



CHARTING A NEW COURSE

FriendShip Food Stores' new concept store is just one step of its transformational journey By Melissa Kress

THIS SUMMER MARKED A MILESTONE for FriendShip Food Stores. While most people were taking family vacations to the Grand Canyon or Disney World, FriendShip team members were putting the finishing touches on the convenience store retailer's new concept store in Elyria, Ohio.

The 5,500-square-foot store welcomed its first customers on July 26. It is the largest of the 25 stores the company operates along the shores of Lake Erie, from Toledo to Cleveland.

The concept store features many firsts for FriendShip, including its first new store of 2018, the introduction of the FriendShip Fuel brand, and the unveiling of its proprietary FriendShip Kitchen restaurant.

As the retail arm of family-owned Beck Suppliers Inc., FriendShip is no stranger to the convenience store industry, nor is it a stranger to foodservice. However, the retailer began really ramping up its foodservice game about a year ago when industry veteran Greg Ehrlich joined the company as chief operating officer of Beck Suppliers and long-time convenience foodservice executive Ed Burcher joined the company as vice president of foodservice.

As Burcher explained to *Convenience Store News*, FriendShip has been in the foodservice business for quite a few years. Its first offering included coffee and fountain drinks when it entered the convenience channel

more than 30 years ago. Then, its initial prepared food program tapped third-party expertise for branded chicken and pizza offerings.

"Over time, these offers served FriendShip well, but they did need to be refreshed. In the last five years, more focus has been on understanding and developing a FriendShip offer to build and expand the food items across all stores," Burcher said.

As time went on, the Ohio-based chain realized there was more flexibility in a proprietary offer. The challenge was gaining the internal skills needed to develop, support and grow such an offer, when it had successfully relied on branded programs in the past.

"It was a real change and we needed to find the right mix of offer, skills and people to make this happen in an effective way," Burcher said. "A proprietary offer lets us build our brand to our guest — the only place you can get FriendShip Pizza or FriendShip Famous Chicken is in a FriendShip store."

This shift comes as the convenience store industry as a whole is moving away from its traditional reputation as "gas station food" to a healthier, better-for-you lineup.

While larger chains like nearby competitors Sheetz Inc., Wawa Inc. and QuikTrip Corp. were grabbing headlines around their stepped-up food programs, FriendShip quietly navigated the waters — and it wasn't just a foodservice refresh achieved.

An Entirely Brand-New Experience

FriendShip's journey to this milestone has actually been about refreshing the brand and its customer experience, not just its foodservice offering.



The Journey to the FriendShip Kitchen concept originated two and a half years ago.



The first step was realizing the need to change, according to Gregg Edwards, vice president of operations, especially since FriendShip was operating well, performing at expectations and growing.

“Change is hard at the best of times and when you really don’t have to [change], you can face obstacles in gathering support. It was through a strategic planning process where we realized that we need to improve our brand presence and image,” Edwards explained.

This began two and a half years ago with the idea of a FriendShip Kitchen and building a store around that idea. Once the strategy planning process was completed, the design phase began.

A year later, FriendShip’s remodeled Port Clinton, Ohio, store debuted the FriendShip Kitchen. The remodel also displayed the retailer’s new graphics and other refreshed materials.

This opening brought to light some further changes needed.

“Part of this opening highlighted the need for more focus on the food and beverage offer, as well as the supporting processes needed to

support,” said Brian Beck, owner and retail division leader of Beck Suppliers.

With the planning already underway for its first new-build FriendShip Kitchen store, the retailer started refining the layout, equipment and processes to successfully bring the new image and store concept to customers. After one more major remodel — its Vermilion, Ohio, location — FriendShip capped off its efforts by cutting the ribbon on the Elyria store.

The Journey Isn’t Over

The retailer continues to learn and apply those learnings to its stores.

Another new-build FriendShip Kitchen store is slated to open in November. According to Beck, this location will feature “a slightly different layout and will give us the ability to evaluate what works the best for our stores in 2019.”

Store transformation aside, FriendShip’s strategic plan also includes a focus on its employees. The chain recently launched an initiative examining how to create high-performing teams coinciding with the opening of the Elyria store.

“Learning and adjustments continue. Our goal is to create the atmosphere where these teams can operate at a better level than our competition and provide the best guest satisfaction possible,” Edwards said.

What can the industry expect next from FriendShip and Beck Suppliers?

Continued improvement, according to the company’s leadership.

“We continue to look for ways to improve our offer for our guests, and how we need to grow our skills and capabilities from within to deliver this,” Burcher said. “This does not stop and will be a focus moving forward so that we provide the best product, service and offers for our guests.” **CSN**

After remodeling two existing stores to this new concept, the first new-build FriendShip Kitchen store opened July 26.

