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Small Business Snapshot

Wal-Mart deal was answer to prayer regarding Heart and Soul Candies

Premium content from Business First by Brent Adams, Staff Writer

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Brent Adams
Staff Writer

When Bill McGee got into the candy business, he wanted to help fund his dream of writing screenplays for family-friendly movies.

But along the way, McGee fell in love with the challenge of getting his products on store shelves across America.

And that is not because he is focused strictly on making money — although that's a welcome aspect of the business — but because he views his Heart and Soul Candies LLC as his ministry.

The candies he sells — individually wrapped pieces and boxed — come in packaging printed with scripture verses from the Bible.

The candies are sold by about 1,300 stores, including large retail chains, grocery stores and about 650 Christian bookstores.

Wal-Mart contract to push revenue to \$2.5 million mark

Recently, the company landed a deal with Bentonville, Ark.-based Wal-Mart Stores Inc., which will put the company's Christmas chocolate boxes in each of its U.S. stores. The 12-piece boxes, with milk or dark chocolate, will sell for about \$5 each.

McGee expects the deal with Wal-Mart to propel Heart and Soul's revenue to about \$2.5 million for 2010, compared with about \$200,000 in 2009. He is talking with Wal-Mart about products for the Valentine's Day and Easter.

McGee said he expects annual revenue to increase to about \$5 million in 2012.

"We have gotten so many e-mails in the past from people who have been thankful that our product is on the shelf," McGee said. "We try not to be too in-your-face (with the religious message), but we want it to be a way to open doors for someone to talk about their faith."

Divine intervention required

Building the business has been daunting at times, McGee said. Last year, the company nearly ran out of money, and McGee had to ask investors Matt Bevin of Louisville-based Integrity Asset Management and businessman Robbie Brown for more money.

"It was one of those things where when I walked back to the car afterward, I felt like my feet weighed about 500 pounds," McGee said. "I just prayed and prayed that this would work out."

Bevin and Brown agreed to provide additional capital, and shortly afterward, McGee strode into the Bentonville offices of Wal-Mart for a meeting with a buyer.

Connections a key in striking the deal

As it turned out, the buyer was a former intern of another buyer who had bought candy from McGee years earlier.

"He said that he had just been thinking about calling Russell Stover to create an inspirational candy box for Christmas," McGee said. "But because I was there and he remembered me and the job we had done before, he asked me to do it on the spot."

McGee chalks up his success to a regimen of prayer, confidence and persistence. "It takes a lot of knocking on doors," he said. "But what I've found is that it just works best to be yourself. It might take multiple meetings, but when you think you can't take another step, that's when you have to take one more."

Running a virtual company

Consumers who pick up Heart and Soul Candies from their store shelves likely don't realize that president Bill McGee doesn't have the complex operations of some of his mammoth competitors.

McGee lives in Louisville. He pays a contract employee, based in West Virginia, to serve as a personal assistant.

The candy sold by Heart and Soul is produced by Annapolis Chocolate Co., a private-label candy maker in Hanover, Md. The packaging is designed by a graphic designer in Los Angeles. The manufacturing of candy boxes and wrappers is outsourced to various suppliers.

McGee makes regular trips to visit each of the partners involved in the business.

“This approach makes so much sense,” McGee said. “If I had all these people under one roof, we’d probably spend about 32 hours a month actually sitting down and meeting with one another. Does it really make sense to pay a month’s rent for that?”

Heart and Soul Candies LLC

Headquarters: Louisville

Web site: www.heartandsoulcandies.com

Founded: 2005

Key figure: Bill McGee, founder and president

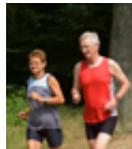
2009 revenue: \$200,000

Projected 2010 revenue: \$2.5 million

Specialty: Maker of chocolates sold in packaging with biblical scripture

Stores carrying the candies: Winn-Dixie, Gelson’s, Ingle’s Markets, Hobby Lobby, Wal-Mart (Christmas 2010), various Christian bookstores. Also used as a national fund-raiser for the American Heritage Girls, a Christian scouting organization.

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