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### Wismer Distributing Co.: Texan Tastes

Written by Amanda Baltazar

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Every year Jim Ferris visits every single off-premise account that Wismer Distributing Co. services. And that might be why he's been president and CEO of the company since 1991 with no plans yet to retire.

He visits the accounts, which number around 350, he says, to thank them for their business, and he's been doing the same thing for 30 years.

The first thing he does in these accounts is check the singles bin, which is a big deal in Texas, he explains. "People get off work and buy a single beer. I make sure my product is in [the bin], iced down, with a price." He also makes sure the bin is clean, the signage is not faded and the light is good.



After checking the bin he then looks at the coolers to ensure his products are there, that they're priced and priced correctly. He also verifies that there are no out-of-stocks.

Ferris has been with Wismer Distributing since 1970, 11 years after its inception, having joined the company as truck loader—"when we hand-loaded the trucks"—and then worked through the ranks in positions including route man, mechanic and general manager. He was named president and CEO in 1991, when he and Ann Wismer, founder M.L. "Wimpy" Wismer's daughter, bought the company.

The company began as an Anheuser-Busch distributor in an "itty bitty" building in Baytown, Texas, USA and struggled for 10 years. "At one point Anheuser-Busch told [the Wismers] to get out; they wouldn't make it," says Ferris, the company selling just 30,000 cases a year, he estimates.

"When I showed up in 1970 things were starting to get better for them. They went through some very hard times. I don't know that anybody nowadays would do what they did," he says.

Things started to improve since Anheuser-Busch started getting aggressive and advertising, he explains. The off-premise business started to grow, largely thanks to the discounted cases of Budweiser that Wismer was selling, which allowed retailers to sell six-packs for 99 cents (a discount of 24 cents over its competitors and a big deal in those days).

By 2005 Wismer Distributing's sales totaled some 4.5 million cases annually, although Ferris admits it was a tough stretch to get there: "I think it was what Anheuser-Busch did and we did what we were told. They were the experts and we learned from them. We did bring some business to the table, but without Anheuser-Busch there wouldn't have been a table to come to. It was a combination of us out there delivering, merchandising and

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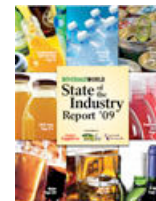
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displaying and Anheuser Busch's superior advertising and expertise. It was a great team."

Now, the company is down to 2.5 million cases, but only because it sold off half of its territory in 2006, which, points out Ferris, has been the biggest change to business in 51 years.

The company has even managed to stay debt-free since the late 1970s, "which makes a big difference," says Ferris, "because you can make some mistakes and not feel it at 4.5 million cases. You have to be more careful at 2.5 million."

However, the company has felt the effects of the past year's economic slow-down, especially in its on-premise business, and mostly since October.

Ferris is optimistic, however, and expects business to pick back up quickly. In January 2009, he points out, the company was the No. 1 distributor in southern Texas with sales up 19 percent over the previous year. But by this January its sales were the lowest in the same area, down 22 percent. He expects annual sales for 2010 to be down 1 percent because of the rough January, but he points out that "it helps being debt-free when you have times like this—to know you're not servicing a debt, too."

To help matters, Ferris has looked at cutting costs, without cutting any of the service he provides. "We'll now negotiate before buying things, we are holding onto equipment for longer and we always check prices—we look for the best deal we can find and that has really helped us," he says.

"I don't want to cut my service because if I do, I'm adding to the problem." And fortunately, not a single employee has been cut from Wismer.

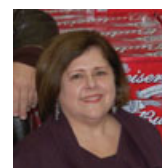
Another thing that's helped Wismer's business was the purchase of a Tygard machine five or six years ago. This forklift-type machine moves the beverages layer by layer from the pallets, which has drastically reduced the number of back injuries employees have suffered, and has helped Wismer substantially reduce its insurance premiums. The machine also has helped with efficiency and has meant Wismer has not had to hire more employees, "so it has saved us in labor because we don't 'have a bunch of people stacking."

Also, last year the Texan Anheuser-Busch distributor bought many of Glazer's Distributors' brands, which include Pyramid Brewing and St. Pauli Girl, just to name two. "[People are] looking for different brands to try and hopefully one of the brands they're going to try will be mine. You see people shop the cooler; they're not shopping prices because they're on the craft side; they're looking for something that stands out for them."

*From Beverage World March 15, 2010*

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Being aware of consumers' changing tastes and keeping in touch with customers has kept Wismer Distributing afloat.

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