Mister Bee Potato Chip Factory Abuzz With Activity

George Hohmann, Charleston Daily Mail

PARKERSBURG, W.Va. (AP) — Now that the Mister Bee Potato Chip Co. factory is buzzing again, the new owners and their young management team are focused on growing market share and standardizing the company's products.

Mister Bee, established in 1951, shut down in November and filed for bankruptcy protection. James Richard "Rick" Barton and Randall Holden bought the company's assets earlier this year. Barton and Holden are veterans of manufacturing. They are among the founding partners of Wincore, a Parkersburg-based manufacturer of windows and doors.

Locally produced potato chips began appearing again on area store shelves in late April. The owners have brought in Randall's son, Dwight Holden, 23, as director of operations and Jonathan Betancourt, 26, as director of sales and marketing.

Mister Bee has long been the only potato chip maker in West Virginia — a fact the company previously trumpeted with the slogan, "200 miles fresher" — meaning 200 miles closer to Mountain State customers than its Ohio rivals.

The new owners and managers are shifting the marketing to emphasize the fact Mister Bee is a West Virginia business. Bags of chips will soon bear an outline of the state. Also, the chips will be sold this fall at Mountaineer Field and other West Virginia University venues. The owners hope Mister Bee will become a familiar brand on Marshall University's campus next year.

Barton said the company's core market radiates from Parkersburg north to Wetzel and Tyler counties, south to Jackson County, and east to Roane, Calhoun and Ritchie counties.

"We're not as well known in Morgantown, Clarksburg, Huntington or Charleston," he said. "We've got some work to do."

The company also is talking with some distribution companies with hopes of getting Mister Bee products in more convenience stores, hospitals and schools, Barton said. Mister Bee recently shipped a load of chips to a distributor in hopes that company will get Mister Bee chips on military bases.

Mister Bee also wants to increase its online sales to West Virginian natives who live out of state. The managers know there's a market "because people stop in all of the time to buy cases of chips to take with them," Betancourt said.

The managers would like to eventually offer public tours of the factory.

Employment has already grown from 32 when the company shut down last year to more than 40. Mister Bee has 11 employees who drive routes and sell the company's product. One of their initial challenges is regaining store shelf space.

During the period Mister Bee was closed, stores filled their shelves with other products. Now Mister Bee must fight to regain space for its original potato chips as well as its barbeque chips, sour cream and onion flavored chips, and dip-style chips.

It is not an easy task. Mister Bee must compete with some other regional companies like Wise Foods Inc. plus national firms like Frito-Lay, a $12 billion unit of PepsiCo.

Betancourt said that to improve Mister Bee's competitive position, the company plans to begin offering a wider array of products within 45 days. The additions: tortilla chips, pork rinds, corn twist pops, baked cheese curls and cheese puffs.

Other companies will initially make these products although they'll be marketed under the Mister Bee brand. If demand for a product warrants, Mister Bee will eventually make its own.

Meanwhile, the potato chip factory is buzzing in a residential neighborhood tucked just out of sight of the Grand Central Mall.

The manufacturing process is straightforward: Potatoes are brought to the factory in trucks that are refrigerated to maintain freshness. Bins of potatoes are dumped into a machine that washes them. Then the potatoes are peeled and washed again.

Another machine slices the potatoes. The slices move along a conveyor belt to a fryer, where they're cooked. They come out crisp and warm. Then a conveyor moves them to another room.

If the chips are seasoned, it happens at this point in the process. Then the chips are weighed and packaged. Betancourt said Mister Bee's chips are packaged in 16-ounce, 10-ounce, 8-ounce, 1.7-ounce and 1-oz. bags. After they're bagged, the chips are boxed and shipped.

The front end of the process is not standardized. Examples:

— A lot of attention is paid to the blades that cut the potatoes. The thickness of the chips must be identical if they are to cook uniformly.

— Employees must take special care of the vegetable oil, which is filtered and freshened daily.

— An experienced employee determines, by sight, if chips coming out of the fryer are properly cooked.

"I want consistency in the chip," said Randall Holden. To this end, "we're also looking at climate control. We know that the higher the humidity and the higher the

temperature, the shorter the life of the chips."

The potatoes are, of course, one of the biggest factors in product quality. Mister Bee currently buys potatoes from Florida in the winter, Alabama and the Carolinas in the spring, and Pennsylvania, Ohio and Wisconsin in the summer.

"We would like to buy West Virginia potatoes," said Barton. The company's fryer already uses West Virginia-produced natural gas. Using Mountain State potatoes would allow Mister Bee to advertise that its potato chips are an all-West Virginia product.

Asked how many potatoes the company uses annually, Randall Holden did a quick calculation. By next year the company should be near its capacity: 100,000 pounds of potatoes a week, 50 weeks of the year, he said.

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