

# Snak King

... where the Possibilities are Endless  
and the Future is Bright

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*By Lisa Schnebly Heidinger*

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You could look a long time and not find anything you didn't like about Snak King. Start with the name: Snak King. Snakking. Who doesn't like snacking? Just saying the name brings thoughts of leisure, indulgence and a little extra something fun.

Scott Burrows knows how lucky he is. When he first wanted to get into the food sales distribution business, he says he bugged Bob Hallden at Frito-Lay every week for a job for almost a year. Describing himself as a 20-year-old who didn't know anything about sales, he nonetheless wore Hallden down, and finally got an entry-level position as a relief route sales person.

Now after many years taking different sales management positions at different companies, he and Hallden are both on the Snak King team. Sales Manager of DSD and Convenience Stores, Burrows smiles as he talks about how far he and Hallden go back.

Burrows looks like he smiles a lot. A commanding presence in any room, he seems easy-going and comfortable with anyone. And he has a lot to smile about. Relocating from Northern California about 15 years ago, newly married and ready for a change, Burrows and his wife both love the Valley. "Of course it doesn't hurt to live on a lake with a boat dock," he adds.

His passion outside of work is classic and new muscle cars; his 2011 Mustang 5.0 GT, parked outside, looks fast even sitting still. Another smile – "It's an investment for when it will be a classic 20 years from now."

Snak King keeps Burrows on the road almost constantly; fortunately his wife is able to come home to their four dogs every night.

But Burrows loves his work. He has high praise for everyone on the Snak King management team. For instance, Barry Levin, the owner, both called and wrote when Burrows mother died a few years ago. That kind of personal contact means a lot. Levin took over a small struggling company in 1978, and it hasn't stopped growing since. Burrows says Joe Papiri, senior vice-president of sales and marketing, is also very involved with developing products, and has been with the company about 20 years. "He is the big driving force in sales and marketing; sales people learn from him, to ask, 'What's out there and what can we do better?'"

Burrows answers two questions at once: his favorite Snak King product, and something that surprises him about his job. The answer to both is Salsitas, the spicy salsa tortilla chips in the El Sabroso line. "The dip is in the chip" isn't just a marketing slogan. All the ingredients for salsa appear in the contents, and the taste has taken off. That's what surprises Burrows: how Salsitas have a huge fan base, on websites and across the country. It's especially popular as a vending-machine item. Burrows has spoken to many of these people himself. He says his favorite part of the job is developing long-term relationships with both customers and distributors. "Many of them have become good friends as well as business partners over the years."

"Salsitas have serious and vocal followers," he says. "We have a very interactive website, and every week three or four people will want to know where they can buy them besides a vending machine. Usually they can get to a Walgreen's, which all stock Salsitas. Many grocers, especially in the West, stock them as well. Sometimes they have to order off the web. They love these things!" In fact, in 2008 Salsitas were named one of the top ten new items by Vending Time Magazine. "Rick Calato, our National Sales Manager for Vending, is the driving force behind this segment."

Burrows takes nothing for granted when it comes to Snak King's success. He knows that every slot in a vending machine has to be fought for; other brands and distributors are eyeing each inch of shelf space Snak King gets covetously. Burrows says he'll go into any store, because getting customers to try a product is the key. While some tend to avoid discount outlets, Burrows has found that even upscale shoppers prowl the aisles of those stores looking for bargains. Once they find something they like, they look for it in other places, and spread the word.

The philosophy is working. Despite the flat economy, Snak King is growing double digits each year. The success is sweet, but not surprising to Burrows, because of the dedication to innovation and quality at all levels of Snak King's operation.

Every one of Snak King's brands has been created by the company except for Granny Goose, a line well known in California that began in 1946. El Sabroso, Jensen's Orchard, Granny Goose and The Whole Earth each target a different audience. "We have something for every income bracket," says Burrows. Generally, Granny Goose attracts bargain hunters, while El Sabroso is a traditional Mexican Style snack line. Jensen's Orchard and The Whole Earth draw the indulgence and health-conscious crowd. But, Burrows says, even vending customers are asking for more nutritious choices; they just don't want to sacrifice flavor to be healthy. "For instance, we just added a Whole Earth Spicy Nacho Multigrain Chip to our vend lineup."



Granny Goose is known for offering quality at a bargain price, showing up at Big Lots stores, 99-cent stores and some groceries. That line includes such items as chips, cheese puffs and curls, as well as popcorn.

The Whole Earth line appeals to customers who value organic, natural and healthy ingredients. Pita chips, kettle corn and multi-grain chips are in this line. Sweet-and-salty snacks are gaining in popularity, and The Whole Earth is unveiling a line of nut-clusters that rely on natural, healthy ingredients that appeal to both trail-mix and candy lovers.

Jensen's Orchard also offers a lot of healthy and natural snacks, like spinach artichoke, bruschetta and veggie chips, nut and trail mix snacks. Snak King makes sure to sell fairly small cases, most 12 count, so a customer who doesn't live close to a store carrying a certain item can order off the web.

El Sabroso is the major line. Jalapeno flavored chips, as well as a variation on the Salsita called Guacachip with avocado baked in, are lead sellers. Hispanic-influenced snacks, including hot and spicy peanuts, chips, pumpkin seeds, churritos, seasoned pork rinds and tortilla chips fly off the shelves, primarily in the southwest. New to this line is a revamped Spicy Blazing Hot line offering Spicy Nacho, Hot Cheese Curls, and Hot Fries.

Snak King also does a tremendous amount of private label business. Burrows says the two influence one another: a product that does well for Whole Earth, for instance, can be added to any private label line. While he can't talk specific numbers or clients, Snak King's plant in California runs three eight-hour shifts five days a week. Generally six lines run simultaneously. One tortilla chip line alone can produce 5,000 pounds of chips per hour. They boast the highest production capacity on the west coast out of a single facility.

And they aren't stopping there. Snak King is adding a third tortilla chip line, and next year will begin producing on a new co-extrusion line, meaning they can make peanut-butter filled pretzels, for instance, or cheese or almond butter-filled corn snacks. "Our possibilities are endless," says Burrows.

Snak King's dedication to quality shows up in several ways: one, no line runs continuously; each is shut down for inspection weekly. And, Snak King gives each private label buyer carte blanche to come in and do

audits. The Snak King philosophy is that if someone is putting their name on the product, they deserve complete transparency. That's a lot of bosses, but that's how Snak King operates. Burrows says Snak King was recently SQF Level 3 certified. "It's a big deal; not many companies have that." Snak King's manufacturing plant innovations include stand-up bags for better marketing and bags with zip locks for consumers who want to buy a larger size and keep the product fresh.

In 2005 a huge storm caused the roof to cave in at the factory. Such was the good will among Snak King's competitors that other manufacturers offered to pitch in and fill the orders Snak King's customers were depending on. Snak King came back bigger and better than ever, rebuilding a much larger plant that does everything you can imagine in terms of snack and chip production. Burrows says Snak King is known for pork rinds and cracklins in some markets.

Burrows says the Snak King sales team really enjoys working together. Many of them work trade shows, which are long hours but lots of fun. He describes some of the events, which sound like anyone would love to go: a candy and snack show in Chicago with new products being tested by all kinds of companies. Burrows says the only product he can think of that Snak King tested which didn't take off was the pepperoni-pizza flavored chip. (It does seem like a no-brainer; combine America's favorite pizza and favorite snack?) One of Snak King's rising stars is a new line of "really seedy" multi-grain chips, both in private label and The Whole Earth line. "It used to be that "seedy" meant a bad part of town you avoided. Now it means healthy whole grain seeds that taste awesome. My wife taste-tested these, and loves them."

But one of the things Burrows likes best about Snak King is that being privately held, it can react very quickly to market trends. While they do national and even international business, they make it a priority to be responsive to every size market and segment. "We're small enough to be flexible, yet big enough to get the job done."

Being smaller than national conglomerates, Burrows says he always feels like the David instead of the Goliath. But he says he prefers that role, small but scrappy, coming from behind, surprising the competition with each new product that gains shelf space, each vending item that replaces something else. Then he adds with his irrepressible grin, "Our possibilities are endless. Our future is bright. We better buy more sunglasses." ●

