

## **How IFA membership paid dividends in leading a heritage restaurant brand during the 2020 challenges**

*Chuck Cooper, CFE, president of Lee's Famous Recipe Group has been on the front lines of the restaurant franchise industry and sees the IFA resources as critical to success in the business*

Lee's Famous Recipe® Chicken is a heritage brand restaurant chain that has shown strong sales growth and new restaurant growth even during the 2020 year of challenge. The business is up double digits in sales from last year. Lee's is a Top 200 restaurant chain, but it has as much in common with other non-restaurant franchise brands -- the model, challenges, and leading and supporting a diverse system of franchisees, licensees, and operators.

Chuck Cooper, CFE, president of Lee's, is a long-time IFA member, and he credits both the brand's strengths and its people, along with his IFA membership, for preparing the brand for success -- even through the pandemic. He says Lee's has been successful for many reasons, but it starts with the brand's QSR position, "The vast majority of our restaurants have drive thru service, we sell comfort food at the core of our menu, and our strength is focused on family-sized meal options. These three sweet spots coupled with our operators' ability to execute around what we are already doing every day helped make us stand out as a perfect home meal replacement option in many local communities...especially during a time when people had challenges visiting grocery stores or grew weary of cooking at home while not leaving the house."

Cooper says the brand was in the process of rolling out new technology with an online ordering app and two brand new products -- a chicken sandwich and a spicy chicken sandwich -- when the pandemic set in. Both initiatives were in the works before March, so Lee's forged ahead with implementation supported by its vendor partners and franchise community.

Cooper joined the IFA and earned his Certified Franchise Executive (CFE) when he began work two decades ago with another franchise system. Many of the annual conferences, online webinars, and being a part of the VetFran committee all created a deeper understanding of the bigger picture of his work with Lee's, and he is credited with turning the much-loved Lee's brand around after it experienced several downturn years around the 2008 recession. He was originally drawn to the IFA to gain knowledge and to keep learning and being challenged for the future, which has paid off in providing support and education through a history-changing events brought on by COVID-19.

Anyone who runs a company as Cooper does would tell you that very often leadership is a lonely place -- unless you can share experiences and learning with others who are facing the same hurdles and reaching for similar benchmarks. Even with plenty of restaurant experience and knowledge of the business model of franchising, this type of support can make a true leader even stronger.

In the franchising world, it is critical to stay current and talk the same language, whether it is in the food business or any other model. Much of that learning is available through IFA membership. Cooper says, "I am a lifetime learner and committing to IFA membership with a road to certification as a CFE, was an enjoyable and rewarding endeavor...well worth the time and investment. I have met some incredible people and have built a better business because of what I have learned from the IFA." He says he knows what it takes to earn the CFE accreditation, so when he sees that designation behind someone's name, he knows they have critical knowledge of what it takes to be successful in times when the model is challenged and in times of prosperity.