Acme expanding into new products, new markets

Company’s history and reputation gives New York group a launchpad for innovation and expansion.

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Brooklyn-based smoked fish producer Acme is being helmed by its fourth generation of private owners. That 107-year history is hard to find in the US seafood processing sector, and it would be tempting for the company to milk its reputation as a dependable, but perhaps not overly exciting supplier.

But stasis isn’t the best platform for growth, the company decided, and it began investing in new SKU5, new concepts and a new look.

“Up until recently, we hadn’t really worked on a new product development strategy,” Vice President of Strategy and Business Development Gabriel Viteri told IntraFish.

But it was clear that the company had to evolve to grow.

“How many more packages of smoked salmon do consumers want to see?” Viteri said. On the other hand, “how do you come up with items that are unique, but that people can relate to?”

So when the company launched a major re-branding two years ago, it was fraught with potential pitfalls.

“The company was taking a risk,” Viteri said. “This was a radical approach, and we’re just now seeing the benefits.”

Acme built its new identity on its old Brooklyn roots, updating packaging with a new, more contemporary brand and look that at first took some getting used to, and had to be adjusted in response to consumers wanting a return of some of the more recognizable aspects of the original packaging.

“You have to be careful not to change too quickly,” he said. “Short-term, markets react negatively to change. Every time there’s change, there’s doubts.”

Acme’s innovations sparked some larger competitors in the category to revamp their image as well, hoping to bring smoked salmon to a newer, younger audience attracted by its versatility and health benefits.

That’s meant Acme has had to keep evolving. Its crepe products, launched early this year, are another step in the value-added product direction, and Viteri hints at more NPD to come. Co-branding partnerships with groups such as AquaChile’s Verlasso and Alaska’s Kwik’pak are two other examples of efforts at reinventing for a new market.

It’s latest innovation — a do-it-yourself gravadlax kit exclusively developed for high-end retailer Williams Sonoma — is already sparking interest among other customers.

“These are good examples of corporate entrepreneurship,” Viteri said.

Not all innovations are a hit. Viteri didn’t have examples of total flops, but he said those products that didn’t work tend to have a common denominator: not enough patience.
"There's things that don't work when we rush to get them to market," Viteri said. "We've learned from those mistakes. You can have great products, but if you rush, they're never long-lasting items."

Viteri points to the success of the company's salmon jerky line, which he said took over a year of planning and testing.

In addition to targeting domestic expansion, Acme is also looking to new geographies overseas for growth, Viteri said. Acme is reaching out to Asian markets such as Hong Kong and Japan, as well as Latin American markets.

Viteri said the company is not spending a lot of time on the effort, and remains in the exploratory phase, but does see opportunities.

"There are a lot of buyers looking into US products," Viteri said. "They look up to them."

Seafood snacks -- an area Acme is pushing hard in -- are already a sizeable category in Asia, but while the product is accessible, US products are viewed as having higher food safety standards.

As part of the company's growth and expansion, Acme has pushed to innovate on an operational level as well. It works with Cornell University on listeria intervention -- a major risk all smoked salmon companies face in the United States -- and recently earned BRC certification for its factory.