

Business : Advertising & Marketing



Mrs. Fields Treats Itself to a Birthday Makeover

In its 30th year, the baked-goods chain is experimenting with an updated look and new menu offerings to broaden its appeal.

By M.R. Kropko, The Associated Press

September 27, 2006

NORTH OLMSTED, Ohio — Clara was being good.

The 3-year-old had just left a mall photo studio with her dad, Craig Orr. He told his daughter she had earned a treat, and just then she spotted a sweets shop that glowed red. She pointed. Dad willingly complied, and a Mrs. Fields cookie was soon in Clara's tiny hand.

ADVERTISEMENT

That's just the way Mrs. Fields likes it to happen.

With its parent company coming off a year of losses, the business known internationally for its chocolate chip cookies and other treats is being made over in its 30th year. It's starting here at a suburban Cleveland store inside the Westfield Great Northern shopping mall, where walls have been painted red, the lighting softened and the menu revamped to include gourmet coffees.

"Obviously, the color red is very appealing. The lighting is nice. It's a very modern look," said Orr, glancing at the freshly remodeled store with a name in big white letters out front that Clara is too young to read but that is familiar to older generations.

The Salt Lake City-based chain chose the Ohio store as the model for the redesign because it was going to move to another location in the mall anyway. Mrs. Fields representatives say that how many of its 503 stores will be redesigned, and when, will depend on the response to this one.

"I think the single biggest difference is warmth of the experience," said Leslie Snavely, brand manager for Mrs. Fields. "We want our customers to say, 'I deserve this. I want this.'"

The change appears to be paying off.

Since Sept. 7, the remade Ohio location has seen a sales increase of about 60% from the same period last year, said Jim Bird, franchise operations director for Santa Ana-based Pacific Hospitality, the franchisee that oversees the North Olmsted store and 26 other Mrs. Fields shops that are mostly on the West Coast.

Although there have been changes, much has stayed the same: Mrs. Fields is still focused on its decadent cookies and brownies, and the business remains walk-up, with treats displayed in glass cases.

The store used to have more white mixed with red accents, and the redesign came with a wider display case to fit more products and lighted signs to better display options for snacks, drinks or gift packages.

Mrs. Fields is expanding its drink menu too, offering smoothies as well as specialty coffees. The Dunkin' Donuts, McDonald's and Burger King chains have similarly introduced high-end coffees. The store here also has new sweets to go with its new look, including new brownie flavors that are planned for shops nationwide.

Food business consultant Arlene Spiegel said that any changes in product offerings and store appearance would be important in a highly competitive market that depends largely on customers walking past.

"Mrs. Fields intercepts them, much like a Starbucks would," said Spiegel, who is based in New York. "In order to get noticed and be differentiated, design and sensuality of the brand has to be enhanced."

Mrs. Fields started when 20-year-old Debra J. "Debbi" Fields opened Mrs. Fields Chocolate Chippery in Palo Alto in 1977.

She is no longer part of Mrs. Fields, which was acquired in 1996 by Capricorn Holdings, a Greenwich, Conn., investment firm.

The company is now part of the privately held Mrs. Fields Famous Brands, which posted a \$37.9-million loss in 2005 after a \$2.7-million profit the year before. The loss was tied to write-offs for its TCBY frozen yogurt brand, which the company is trying to revitalize, spokesman Michael Frandsen said.

The company also operates Great American Original Cookie, Pretzel Time and Pretzelmaker stores. During the first half of 2006, the number of stores declined to 2,384 from 2,479, as company shops were sold or franchised stores closed.

Mrs. Fields identifies mall regulars Auntie Anne's Soft Pretzels and Cinnabon among its competitors. Other similar stores include Harry & David of Medford, Ore., and Cheryl & Co. of Westerville, Ohio. Both are more focused on a wider array of gift foods and Internet sales.