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Gold Star branding campaign hits its mark

by [Christa Hoyland](#) * • 12 Mar 2009

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When Cincinnati-based Gold Star Chili was planning its rebranding campaign, the company looked to its nearly 45-year heritage. The goal, said director of marketing Charlie Howard, was to assert itself as a Cincinnati-style favorite.



"A lot of people over the years have kind of defined the whole definition of Cincinnati chili based on our No. 1 competitor (Skyline Chili), so our philosophy was that the overall category of Cincinnati chili wouldn't be what it is today if terms of recognition of Gold Star weren't a part of it," Howard said.

So, Gold Star took on an aggressive media campaign designed to get out its new message, "The flavor of Cincinnati," with billboards throughout the city, local TV and radio spots, and newspaper ads.

Most of the chain's 96 stores are in the Greater Cincinnati area, so the brand message hits its target market, Howard said. For the handfuls of stores outside the area, the tagline still resonates because the city is known for its style of chili.

The branding campaign plays on that heritage with the new moniker "Chilitown USA," a term coined and trademarked by Gold Star. It also gives a nod to the more than 200 independent chili parlors in the area.

The Chilitown USA messaging is on billboards placed strategically throughout Cincinnati, including one just off a bridge into the city. Other billboards promote the concept and Gold Star at sports venues, the airport and in neighborhoods.

"We're really trying to strengthen the claim of the flavor of Cincinnati by having this kind of cheering section for the overall category of Cincinnati and its love of the chili," Howard said.

Media discounts

Gold Star has found that the economy has worked in its favor for the media blitz, thanks to discounted advertising.

"Given the economic situation, we budgeted flat this year," Howard said. "Even though it's the same dollar amount, it's just going farther because with the overall economic

situation, there are lots of bargains in the media."

Of those media efforts, Gold Star is investing the most in local TV advertising — and seeing the largest return.

"It's the driver," Howard said. "We can look at our media schedule and look at our sales. The peaks and valleys pretty much follow when we're on television and when we're not."

The marketing campaign also has translated into higher sales, thanks in part to a January value promotion for three \$5 meal combos. At the end of February, sales were up 7.2 percent and transactions were up 7.6 percent, with the transaction increase the better news, he said.

"Our sales were going up, and part of that was due to price increases," he said. "But our transactions were going down. These value promotions really seem to bring more people into the stores."

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