

Bottom's Up

Michele Lewis Scores
with Fudge-Coated Cookies

This month's Spotlight returns to the supply side with Michele Lewis, president and owner of Sweet Bottom® Cookie (SBC).

We try to bring you profiles of a wide range of people and companies of all types and sizes. Michele is an entrepreneurial owner of a specialized cookie company currently selling to movie theatres across the country.

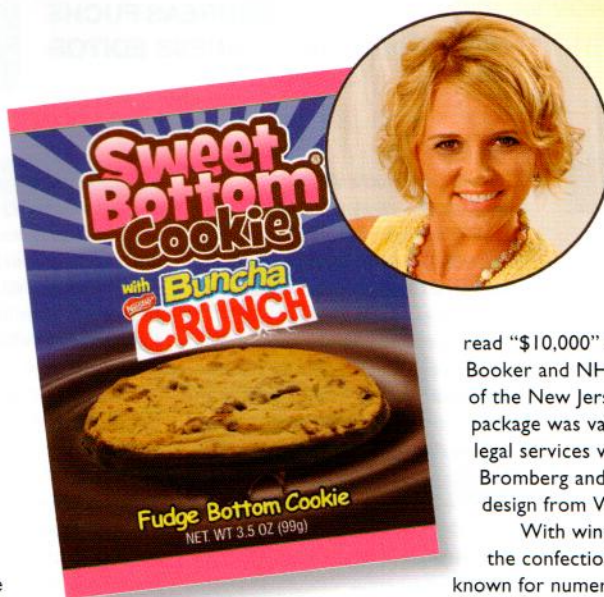
Michele grew up in Westchester County, New York, as one of seven children. She was inspired by and is forever grateful for the guidance of her parents, which remains a big part of her drive to be successful. She graduated from Providence College in 1993 with a degree in Marketing and Psychology and worked in advertising sales in Boston. She put herself through four years of grad school at Harvard University, obtaining an Administration and Management degree in 2002.

Michele and her husband Greg have two children, Hannah (10) and Noah (8). She is very involved in her young children's lives, church, and community organization events. But with the kids approaching full-time school age, she wanted to get back to work and put her education to further use. She developed Sweet Bottom Cookie in an effort to maintain a balanced lifestyle between contributing to the Lewis family's bottom line and giving back to the church, school and family members in need of assistance. She marvels, "The funny thing is, SBC took off, and this 'part-time' interest took on a life of its own!" In October 2010, Sweet Bottom, LLC was born.

Sweet Bottom Cookies are individually wrapped, 3.5-ounce soft fudge-covered-bottom cookies. Currently, Sweet Bottom Cookies come 72 units per case, and can be drop-shipped anywhere nationwide. "Although there are literally hundreds of cookie companies on the market today," Michele notes, "we differentiate ourselves because of our amazing shelf life [one year frozen, six months thawed] and our fudge-covered bottoms."

Michele targeted the cinema industry immediately. Digiplex Destinations (now part of Carmike Cinemas) gave their support to the brand and continued to grow with them over the years. Michele says, "Of equal importance is the feedback from AMC Theatres. In 2012, it was AMC Theatres who provided the all too difficult feedback to SBC to improve our product packaging." At the time, SBC were offered to patrons in a plain silver and black foil.

To provide the needed capital for the packaging revamp, a colleague suggested SBC enter the Annual Biz Plan Competition for Entrepreneurs held at the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT). After seven months to become a finalist, SBC had to perform one final three-minute pitch, covering 27 points, in front of the blue-ribbon panel of judges. It was a unanimous decision. The moderator announced, "You will not like this year's winner, as they will add calories to your bottom." SBC was then presented an oversized cardboard check that



read "\$10,000" from (then) Mayor Cory Booker and NHL owner Jeffrey Vanderbeek of the New Jersey Devils. The total prize package was valued at over \$35,000, as legal services were awarded from Porzio, Bromberg and Newman, PC and a website design from Websignia (Newark, NJ).

With winnings in hand, Jerry Lessard, the confectionary design expert who is known for numerous package designs like Mentos Mints, created the new Sweet Bottom Cookie package. The new, full-color wrappers were released in November 2012 and quickly became widely recognizable among consumers.

For two years, Sweet Bottom Cookie enjoyed growth by servicing movie theatres, aquariums and stadiums nationwide. The fall of 2013 marked a huge feat as LSU's Tiger Stadium offered SBC in all sections throughout their venue. Additional growth was secured when SBC became an approved supplier for Vistar, and more recently with Continental Concession Supplies, Inc. and Summit Foods. SBC also partners with United Fulfillment Solutions (St. Louis, MO) for drop-shipment distribution needs.

In 2014, SBC was presented with another opportunity after attending the National Association of Concessionaires' annual convention. Working side by side with Tim Farha of Nestle, SBC developed a co-branded product with Nestle's Buncha CRUNCH™ product baked "in the mix," creating the first Sweet Bottom with Nestle Buncha CRUNCH cookie. The cookies remain 3.5 ounces and continue to be bottom-enrobed in chocolate fudge. The product was released in the marketplace in January 2015 to tremendous positive feedback.

Michele learned to look at the bright side of any situation, thanks in part to Lindsay Frucci, founder of No Pudge! Foods and a business associate. A blessing in disguise, she says, was losing the small bakery making Sweet Bottom Cookies on the same day that she secured the LSU contract. She was forced to find a different bakery, but it has proven to be one of the best things she has done, giving her the ability to grow. She will need it.

Michele is still very involved in her community and says she has "an unhealthy passion for event planning" for fun. She lives in Charleston, SC, and loves the beach when she is not working. She is a member of the school board, the Mount Pleasant Business Association, and the junior cotillion. As for the best part of her job, she says, "Life is full of twists and turns, challenges and difficulties. I love having the opportunity to provide an escape for anyone taking a moment out of their busy day to enjoy a little bit of happiness from our cookie."

The cinema industry is lucky to have bright, hard-working people like Michele Lewis ready to improve our industry with their ingenuity.

—Anita Watts