

Franchise Times®

Nothin' but 'Net

Sometimes it takes a full-court press to run up the score

When most people look at a customer service counter, they see the place they haggle over a receipt. To John Francis, a PostNet area franchisee in Minnesota and Wisconsin, the customer service counters in Byerly's—an upscale grocery chain in Minnesota's Twin Cities area—were an opportunity worth an eight-year conversation.

John Francis saw the grocer's customer service counter as being under-utilized, selling postal services and stamps, running an outdated telephone switchboard, selling miscellaneous products like cigarettes and baby formula, processing returns and the like. In its place, Francis envisioned a PostNet counter.

So in 2001, he sent a letter to Byerly's vice president of store development introducing himself and pitching his idea. "He blew me off," Francis says. "He said, 'you're too small, too new.'" That didn't stop a persistent personality like Francis. He kept the Byerly's contact updated on PostNet news and press releases. He courted other grocery stores, but Byerly's, with its affluent, professional customer base,

was his brass ring.

Then, a friend who worked for Byerly's told Francis the switchboards at the customer service counter were likely roadblocks to change, and that Byerly's had plans to do away with the system in favor of a direct-dial network. In 2008, Francis' hesitant Byerly's contact retired. Another opportunity. So Francis tracked down his replacement and pitched the PostNet idea.

Last September, eight years after Francis first pitched the idea, the first Byerly's location of PostNet opened in Eagan, Minnesota, as a test store. Francis says the store is doing well, though they had to treat a minor case of sticker shock in Byerly's customers at first. "Byerly's customer service was selling U.S. Postal services and stamps at cost—like going to the post office, but with Byerly's service and convenience. That was a losing proposition, so we had a delicate process of converting (customers) to PostNet rates, which are significantly higher," Francis says. In addition, the Byerly's PostNet also offers services previously unavailable at the old customer service counter, such as UPS, FedEx, copying, printing, fax, notary and mailboxes. A fading incremental discount program for the first six weeks of PostNet's tenure in the grocery store helped ease customers into the new pricing, and Francis says they opted for overnight construction of the store "to make an impression that we're strong and capable." If



PostNet area franchisee John Francis saw a wasted opportunity at Byerly's—and took it.

the first Byerly's PostNet performs well, Francis hopes to convert eight more Byerly's customer service counters into PostNet stores.

Did Francis ever want to give up on an uphill battle to match his concept with Byerly's? "I figured it was a matter of time," he says. **FT**

—Meredeth Barzen

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