.

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