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P A C K A G I N G T H A T S E L L S

A Fish Story: The One That Didn't Get Away

With the right bait, fisherman Bob Costarella truly caught the “big one”. Except the big one wasn't a fish, and the bait he used was packaging.

It's not that fishing isn't in Bob Costarella's blood. Since 1952, he and his San Francisco-based Costarella Seafoods have become a Fisherman's Wharf institution and an icon for the city's fishing industry. Costarella's daily haul is one of the most sought after by top chefs and fish mongers due to the company's long time reputation for procuring the Wharf's finest “catch of the day.”

If you live in the San Francisco Bay Area and like seafood, you've probably eaten Costarella fish. With an impeccable reputation and a solid business, you'd think Costarella would be content to sit back and enjoy its success. But with the consumption of seafood growing, Costarella felt it could better capitalize on the market opportunity.

“We knew we were leaving money on the table,” says Bob Costarella. “We had the resources and expertise to expand our business. We just needed to create the right strategy to capitalize on the opportunity.”

It was with this goal the company set sites on establishing its own branded product line for consumers, leaving the comfortable world of wholesale for the unfamiliar world of consumer packaged goods.

Where to start

The first step was to pick the market entry point. Costarella thought the best opportunity would be in the higher margin, value-added retail market



with smoked salmon and gravlox. The thinking was to leverage the Costarella reputation for quality with an entirely new audience by taking advantage of the rapid growth of gourmet offerings at retail. The product strategy offered an additional benefit: Costarella could manage the predictability of smoked fish supply that couldn't be done with fresh seafood.

The wrong bait

With the product strategy in place, Costarella began to show the product to the retail trade with a makeshift label and package that was representative of the company's wholesale brand. But nobody was biting.

Sure, the buyers knew of Costarella's legendary reputation for quality. The challenge, however, was communicating that brand equity to the retail customer unfamiliar with the Costarella name. Retail buyers were reluctant to move forward, especially with the number of emerging and artfully packaged premium fish products. The effort to break into retail was going nowhere.

“To appeal to grocery customers, and even just to get on shelf, we needed to reinvent ourselves,” Costarella says. “We had to figure out how to translate what we had always been so good at doing in person at the wholesale level to a channel that was totally new to us: consumer packaged goods.”

A twist of fate

As in all good fish stories, a twist of fate had a major impact. Costarella retail sales manager Lou Notti's good friend, Ellen Baker, worked at a locally based packaging design firm, Philippe Becker Design (PBD). Lou showed the labels to Ellen and asked her for advice. It was difficult for Baker to provide constructive criticism when she saw labels with no discernible brand or hierarchy of communication.

Knowing she needed to take quick action, Ellen asked her boss for a favor: could the firm work up some ideas that would improve Costarella's chances at breaking into retail? Philippe Becker, the agency's founder and creative director, jumped at the challenge.

"What really piqued our interest was the opportunity to tell the Costarella story on a package," says Becker. "The 'raw material' to create a compelling brand based on Costarella's history and industry status was irresistible."

It was with the Costarella legacy that PBD began its exploration of what the brand should be. "We had some truly powerful icons to work with—the city and the Wharf together embody seafood and a culture of food," says Becker. "In our minds, Costarella's long standing history in both of these areas represented San Francisco at its best."

Surprisingly, no brand or company had ever "owned" or captured this heritage—this "San Francisco-ness"—as it relates to seafood. "Why not Costarella?" posits Becker. "The history, the iconography, the quality of the product—they all spoke to a very believable brand personality."

Using this authenticity as the base, PBD honed in on a brand positioning. "We wanted to communicate the company's heritage and convey its history."

Visitors—and even some native San Franciscans—often assume Fisherman's Wharf exists purely as a tourist haven,

a relic of its former glory as the hub of San Francisco's infamous Barbary Coast. But Fisherman's Wharf also remains a bustling, working seat of commercial fishery.

"Pier 45 currently houses 25 fishing companies and is the largest, most modern facility of its kind on the West Coast," says Costarella. "PBD felt strongly this locale was a credible way to tie the business to San Francisco by making it part of our identity, and I agreed. This is where I grew up and where my father taught me the trade. This was an authentic representation of who we are as a company."

The final product

Following several rounds of design, the group narrowed in on a direction that best embodied the new positioning. A nautical blue banner was created to house the friendly, approachable Costarella script. A medallion was created for the packaging from an original 1950s era photo of the founder (Lou Costarella, Bob's father) on the pier at Fisherman's Wharf. The graphic ensemble proudly exhibits the company's heritage and authenticity—and its tie to Fisherman's Wharf. This brand identity was then extended to packaging for its line of smoked and salted fish.

"When we were finished, I couldn't believe the transformation," says Costarella. "PBD was able to change our package into the embodiment of everything we had built over the last 50 years."

The new label features an original 1950s era photo of founder Lou Costarella on the pier at Fisherman's Wharf.

Taking the bait

Armed with the new packaging, Costarella went back to the retail trade, and this time the response was immediate and overwhelming. "Within two months we were being carried by all of the San Francisco Bay Area's premium grocers," he says.

Upon viewing the new identity and packaging for the first time, Whole Foods Market ordered the entire retail line for all of its 19 San Francisco Bay Area stores. The nod from Whole Foods doubled Costarella's retail smoked line sales. It was at that moment that Costarella truly felt the power of packaging. "I got it," he says. "The importance of actually selling my brand in order to sell my product really sunk in."

Whole Foods was just the tip of the iceberg for Costarella. Sales have continued to climb as the company's products have gained distribution in a number of Northern California's grocery store chains and specialty stores including Mollie Stone's, Andronico's and Bryan's.

Gone fishing

"The experience of creating our brand and packaging our products has been a catalyst for the company," Costarella says. "We are where we sought to be, in retail, and in a very real way. We are now poised for further growth. Our retail presence is expanding, capped to a large extent only by ability to meet demand."

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