



A Fresh Beginning

R.H. Foster's new c-store prototype is step one in a five-year plan focused on foodservice

By Danielle Romano

If you've ever questioned what an energy company knows about foodservice innovation, R.H. Foster Energy LLC has the answer with its new convenience store prototype in Ellsworth, Maine: "More than you'd expect."

Opened for business on July 21 and located on the corner of Elm and High streets in Ellsworth, this prototype store not only ushers in a new c-store design for the Hampden, Maine-based company, but also a whole new brand for its convenience stores — Freshies.

This moniker was previously reserved only for R.H. Foster's deli concept. The foodservice-focused Freshies prototype in Ellsworth is the first location to be completely branded as Freshies — and is step No. 1 in a new five-year plan for R.H. Foster, Brenda Gerow, the company's executive manager, told *Convenience Store News*.

As the U.S. convenience store landscape began shifting its focus from tobacco and gas as primary staples, R.H. Foster recognized it had to make changes in order to adapt. Thus, the company came up with a five-year plan to put foodservice in all of its c-stores.

"Our goal is to reinvent ourselves today for the customers of the future," Gerow explained.

FRESH LOOK, FRESH OFFERINGS

Many of R.H. Foster's existing On the Move c-stores already offer foodservice, so the company wasn't looking



The Freshies brand, previously reserved for R.H. Foster's deli concept, will serve as the overall store moniker for all the chain's future new stores.



A proprietary-branded coffee bar is part of the prototype store's foodservice focus.

to completely reinvent the wheel. Instead, it identified foodservice as an area of opportunity to put fresh and healthy at the helm of customers' want states.

"We recognize the customer today is different than the customer from yesterday," said Gerow. "Innovation is part of bringing new customers to the store."

To arrive at its new prototype, R.H. Foster researched a number of different store designs by traveling the country and studying the marketplace. Armed with its findings, coupled with an understanding of what its customers are looking for, the resulting Freshies store makes a connection with the local community through a fresh look and fresh offerings.

At 4,179 square feet, the new store is a dramatic turnaround from the previous 954-square-foot store that was torn down on the same site earlier in 2016. Now, the larger, upgraded model features indoor bathrooms — unlike the old store, where the bathrooms were located outside — and its décor includes a backdrop of the area's Union River.

Deviating from customary c-store fare, Freshies' customers can craft their own healthy smoothies with kale, goji berries and flax seeds, and customize gourmet, made-to-order pizzas like fig and prosciutto, or brie and spinach. Those crunched for time can choose from Freshies' selection of fresh grab-and-go sandwiches and salads, or they can go the more traditional route and pick up a breakfast sandwich or a whoopie pie.

Playing homage to R.H. Foster's home state of Maine, Freshies also features a selection of local jams, jellies, honey, maple syrup and wines — a one-of-a-kind offering in its area.

"Ellsworth is really different and really unique," noted Gerow. "We played with the wine cabinet to really blend in the wine to truly test if people will purchase Maine products in c-stores."

An additional feature of the hands-free Freshies store is its modified beer cave. Chilled to the ideal temperature, the beer cave was designed with extra lighting and open glass to accommodate R.H. Foster's female customers. The company found that without these simple adjustments, female customers shy away from entering its stores' beer caves because they feel uncomfortable and intimidated, according to Gerow.

THE FUTURE OF FRESHIES

To draw in new and returning customers alike to the Ellsworth Freshies store, R.H. Foster held a VIP preview party, which invited the local community to get a special look at the new-to-market model. The company used digital marketing and social media site Facebook to invite community members, recognizing that many of its customers are millennials who spend a lot of time online.

R.H. Foster plans to continue broadening its digital marketing efforts and bringing such events to life by inviting customers to future Freshies store openings.

The Ellsworth store will serve as the model for future store replacements and store renovations. A second Freshies store is expected to open this fall at the corner of State Street and Broadway in Bangor, Maine. All future new stores will be branded as Freshies.

Although not part of R.H. Foster's five-year plan, the company additionally is looking to add a Freshies location near a university. It will be the first to offer seating, Gerow shared.

"[We're] just trying to listen to what customers are telling us and be innovative," she said. "We're a best-kept secret. We're a great company with great people, and are working toward the best c-stores to offer experiences customers won't get anywhere else." **CSN**



The beer cave was designed with extra lighting and open glass to better accommodate female customers.