

A devoted fan base

Sheila G. Mains finds a recipe for social media marketing with Brownie Brittle

BY HOLLY HAMMERSMITH | CEOINTERVIEW@SBNONLINE.COM

If the social media follower movement experienced by West Palm Beach-based gourmet food brand Brownie Brittle could be condensed into a recipe, it would likely read:

Step 1: Create a great product.

Step 2: Cultivate a fan base.

Step 3: Turn fans into followers.

Yield: Social media marketing success.

The growth of Brownie Brittle's Facebook following mirrors the company's rapid growth.

In 2011, the brand had a new Facebook page and about 200,000 bags of product on store shelves. Today, more than 300,000 people interact with the brand on Facebook. Brownie Brittle has an international presence and more than 20 million bags stock store shelves.

"That's pretty explosive growth, pretty significant," says Sheila G. Mains, CEO and founder of Brownie Brittle. "People love the product. People love to share the product or introduce their friends and family to it, which is a little bit of a phenomenon because it doesn't normally happen."



SOCIAL MEDIA: To learn more about Brownie Brittle, like its Facebook page www.facebook.com/BrownieBrittle and follow on Twitter @BrownieBrittle.



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Building a brownie empire

Baking was not Mains' first career choice. The Syracuse, New York, native worked as an industrial advertising agency executive, but in the early 1990s found herself unemployed due to a business slowdown.

She took to plan B, which was baking brownies using a popular family recipe. Mains focused on selling her product in the B2B realm, mostly to offices for gifts, special occasions and parties. She later sold the brownies wholesale to hotels, restaurants and coffee shops. In 2008, when the recession hit, sales plummeted.

"People weren't eating out, and when they were they weren't ordering a \$5 brownie sundae," Mains says.

Enter plan BB.

Mains always enjoyed the chewy corner pieces of brownies best, as did many of her customers. She set out to make the same product in mass quantity with Brownie Brittle. At the same time, she shifted her business to a B2C angle and gained buy-in from retailers.

"They loved it. It had been a long time since anyone had come up with something new in that (brownie) category," she says.

Getting the word out

Mains spent tens of thousands of dollars demoing Brownie Brittle. Around the same time, social media marketing began to gain popularity.

Brownie Brittle launched in 2011 with a website and a Facebook page. Later the #BrownieBrittle hashtag was added along with other social media channels such as Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest. During those demos, Mains and her team would hand out samples and ask customers to like the company's Facebook page in return. They did.

"Every time we did a chocolate festival or anything, anything that we did went right out to social media. People started to become more familiar with the product, the name, the brand," Mains says.

Brownie Brittle social media followers are "fanatics," Mains says. They love the product and tell others. Fans write to the company, offer ideas and suggest new flavors.

"They've embraced us and we've embraced them and we develop a relationship with our consumers. You can't do that by any other means than really social media," she says.

When the product underwent a packaging refresh in 2014, Facebook fans were asked to vote on their favorite



design. The fan favorite is the package that appears on shelves today, Mains says.

The most important social media rule, Mains says, is to respond to comments — positive or negative.

"We view a post on Facebook like somebody walking into a room in the real time space and (talking)," Mains says. "We respond to everything because we view it the same way. It doesn't matter that it's in the digital world."

Managing and expanding social media

In order to manage the company's booming social media presence, Mains employs a social and digital manager. Additionally, an agency supports the company's Twitter and Instagram channels.

"I think it's best, in my opinion, to have an in-house person who has a finger on the pulse of the brand and knows what's going on all the time," Mains says.

For companies seeking to increase their social media footprint or begin from scratch, Mains says hiring part-time or contract help is a start, even if it's for only a few hours per week. The person handling social media has to be familiar with the platforms, and ideally needs an advertising or marketing background.

While social media has been huge for Brownie Brittle, Mains says she also uses traditional advertising, from full-page ads in women's glossy magazines to billboards and manning booths at food shows.

Additionally, over the past year the Brownie Brittle brand has utilized the blogging sphere to increase brand awareness. After connecting with bloggers in person at conventions such as BlogHer Food, bloggers received product samples and were asked to write about the treat if they liked it.

Some bloggers created recipes with the product and have shared the Brownie Brittle brand on their own social media channels. These bloggers can have 25,000, 50,000 or even 100,000 followers on their own social media channels, Mains says.

Entering 2015, the Brownie Brittle brand will work to increase fan engagement on Pinterest. ●

How to reach: Brownie Brittle, (800) 276-9643 or www.browniebrittle.com

