Johnny on the Spot

Johnny Junxion's rewinds to the '50s while keeping an eye on modern opportunities

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Johnny Junxion's is a school of brand building. This southern Indiana c-store has experienced prosperity from the get-go: inside sales growth of 10% to 14% each year and a solid 160,000 gallons of fuel sold each month. The owners attribute much of that success to Johnny himself. Their fictional 1950s caricature mascot has made their store an icon.

Steve Jones, president of Johnny Junxion's, grew up in the area surrounding the store. He graduated from a nearby high school, got a technical degree in architectural drafting at a nearby college, and worked as a draftsman at a nearby manufacturing company. He moved up in the ranks and eventually switched to a new company, Showers Group, where he ran eight factories until business started going overseas. He began looking for other opportunities.

"My brother-in-law and I had talked in the past about how we'd love to open a c-store together. Why? I don't know," Jones jokes. "We found a Midwest division of Circle K and they helped us put together a plan."

Jones and his brother-in-law, along with a local chiropractor and longtime friend, set to work on turning the 2-acre lot they selected into a destination operation. They knew the junction where their lot sat, a major artery for local residents to get on Indiana State Highway 37, would give them lots of exposure, but they also

At the Hop: Johnny Junxion's takes 1950s-inspired décor seriously. The entire store is infused with iconic '50s shapes and colors.

knew they needed to draw people in. They did their own primary research, visiting different c-stores, making mental notes, talking to owners and operators, and implementing what they liked. Six months later, in November 2004, Johnny Junxion's opened for business.

When Johnny Was Born

Maybe it's the old-timey feel of the community that led Jones to select a 1950s theme. Or maybe it's Jones himself—he married his high school sweetheart, Jennifer, 37 years ago, and they've raised their two sons together in bliss.

"Call it a modern-day success story," Jones says. We'll call it a flashback to 1950s home life.

The three men collaborated with a local, family-owned sign shop called, coincidentally enough, Johnny Signs, to develop and trademark Johnny Junxion, their rugged, redheaded mascot who wears sunglasses and a leather jacket. The "x" in Junxion signifies the crossroads where the store sits, and every inch of the store reminds customers of the brand Johnny unifies. There's lots of neon, '57 Chevy diner booths with boomerang-shaped tabletops, a vintage soda fountain, and wallpaper made of old photos of the community. The "wall of fame," as they call it, sits above the cooler area.

"It has pictures of everyday people from this area," Jones says. "Old gas stations, local racing legends and high school yearbook photos. We wanted to create a place that was all around very inviting."

The Grand Tour

When you pull onto the property, you enter a spacious parking lot with four double-sided pumps centered in front of the building, and a car wash to the side. The store's single-bay automatic has been open for the past seven years, but the benefits have been marginal. "We got into the car-wash business when gas prices started climbing the most," Jones says. "It pays for itself, but it's not a cash cow for us."

Huge windows at the front of the building let customers see everything inside. "I wanted my wife to be able to pull in here with the kids any time of the night and feel safe," Jones says. "With all the neon lights inside, everything is very bright."

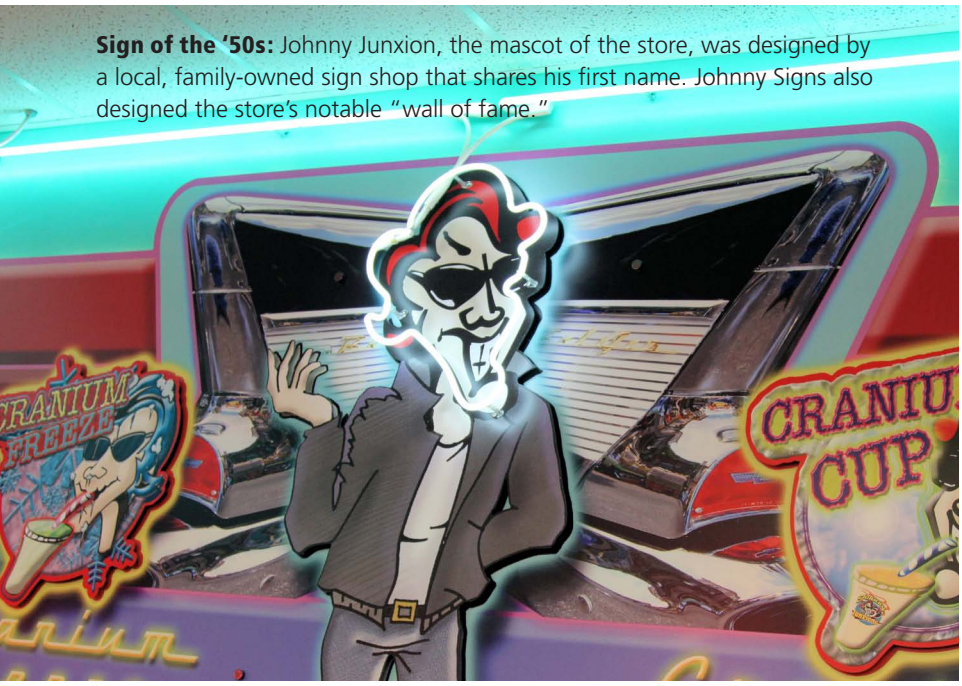
Through the windows you can see the store's back entrance, with benches and parking spaces surrounding it. "Because of how we're situated on the highway, we didn't want people coming from one direction to be looking at the back of the building with Dumpsters and no signage," Jones says.

Walk in the front door and there's Johnny, a 5-foot-tall, 3-D figure standing on a 4-foot-by-6-foot candy counter island of traditional goodies and hard-to-find retro sweets. On the right is the register and the hot food area, a co-branded Charley Biggs chicken program that's hand-breaded by Johnny Junxion's employees in the on-site kitchen, open 4 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Next to that is Cranium Cup, the store's beverage program.

"We intentionally designed Johnny to have a big head, because of our family joke," Jones says. "Joneses and Murphys have big heads. Our tag line for the drinks is 'As Big as Your Head.'" The store offers customers Cranium Cup punch cards—buy seven drinks, get one free. Jones says many customers get it stamped every day.

Then there are frozen drinks, coffee and cappuccino, labeled Cranium Freeze and Johnny's Java, with custom imaging to expand the brand even further. The beverage stations are self-serve, but the old soda fountain is manned all day by cheerful employees, ready to scoop Ashby's Sterling hard-dip ice cream and whip up shakes, sundaes and seasonal items, such as apple-cider shakes in the fall. Along the left-hand storefront windows is a 12-foot-long high-rise counter with old-fashioned bar stools that are so 1950s it's easy to picture Johnny himself sitting there.

Along the right-hand storefront windows are four red leather diner booths with glittered '57 Chevy V patterns swooshing across the backs. "You see a lot of signs in c-stores that say, 'No Loitering,'" Jones says. "Here, if you want to just get in, get your gas and go, you can. But we also created a place to do the complete opposite if you want. We play 1950s music. We serve food. We encourage loitering to an extent.



Sign of the '50s: Johnny Junxion, the mascot of the store, was designed by a local, family-owned sign shop that shares his first name. Johnny Signs also designed the store's notable "wall of fame."

The more you're here, the more you're going to buy."

One corner booth is dedicated to a local WWII veteran, the 92-year-old Red Ritter, who owned a gas station for a few years across the street from Johnny Junxion's location. "We wanted to honor a man who everyone knows and respects," Jones says. "We want to do anything we can to promote community and family."

Deeper into the store are four aisles of merchandise, HBC products, an automotive selection, another aisle of nothing but candy, then sweet and salty snacks and a small grocery section. The store recently started offering healthy ready-made foods, such as salads, yogurt parfaits and carrot sticks with ranch dressing, in an open-air cooler branded Johnny Junxion's Marketplace, in the hope of appealing to female customers who come in.

"We'll see how it goes," Jones says. "People always talk about wanting healthier stuff, but sometimes when you offer it, you find out it was all talk."

There's also a cooler section filled with beverages, including Johnny Junxion's branded bottled water. "It's a promotional thing we use to donate to local sports teams or fundraisers," Jones says. "It's a good way to advertise and help out local organizations without shelling out a lot of money." There are nine refrigerator doors and three freezer doors. Above them sits the beloved wall of fame, which, like the nearby the James Dean and Marilyn Monroe cut-outs on the men's and women's restroom doors, hits the '50s theme home.

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Nuts and Bolts

Beyond the physical elements of the store, Johnny Junxion's is building the brand through technology. The owners have partnered with iConic, based in Glasgow, Ky., to develop what Jones calls "essentially our own TV station." Two 46-inch TVs that sit in the store play a 2-minute roll of Johnny Junxion's promotional footage. Along the bottom is the current weather and a feed to the store's Facebook page.

Jones says, "Our motto is, 'All the Modern Conveniences with 1950s Style and Service.' Something we're trying to focus on more is the modern, digital part of that."

The store offers free Wi-Fi and plays "Johnny Junxion's Radio" at the pumps. A local radio station provided the store with a CD of '50s-era songs with Johnny Junxion's commercials in between to let people know about current promotions.

The store's Facebook page promotes community-building events it sponsors, such as coloring contests for kids in which the winner gets a free family ice-cream party. Last year, to get its "Like" count up, Johnny Junxion's offered to donate $1 to a local family whose son was struggling with cancer for every new "Like."

From April to September, Johnny Junxion's hosts a monthly outdoor "Classic Car Cruise-In" with a live DJ, a chili cook-off and a 1950s night, during which a local youth organization comes to pump gas and clean windshields for customers free of charge. From June to October, a produce stand is outside, stocked with locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables.

1950s and Beyond

Jones says his short-term goals mostly involve continuing on the track the store is already on, including continuing to find and keep great employees. "I have very low turnover," he says. "I have 21 employees, not counting myself, and the average tenure for those people is about 3.5 years. People stay because we lead by example. I'm not going to ask anyone to do anything I'm not willing to do myself, and all my employees know that."

His long-term goals involve seeing what his is brand is really made of. Jones would like to see Johnny Junxion's 1950s charm spread all over the area. "We didn't go through all the trouble and money on making our own signage and brand just for one little place," he says. ■