

Wishing on Bones

By Ken Ahroni, Owner, Lucky Break, Seattle

EACH THANKSGIVING, MY HOUSEHOLD BRIMS WITH ABUNDANCE and gratitude. But after dinner my family always squabbles over who gets to break the wishbone. One year I had an idea that would solve the problem for my family and, I was sure, many others on turkey day.

I was familiar with plastic manufacturing because I ran a consulting firm that helped Christmas-light makers meet quality standards. So I called eight plastic companies and requested samples of breakable plastic. They wondered why I wanted them, but I didn't tell. After a year of testing we launched our product in 2004: a plastic wishbone with the feel and satisfying snap of a real turkey bone.

Given my background with seasonal products, I was confident enough of this one to wind down my consulting business and focus on bringing the wishbones to market. We began in a few Seattle-area novelty and grocery stores. By 2006 we had hit almost \$1 million in sales, and our four-packs were selling in nearly 1,000 outlets, such as the Party Store chain, in 40 states.

The previous year we had gotten a call requesting a product sample from Sears Roebuck's ad agency, Young & Rubicam. Next Y&R asked for a quote on millions of wishbones custom-packaged for Sears. We were thrilled, and created a design for it. But then Y&R abruptly went silent. We assumed the deal had fallen through.

Days before Thanksgiving 2005, I spotted a Sears ad insert in our local paper. On its top left corner was a photo of our product! I drove right to Sears and saw that it was using our wishbone and packaging as a marketing tool: Customers got a free wishbone redeemable for \$10 off a \$100 purchase. My blood boiled as I stood with the product in my hand.

We promptly sued Y&R and Sears for copyright infringement. The case went to trial 2½ years later. Thanks to our patented design and our packaging's copyright warning statement, we were awarded \$1.7 million in damages. (Sears spokesperson Kim Freely notes, "We're disappointed by the verdict.") We lost 50% of our business in 2007 because of the time and money we spent in court. But we are moving on with new wishbone design ideas, such as colorful and custom-printed lines. The wishbones are a hit with vegetarians and even internationally—turkey is also a Christmas staple for many families.

At the end of the day, breaking a wishbone is a lot like blowing out birthday candles. There's a renewed sense of hope and optimism when it snaps.

—AS TOLD TO EMILY MALTBY

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