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Roche Bros. truly is a family affair

By

Craig Levitt, managing editor

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Pride.

That is the feeling that resonates within the walls of Roche Bros. It starts with the owners, flows through management and runs to company associates.

The past few years have been hard... on everybody. Roche Bros. has navigated the pandemic as well as any company could — and better than most. Its success can be directly attributed to the people that work for Roche Bros. and the pride they take in doing what needs to be done. It's the kind of pride usually reserved for family.

“There is a sense of pride working for Roche Bros. I have always felt that way,” said Arthur Ackles, senior vice president of merchandising and buying for Roche Bros. “I’m not sure that a lot of people would feel the same way working for a supermarket. Here, it’s not about a supermarket, it’s about family, and every day you feel it.”

The second-generation, family-owned food retailer continues to thrive, in an extremely competitive market. A market that includes among others: Stop & Shop, Whole Foods, Market Basket, Wegman’s, Big Y and Shaw’s/Star markets.

Last April, Mansfield, MA-based Roche Bros. opened its 21st store — all in the Boston area — and this October it will celebrate its 70th anniversary. Not a bad a legacy for Pat and Bud Roche, who founded the first Roche Bros. store in Roslindale, MA, in 1952.

Those 21 stores include 17 Roche Bros., which are high-end, full scale grocery stores running about 40,000 square feet, and four Brothers Marketplace formats, a smaller format (12-15,000 square feet) that reside as neighborhood stores focusing on local and hyper-local product.

“Products for the Brothers stores are selected based on locality and clean ingredients whenever possible,” said Ackles. “Perishables are a main focus in these stores and each location is designed and merchandised to take on the characteristics of the towns we serve.”

Of course, more often than not the survival of a supermarket is dependent upon its perishables, and this is where Roche Bros. shines — specifically its produce department.

Roche Bros. produce department is so much more than just simply displays of apples, oranges and bananas. Tom Murray is the director of produce for Roche Bros. and under his leadership Roche Bros.’ produce department has continued on its upward trajectory — but it has done so much more. Between its community outreach and support of produce industry driven events and programs Roche Bros. has become a pillar in the produce industry. One in which others would be wise to emulate.

For these reasons, and more, The Produce News is proud to name Roche Bros. the 2022 Produce Retailer of the Year.

“Over the years, produce has become such a focus for Roche Bros.,” said Ackles. “We have the best quality and the freshest produce we can get coming in seven days a week from the New England Produce Center.”

Murray and his team, which includes his two right hand men, produce merchandisers Bill Gordon and Scott Maher, have a firm and successful strategy on how to maximize the produce department — let the fruit tell the story. “Showing the product is what’s important,” said Murray. “We limit the amount of cross merchandising that goes on because we want to always make sure we have that fresh appearance. Sometimes when you bring in too much from other places, like grocery, it can really take away from that fresh look you want to get every day.”

Merchandising each individual store can be a little tricky sometimes because each store is different. “None of our stores are cookie cutters,” said Murray. “So, it can be hard to make one merchandising plan for each store. There is a base plan for the stores to follow and work off, but each individual produce manager has the freedom to do what is needed.”

Murray, Gordon and Maher are fast to give a great deal of credit to all of Roche Bros. produce managers. “Each and every one of our produce managers are getting the job done — every day,” said Murray.

To ensure freshness, Roche Bros. relies heavily on two buyers, J. Kilduff and Frank Romanowski, who buy produce every day directly from the Chelsea, MA-based New England Produce Center. “The New England Produce Center does well by us,” said Murray.

Apples, oranges and the Golden Rule

Of course, fresh apples and attractive citrus displays aren’t exclusive to Roche Bros. To capture consumer dollars a retailer must go above and beyond — and Roche Bros. does just that. At the forefront of Roche Bros.’ success is customer service.

“Customer service is vital to our success,” said Murray. “Our company has always focused on the ‘Golden Rule.’ We treat the customer the way we would want to be treated. That means going out of our way to make sure a customer’s question is answered and they are satisfied with that answer. If a customer needs an item we take them directly to that item. I have always preached to our associates eye contact and a friendly ‘hello.’ Make customers feel at home in your store and comfortable to ask any question they may have.”

Ackles told a story about how one particular shopper was in search of an item that happened to not be available in the store she was in. He said it was commonplace for Roche Bros. to deliver that item from a different store. “We do a lot of things that our competitors may think wasteful,” he said, “but for that customer it means so much, you have grabbed them for a lifetime.”

Like most retailers, particularly food retailers, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic really put Roche Bros. exemplary customer service to the test. Not surprisingly, Roche Bros. home delivery service saw an uptick. Fortunately, Roche Bros. already had a home delivery foundation in place.

“I was part of the team that started our home delivery back in 2006,” said Ackles. “It has come a

long way, but I think we are still trying to figure it out completely. We are constantly trying to find ways to make it more efficient.”

Prior to COVID-19 eCommerce accounted for about 4.5 percent of Roche Bros. business. During the peak of the pandemic it reached almost 13 percent, and now it has settled in at about 9 percent. Roche Bros. offers multiple variations of its eCommerce service: home delivery, pick up and the recently added call in service for the elderly and disabled — essentially those that can’t get onto a computer.

The dedication to the elderly is just another example of how family-oriented Roche Bros. is. “I can’t tell you the stories of how grateful people are that we are giving them the independence to order their own groceries,” said Murray. “We actually have someone in the office that takes these calls or calls the elderly to make sure they get what they need every week. I think they spend more time talking to them about what’s going in their lives than they do taking their order. That means so much to those people.”

Personal produce

As home delivery becomes more mainstream the produce department has hurdles to jump that other areas of the store do not, simply because picking out produce is often a personal thing to consumers. To instill confidence, Roche Bros. emphasizes that it utilizes personal shoppers to pick produce.

“We have trained our pickers to pick better than you would if you were buying for yourself,” said Murray. “That’s been a hard line that we have taken right from the beginning.” If a produce picker is unsure about something, they are instructed to involve a produce manager or another expert in the department to help out.

Working with the produce pickers is part of the evolving training program the Roche Bros. has in place, but, as Ackles said, it’s not about the training that makes a culture what it is. It is about leading by example.

“When you have guys like Tom Murray, Scott Maher and Bill Gordon, who work hard, treat customers and vendors with respect and lead by example — that’s how you train. Treat your vendors, customers and associates the way you want to be treated — when you do that they will treat you the same way.”

Murray backed that up, saying some of his best relationships are with vendors. “That’s the way I grew up at Roche Bros. It wasn’t always to hammer them on every deal. It was to make sure we both got a good deal. Now, with COVID-19, it gets paid back in times like this. Our vendors have really come through for us.”

The vendors aren’t the only ones that have come through for Roche Bros. during the pandemic.

“In the history of my 35 years at Roche Bros. what stands out is these last two years,” said Ackles. “The fortitude of the people that work for us has been amazing. Our ability to come together as a team when things are at their worst... I’m never surprised by it, and I never take it for granted. I look back at those times and events when we had to come together and thank every day that I work for this company — it’s special.

“People ask, ‘what keeps you up at night?’” Ackles continued. “The last two years it’s been the

health of our associates. They've been put on the front lines, dealing with the worst of the worst, and they are the best of the best. I can't say enough about what our store associates have done. Somehow, they have kept their heads high and managed to get our customers food the past two years. I get emotional thinking about it."

Just like with family.

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