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Change Language: Choose

One Big Family

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Jason's Deli sharpens its focus on customers, partners with MD Anderson to fight cancer

When Joe Tortorice, Jr., founded Jason's Deli in Beaumont, Texas, in 1976, he set out to open a sandwich shop that treats employees like family.

Tortorice believes that by investing in and empowering his employees, he is rewarded with a loyal and hard-working workforce. So, not only does he pay his employees well and treat them as an extension of his family, he also created the Leadership Institute, which offers free educational classes on finances, ethics, marriage, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence, as well as The Fishing School, which gets its name from the "Teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime" adage. The school empowers hourly employees to advance themselves professionally by becoming managers and leaders. There's also a non-profit foundation that helps employees who encounter hardships. For more than 35 years, this has been one of the guiding principles behind Jason's Deli's success.

Inspired by Natural Ingredients

In addition to family values, Jason's Deli is also committed to serving the highest-quality food using natural ingredients. From sandwiches to salads, Jason's Deli offers healthy and delicious food that is free from artificial trans fats, dyes, MSG and high fructose corn syrup. This food philosophy inspired the company's newest prototype design.

After conducting a holistic exam on customer service, which included interviewing new and existing customers, Jason's Deli learned they had some areas that needed improvements. Customer feedback revealed confusion with navigating through the delis, problems with the noise level and congestion around the salad bar, ice cream station and drink station. These issues were creating bad customer experiences.

To correct these issues, the prototype has completely remodeled the deli. The ordering counter was moved directly in line with the entrance to create a direct path for customers. The stations were separated to reduce traffic and congestion, allowing for easier access to items. The salad bar was moved closer to the front door, which creates an immediate visual marketing element for guests as they enter the delis.

"We wanted our guests, when they walk through our doors, to see a great display of our vegetables," said Todd Breiner, Director of Design and Concepts for Jason's Deli.

The seating area was drastically altered as well.

"There was a change in philosophy over guest seating," Breiner said. "We broke the restaurant industry adage of every seat equaling \$1."

Breiner reasoned that if the seating configuration doesn't make sense, it doesn't help the bottom line.

"For example, if you have a bunch of four-top tables but a number of pairs walk in, only 50 percent of the seats are being used," he said. "It doesn't matter if you have 180 seats if 40 percent of them are empty when a table is taken."

The team counted the number of guests who came in during peak times and took note of group sizes. To create seating that better serves guests, the prototype includes more two-top tables that can be pushed together as four-tops and more single-top and high-top seats. Brick walls were erected to break up the seating area, add privacy and create more intimate spaces, which also reduced the noise level.

The building materials also reflect the natural, unadulterated food. Raw milled steel in its natural state—steel that is not painted or powder coated—is used throughout the prototype. Corten steel, which rusts naturally and is then sealed, is used on the exterior. The new chairs are also in their natural state, without powder coating.

Lastly, new design elements balance modern and traditional styles, such as the Edison-style pendant lights installed throughout the delis. Local photography captures the regional flair of each location. Orange and green accent walls create a warm and inviting feel.

The interior design was created with the multi-generational customer base in mind; it provides a comfortable and inviting environment for everyone from millennials to seniors.

Important Vendor Partnerships

To complete the prototype, Jason's Deli relied on some trusted vendor partners.

With sustainability in mind, Haines, Jones and Cadbury (HJC), a consolidator of tile, plumbing and electrical fixtures based in Bentonville, Ark., helped Breiner source water-efficient fixtures for the restrooms, including waterless urinals. The new fixtures are estimated to reduce water usage by more than 60,000 gallons in the men's restroom and 52,000 gallons in the women's restroom.

HJC also recommended cost-effective tile options for the dining room that enhance the overall design of the prototype.

A goal of the prototype was to standardize the lighting package across all delis. Regency Lighting, based in Chatsworth, Calif., helped determine the best lighting options to convey the look and feel of the prototype. The company conducted lighting-level tests to determine the best lighting options for the different areas. The tests covered the dining areas, open-concept kitchen, restrooms and stations (including salad bar, drink station, ice cream station, and order counter) as well as accent lighting to highlight the local community pictures and marketing signage.

Various lighting levels determined by Regency Lighting helped Jason's Deli create better experiences for guests. Lower lighting is used in the dining areas to create a comfortable ambiance, while brighter lights highlight the kitchen, the drink station and the salad bar.

In addition, a replacement lighting website was created to facilitate light bulb orders for operators. Prior to standardizing the lighting and the website, store managers and employees were purchasing light bulbs from hardware stores, often during business hours.

"It was a nightmare for our operators to maintain uniform lighting," said Nic McLaughlin, Director of Facilities for Jason's Deli. "Different lighting and hardware stores carry different brands of bulbs, and it was a struggle to ensure every bulb purchased matched the color, kelvin and wattage of the other bulbs in the deli. And in most cases, our stores were purchasing the least expensive bulbs. These were typically residential bulbs that were not meant to burn for 17 hours a day."

Now, store operators have an easy, one-stop shop for ordering light bulbs, all warranties are tracked and consistency is maintained across all delis.

Refreshing the Brand

For delis receiving a refresh, many elements from the prototype are being incorporated, such as the brick walls, the new paint palette and the display of local pictures.

These refreshes are completed without closing the delis. The work is done after hours, in segments and over a seven-to 10-day period. By the end of the year, 65 delis will be refreshed.

To manage construction trash removal, Waste Management has been an integral partner for the refresh efforts. Wherever possible, Jason's Deli utilizes Waste Management's single-stream recycling, which diverts 70 percent of construction waste from landfills.

Whether building a prototype or completing a refresh, Jason's Deli's development team uses Autodesk Revit, a building information modeling software, during the planning and design phase. Jason's has partnered with Innovation Design Architecture (IDA) who introduced them to this software in 2011. IDA has been instrumental in transforming how the team designs and reviews projects. The team can virtually construct a deli with all of its components in 3D as they are designing it. Having real-time renderings and 3-D layouts that can be rotated ensures that the team is executing the architectural and design vision.

"A lot of our locations are inlines and at endcaps, so the software helps make sure we are interpreting the space correctly," said Kevin Gray, Director of Development for Jason's Deli. "Using Revit, we can walk through the store from the customers' standpoint."

Maintaining the Vision

Once a prototype or refresh is finished, the facility management team takes over to maintain the deli and ensure guest satisfaction. The facility team conducts audits up to three times a year. Not only do the audits ensure that the equipment is working and properly cleaned and maintained, they now include customer touch points.

"Our focus has shifted to incorporate walking in our guests' shoes," said Raymond Begnaud, Director of Facilities, Development and Design. "We start in the parking lot and walk through the deli from the customer perspective. We're not just wearing a facility manager hat or an operator hat; we're putting on the customer hat as well."

Along with checking the standard facility items, the audits also check the walls for any discoloration, damage and cleanliness; the exterior for cleanliness, that it is free from damage, trash, trip hazards and eye sores; and the dining room furniture for cleanliness, good condition and that they are free from blemishes, chips and scratches.

United for a Special Cause

The family-oriented reputation of Jason's Deli is well known within the restaurant industry and beyond. When The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center formed its Corporate Alliances Department, its first choice was to approach Jason's Deli to be a corporate partner. Simultaneously, Jason's Deli was also searching for a charitable organization to partner with.

"Their core values and our core values mesh well," said DeDe DeStefano, Executive Director for Corporate Alliances at MD Anderson. "Our philosophy is 'Caring, Integrity and Discovery,' and they have several programs that give back to and take care of their employees." Jason's Deli's and MD Anderson's partnership is about more than aligned core values. At the heart of the partnership is a matter of life and death.

Several of Jason's Deli employees and family members have been affected by cancer. Many sought successful treatment at MD Anderson. One such person is Monique Cohen, the wife of Director of Brand Management Jamie Cohen.

When Monique was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2011,

Tortorice told Jamie to take the year off to take care of his family and recommended MD Anderson, considered the best cancer hospital in the United States. U.S. News & World Report has consistently ranked MD Anderson No. 1 in cancer care in its "Best Hospitals" survey.

Monique received her treatments at the Julie and Ben Rogers Breast Diagnostic Clinic at MD Anderson. Ben Rogers was the Beaumont, Texas, philanthropist who encouraged Tortorice to open Jason's Deli. Jamie saw this connection as a sign that everything was going to be alright.

After six months of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation, Monique remains cancer free today.

So, when MD Anderson Board Member Regina Rogers, daughter of Julie and Ben Rogers and longtime family friend of the Tortorice family, reached out to Jamie about the corporate alliance, he saw it as destiny; it was his chance to give back to the renowned cancer center that successfully treated his wife's breast cancer.

All in to Fight Cancer

To help MD Anderson in the fight against cancer, Jason's Deli launched a year-long, national campaign in its more than 200 delis in 28 states. Ten cents of every bottled water purchase is donated to the cancer center's Moon Shots Program. Named after President John F. Kennedy's inspiring goal of landing a man on the moon, the program aims to eradicate the mortality rates from eight types of cancer—breast, ovarian, leukemia (AML/MDS/CLL), lung cancer, melanoma and prostate cancer—by 2024.

Specially designed water bottle labels feature a Jason's Deli family who was affected by cancer and sought treatment at MD Anderson. In addition to the Cohens, the Schmidt family is featured on the water bottles.

Will Schmidt, a District Manager at Jason's Deli, was diagnosed with colon cancer in April. Luckily, it had not spread beyond the colon. MD Anderson surgical oncologists removed the tumor and 42 lymph nodes. Oncologists determined that Schmidt was cancer free after the surgery. This experience served as an important reminder to Schmidt about the importance of yearly physicals and regular colonoscopies, especially since his family has a history of colon cancer.

Also featured is the Harmon family. Danielle Harmon, wife of Eastern Region Manager Jason Harmon, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998. At the time, she was 31 years old and a new mom to 14-month-old Sam. After six rounds of chemo and five surgeries, Danielle remains cancer free today.

The photos of the families are mostly in black and white, except for the colorful bandanas each member of the family is wearing. The bandanas come in five colors, each representing a type of cancer targeted by the Moon Shots Program: Pink: Breast Cancer, Orange:

Leukemia, White: Lung Cancer, Black: Melanoma, Blue: Prostate Cancer.

Customers can also purchase these bandanas at Jason's Deli, and \$2 of every purchase is donated to the Moon Shots Program.

Throughout October and November, Jason's Deli employees wore the bandanas to raise awareness about the MD Anderson campaign and to show their solidarity for their Jason's Deli brothers and sisters who were touched by cancer.

"The bandana is an important symbol of this campaign," Tortorice said in a press release. "When everyone is wearing one, it says to people fighting cancer that they're not alone in the fight."

This partnership with Jason's Deli is MD Anderson's first year-long national campaign.

"We thought they would be a perfect partner in the beginning, and they really have been," DeStefano said. "It's truly been a great relationship. It's been emotional and powerful to work with a group who is as dedicated to helping others as we are. It's really important for people to know how important gifts like this really are. Even a small amount—10 cents of every water bottle—really adds up. Sometimes, these gifts are the only things that keep a lab running or fund a scientist's innovative idea that allows him or her to compete for a federal grant. These gifts are truly incredibly important to cancer research."

To Tortorice, the partnership is all about family.

"Jason's Deli is a family business, and our employees are part of our family. Unfortunately, our family is affected by cancer like many others, so our decision to support MD

Anderson is personal," he said in a press release. "Our employees and their family members who valiantly fight cancer inspire us. We're honoring them by sharing their stories. And by sharing their stories, we're letting everyone know how important it is to support MD Anderson in its mission to eliminate cancer."

The People Business

Tortorice is known to say, "We are truly in the people business; our product happens to be food." The company's actions prove that he is a man of his word time and time again.

From supporting and developing his employees to ensuring that guests are kept top of mind and, now, to the campaign to fight cancer with MD Anderson, Jason's Deli demonstrates that it is committed to staying true to its remarkable people-oriented culture.