

At Nuts.com, new generation brought new ideas

BY MEG FRY

It's not every day you hear about a family business that has survived the Great Depression, World War II, a fire-bombing during the riots of 1967 and two mandated relocations by the city.

And that was nothing compared to more than a few internal squabbles.

But what else would you expect from some tough guys from Newark?

These Jersey boys — also known as the Braverman family — always have done whatever was necessary to keep the third-generation distributor of nuts consistently dynamic and achieving maximum growth.

Including taking one big risk.

While most family businesses hope

they can maintain the success of the past when there is a generational leadership change, brothers Ken and Sandy Braverman were looking to the future when they gave the reins to the next generation. Ken's son Jeffrey has risen to become the company's CEO since joining it in 2003, winning his family's trust over time.

Ken said Jeffrey is entirely responsible

for developing the original business, the Newark Nut Co., into the successful online operation it is today.

"To see where we came from and then to see this operation is unbelievable," Ken said. "We went from filling five orders a week to 10 orders a day to 100 orders a day."

"Now, we come in here on a Monday and fill 3,000 orders a day."

Simply put, it's a different company — with a different business model — from the one Sol Braverman created in 1929 as a thriving vendor on Mulberry Street in the open-air market.

Getting from there to here was a long, circuitous journey.

Sandy started working full-time at his father's ailing business in 1966, while earning his degree in business administration at Farleigh Dickinson University. Ken joined in 1969, after graduating from the New Jersey Institute of Technology with an engineering degree.

The biggest change in the company came in 1984, when the business was relocated by the city of Newark into a small indoor retail store. The wholesale business grew, but the retail business suffered.

It wasn't until Jeffrey, then a freshman in college at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, suggested his father and uncle launch **NutsOnline** in 1999 that the business began to recover and grow again.

And when Jeffrey left investment banking in 2003 to entirely restructure the family business online with strategic marketing campaigns, the orders really started pouring in.

"My father got nervous and told me, 'Shut the Internet off!'" Jeffrey said.

Good thing they got additional help when Sandy's son David joined to take

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What's in a name?

When Jeffrey Braverman used to go out and network, everyone would ask before they parted, "What's the name of your business again? Nuts.com?"

Braverman smartly caught on, and purchased the URL in October 2011 before officially changing the name of the company — then Nuts Online in 1999 — to Nuts.com in 2012.

"The four-letter domain increased credibility for our company; it was easier to remember, and it led to better branding opportunities," he said.

It was also an intelligently defensive move — and incredibly lucky that it was available when Braverman searched for it.

"What if a competitor were to purchase that domain name?" he said.



charge of customer service, because the business just kept getting bigger and bigger.

In 2005, the company again was asked to relocate by the city of Newark due to the construction of the Prudential Center — a move that spurred them to move into a 17,000-square-foot warehouse in Linden.

Five years of 50 percent annual growth later, they moved to yet another location — their current 70,000-square-foot building in Cranford. And a year from now, they'll once again need even more space.

"We're continuing to work on stuff where we can double or triple the business to really get our growth going even faster again," Jeffrey said.

The company, which changed its name to **Nuts.com** in 2012, handles a variety of product — from your everyday roasted pistachios to nuts grown only in the volcanic soil of the Philippine peninsula.

With more than 3,000 product types, about 30,000 one-pound bags are now hand-filled by 120 employees every day.

Nuts.com even employs its own programmers to write code for all the operating, sorting, organizing, labeling and shipping that's done within the facility.

"Growing up in the business, I've been used to micromanaging," Ken said. "So I've had to adjust to macromanaging now."

It wasn't the only adjustment.

"When David and I joined the business, lots of tempers were still flaring because Ken and Sandy had always been at each other's throats when the business was stressful," Jeffrey said. "They had been working six days a week, going to work together and sharing a room and office."

Change was needed.

"So one thing we did was as we grew, we put in systems," Jeffrey said. "If they had been fighting over the same thing for 40 years, I'd say, 'Let's fix this.' We came up with policies and procedures which eliminated a lot of tension. And fortunately, business has been great — so now it's easy to get along."

As long as others play nice.

Ken, as CFO, and Sandy, as president, are still involved in the company, still proving how tough and committed they are.

"My brother and I will fight like cats and dogs, but don't let anyone pick on my brother if I'm around and vice versa," Sandy said. "It was tough in the beginning with our different personalities, but we were always there for each other, and I think over the years we've become closer."

Sandy's son David shares his father's sentiment.

"We still really enjoy socializing outside of work," he said. "Jeffrey and I live two minutes from each other and our wives and kids hang out."

While both Jeffrey and David have a son and daughter each, Jeffrey is realistic about the success of the family business continuing.

"The odds are against it."

Then again, Jeff wasn't forced into it.

"My father was a tough cookie to work for," Ken said. "So I made up my mind that if I had kids, I wouldn't force them into the business."

One thing the company can count on, however, is that Jeffrey doesn't ever plan to cut his family business' deep ties with Jersey.

"State taxes are extremely high, but we're rooted here and we're loyal to our employees," he said.

"We're not looking to jump ship."

That, he said, would be nuts.

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The Bravermans of Nuts.com, from left, Ken, Jeffrey, David and Sandy. —AARON HOUSTON

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