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Cover Story Page 94

Hickory Harvest Foods

The Good Snack People

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Joe Swiatkowski, current president of Hickory Harvest Foods (Hickory Harvest), fondly remembers the time he spent during his childhood running around his family's cheese and summer sausage distribution company. Today the Ohio-based company no longer distributes cheese or summer sausage, but it has become a purveyor of fine quality roasted nuts, trail mixes, dried fruits, candies and more.

Hickory Harvest was founded in 1972 by Joe's father and grandfather, George and Joseph, respectively. Hickory Harvest began oil-roasting nuts in the early 1980s, which proved successful, as those nuts are now the company's signature product line. The company has added an array of products over the years, now offering a variation of over 400 Hickory Harvest-approved goods.

Joe knew early on that he would be a part of the family company, someday. "I had always had an interest in coming into the company," Joe says. "Right out of college I did not, but it wasn't too much later that I joined the company." However, Joe claims to be a real nut aficionado; after all, his vanity license plate reads: nutman.

Passion for the Product

Since 1999 Joe has served in a variety of roles prior to his current position. He begins each day reviewing commodity nut pricing and has a real passion for the business. In his role he is responsible for daily operations, procurement, pricing and capital expenses for the company.

Hickory Harvest remains a family affair; Joe's brother, Mike,

vice president of sales and marketing for Hickory Harvest, and his mother also serves in an executive position. "We're a family-owned and -operated company, and we really take that to heart," Joe says.

Mike also has a rather long history of product development, as he created his first trail mix blend when he was 5 years old. Mikey's Mix, a blend of sweet and salty, including roasted salty nuts, raisins and chocolate candies, continues to be a top seller 30 years later.



As for Joe, Hickory Harvest's roasted nuts – of any kind – are his favorite. "If you eat a nut warm right out of a roaster, you're just never really interested in eating them at ambient temperature again," he says.

When it comes to business relationships, Hickory Harvest extends the family feel. The team

is sure to take the time to meet with each customer and develop a working relationship between the two entities. "We develop true partnerships, rather than working based on a customer-client mentality," says Joe. "Our goal is to make our customers successful." The company's partnerships also help Hickory Harvest plan for the future and identify the next trends in the snack industry.

Quality, Fresh Nuts

No matter what taste appeals to customers' palates, the team is doing something right. Hickory Harvest is dedicated to providing fresh, great-tasting and safe food to consumers. With increasing reports of food contamination in the industry, Joe makes food safety a priority.

Hickory Harvest recently added a new packaging process for deli tubs, which helps to extend a product's shelf life and increases safety. The process includes a nitrogen flush prior to a double seal for deli tub containers, a process that had been in place for years with the company's bagged products. By adding the nitrogen, it displaces the oxygen from the packaging, extending the shelf life. According to Joe, being able to offer nitrogen flushing for plastic tubs is innovative.

"We may be the only company in the industry gas flushing plastic containers," Joe says. "In addition, we triple-seal our containers to ensure food safety and freshness. We take food safety very serious and look for the latest technology to provide the best and safest products for our customers."

Food safety is a major challenge for any company in the food industry, but for Hickory Harvest the major challenge is how to grow in a way that sustains the business. "Our challenge has been growing pains," says Joe. "The company has been growing at a good rate."

According to Joe, the growth has been made possible despite the difficult economy because of smart business decisions early on. "A lot of people overspend when the economy is good," he says. "We don't overspend ourselves. So we're good in the good market and we're good even in the bad market."

Because of the company's continued well-made decisions, Hickory Harvest continues to grow and expand. The company is increasingly adding distribution in its two main markets, grocery and convenience stores, as well as distributors in order to get more existing product lines on the shelf. At the same time, the Hickory Harvest team is always considering new products to launch and ways to improve the existing product lines.

Proof of the company's growth is showcased in the recognition Hickory Harvest received in October 2012. The company was honored with the top award in manufacturing at the Cascade Capital Growth Awards, which annually honors a business in a six county region of northeast Ohio with significant growth in sales and employees over the past five years.



Expanding Operations

To address growth in the company, Hickory Harvest built a new 30,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art food processing facility to incorporate the acquired brand I.M. Good Snacks. Just three years later, more space and equipment are needed to meet client demands.

Joe anticipates adding equipment to increase production by 50 percent in 2013; these investments include a new roaster and new product packaging line. Also, Hickory Harvest has plans to add another 18,000 square feet of space to its facility in spring 2013. "With the addition of the new packaging machinery and our increased capacity, we need more warehouse space," he says.

As Hickory Harvest continues to add capacity to meet the needs of its customers, Joe continues to stay focused on steady, smart expansion, while ensuring the freshest, best-tasting and safest products available. It is Hickory Harvest Foods' mission to maintain customer's needs of product quality and customer satisfaction.

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