

Hip, But Not Just for Hipsters

A minimalist design offering streamlined SKUs is the cornerstone of Mini Mini's strategy

By Renée M. Covino

Local media has dubbed Mini Mini as “Portland’s First Hipster-Themed Convenience Store,” but one of its founders refutes this label, explaining that Mini Mini is a “modern convenience concept” that is somewhat misunderstood, but in it for the long haul.

“People need to label everything so that it fits in a box, but the truth is, we don’t fit in a box. When we opened Mini Mini, nobody knew what to do with it,” co-owner Matt Brown, 35, told *Convenience Store News*, speaking about the public reaction to the minimalist-designed single store that opened this past September in Portland’s Buckman neighborhood. “People walk in and say, ‘I think this is a c-store, but I’ve never seen anything like it.’ Then, the fact that my business partners and I are young, it’s easy to classify [the store] as a ‘hipster mart.’”

Mini Mini was designed by Brown and its three other founders/investors to be hip, but also to have a much broader appeal than just to Portland’s hipster crowd.

From families with little kids, to daytime professionals, to nighttime city folks, “we want everyone to feel welcome,” Brown said. “It’s interesting they gave



Mini Mini is the brainchild of four co-founders/investors, who plan to expand into a chain.

us one label. We just roll with it. As long as people are talking about [Mini Mini], that’s a good thing.”

Indeed, the buzz swirls. Local news outlets have both praised and poked fun at the new convenience store, pointing out there are no canned goods or frozen pizzas sold, for instance.

“So, the joke is, we are a glorified snack shop,” Brown relayed. In reality, the store’s assortment is built around the notion that everything revolves around grab-and-go but with a streamlined choice, rather than a cluttered and chaotic heap of emergency shopping SKUs. There is a calm here that isn’t typically found in the confines of a c-store, and it’s attracting attention.

CLASSIC VS. RAD

The Mini Mini concept is the creation of Brown and one of his partners, Jonathan Felix-Lund, who both started toying with the idea four years ago. While on a business road trip, they recognized a need for “a refined version of a convenience store” that was easy to access and played to different diets. They envisioned a mix of the indulgent and the healthy, with meat options as well as vegan and gluten-free options, but



Mini Mini strives for less “visual noise.”

without the aisles, shopping carts and parking-lot hassles of the large grocery stores where customers could typically find such an assortment. They started referring to their idea as “the c-store, refreshed.”

When that vision came to fruition and Mini Mini debuted a few months ago, customers discovered they could quickly choose from a dichotomy of options — the “classic” vs. the “rad,” as Brown has relayed the approach to his staff. For instance, a “classic” option in the candy category is a Snickers bar, while a “rad” option is Justin’s Dark Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups.

Mini Mini has carried this “classic vs. rad” merchandising throughout the store, offering items customers know they love alongside options to try something different.

“We want to have options, but we also have to make sure our product bounce doesn’t get too wacky, leaning toward one dietary option or being

too healthy,” acknowledged Brown. “We have Hostess doughnuts and Red Bull because when you’re leaving a bar late at night, that’s what you want from a c-store.”

Mini Mini has also introduced its customers to softer lighting, clean displays, custom shelving, and other “significant design elements” not typical of a c-store, Brown noted. The store utilizes colors of red, white and blue “that feel familiar, but are not [the] traditional American tones,”

he added. This was the work of Aaron Draplin, another one of Mini Mini’s founders and the mastermind behind its minimalist, less-is-more ambiance, which extends into signage and SKUs.

Basically, there is a lack of signage, clutter and the proliferation of products found elsewhere in the convenience channel. Brown puts the store’s total SKU count at roughly 750. “We don’t have every beer company in the world, and we have Coke, but we don’t have Pepsi,” he said.

EXTRAORDINARILY CLEAN

Aside from keeping a “clean” product assortment, the



Mini Mini’s owners believe in a spotless environment for food sales.

store is also, literally, kept clean — “extraordinarily clean,” Brown maintains.

“You’re going to buy food here, so everything is spotless and very ordered,” he said. “All of these things together create an environment of less visual noise, so there’s less urgency.” And this is where Mini Mini’s “calm convenience” comes in to play.

However, the in-store music is intended to be upbeat in a way that makes customers feel they can take on the day. “We know we’ve done it right when we see people bobbing their head in the store while they shop. It all plays into a comfort level,” Brown explained.

Regarding pricing, Mini Mini aims to stick to flat pricing as much as it can — \$2 instead of \$1.99. The founders also designed it so that nothing in the store costs more than \$25. Currently, there’s a bottle of wine priced at \$25, but most trios of snack foods — a sandwich, snack and drink — are purposely priced so that the combined cost is \$10 or less. This was done so that customers could compare the prices to a grocery store where “you’re looking at \$15 to do that same thing,” according to Brown.

Grab-and-go food is mostly priced in the \$5 range. This includes its popular guacamole packs, small containers of the spread plus chips — similar to the hummus and pretzel packs that came on the scene a few years ago. Bags of chips can range from \$1.50 to \$5.

STILL GOT THEIR DAY JOBS

While minimum wages are raising across the country, Mini Mini from day one has believed in employee investment and the return you get from it.

“A lot of people don’t ask much of their convenience store staff, but we pay ours better than most shops do to secure a solid group of folks who are getting it



The store contains roughly 750 SKUs.



Mini Mini serves Portland's Buckman neighborhood, one of the city's most popular residential districts.

right," said Brown.

They conducted a lot of interviews to find people who could help set up systems and count inventory. For Mini Mini, this wasn't really an option, but rather a requirement, given that Brown and Felix-Lund, the operating partners of Mini Mini, actually have "day jobs."

Brown is the director of sales for Portland's Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co., a lighting and lifestyle company that manufactures lights, furniture and shelving units. And yes, it is the source of the lights and custom shelving at Mini Mini.

Felix-Lund is the director of operations for Coava coffee, an award-winning coffee found in Mini Mini that "immediately grabs the ears of folks who want the next level of coffee, which is super important in Portland," Brown said. The fact that "we were able to pool these different areas of our lives together was really exciting."

Brown, though, admits that while the pooling of resources was a business benefit, their having other career commitments is a definite drawback. The two operating partners trade their before and after work time to be at the shop, keeping rigorous schedules to get it all done.

"If we could be there more often, we would, especially during the day hours when deliveries come in," said Brown. "But we spend a lot of time setting up [our] staff for whatever is going to happen on a particular day — that is paramount."

EXPANSION PLANNING

Given how busy both operating partners are, can expansion be in Mini Mini's future?

"Oh yeah, we're already scouting out the next location," Brown revealed. "We want to put in as many Mini Minis as we can, and pool our resources to do so."

The four founders/investors, which include two pizza company entrepreneurs who took their local Sizzle Pie concept to Seattle and Brooklyn, have a goal of running five Mini Mini stores in Portland within the next three years.

Setting up Mini Mini locations beyond its home base is a strong possibility, too, as there have already been requests by building owners in New York City and Seattle looking for shops like Mini Mini.

"The whole goal is to lock things in place here. Then, anything is game," Brown said. "We have to make our processes sound before we make that big of a jump."

He's referring to the fact that so many of Mini Mini's products are sourced by local vendors, something it would have to do in each city it enters. So, a prerequisite of expanding outside Portland would be to make sure its systems for managing vendors were "locked tight and in place," as he puts it. Then, bringing on people with a similar energy in other cities would be the next key in expanding.

Wherever they go, the plan is to take their neighborhood appeal with them — relying on being nimble and listening to the locals before building something special.

Before Mini Mini opened, Buckman neighborhood residents found Brown and Felix-Lund painting over graffiti that was tagged on the building the night before, sweeping the sidewalks in front of the store, and just communing with passersby.

"We showed them how small business works. We didn't come from money and we didn't have money to hire anyone to do these tasks; we were out there doing it ourselves," Brown said. "By the time we opened, people told us how glad they were that we made it, and that was partly because we asked them beforehand what they wanted in a store like this. We listened." **CSN**