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## Leveraging A Holiday To Build A Blockbuster Brand

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When Nestle wanted to brand its heartier snacks, it coined the word “smeals”: half snack and half meal. We could probably use other new words to describe an increasing connection between snacking and holidays. What about “Valentine’s Day”? We’d munch away on “snolidays,” and companies would “sell-ebtrate,” tapping holidays to boost sales.

Holidays and F&B brands are frequently matches made in Heaven. Certain products see revenue soar on Valentine’s Day, Christmas, or Halloween. But some products get help from other holidays.

When Ira “Bob” Born, the founder of Just Born, manufacturer of Peeps, the popular Easter marshmallow candy, died at 98 on January 29, he left behind family, friends, and F&B admirers. He also left behind the story of how he built a ubiquitous brand, in part by leveraging a holiday that most companies ignore.

### Hook your star to a holiday

When a product can connect with a holiday, it can boost revenue and fuel demand year-round. Peeps, in part, parlayed the shapes of rabbits and chicks

into an Easter boom, just as heart-shaped candies epitomize Valentine's Day. It was a case of turning a holiday into a launch pad to boost demand, something hardly unknown in F&B.

While turkey is tied to Thanksgiving, Christmas is synonymous with candy canes. Halloween is a red letter day for many F&B brands as customers buy treats by the bag – rather than individual servings.

Consumers were projected to spend \$25.9 billion this week on Valentine's Day, up from \$23.9 billion in 2022, in “one of the highest spending years on record,” according to the annual survey by the National Retail Federation (NRF) and Prosper Insights & Analytics. A big chunk of that is spent on candy, even if roses are popular purchases and jewelry brings in the bigger bucks.

### Help from a holiday

Just Born Quality Confections found a not-forgotten, but still hungry, holiday to hook its brand to. It built Peeps into big business, in part by tapping into the role of rabbits in celebrating Easter. Peeps' marshmallow chicks and bunnies, the company says, are the “number one non-chocolate Easter candy brand.” Just Born this year launched its Peeps Easter “candy collection” earlier than ever, in January. If Christmas can be a season, why not Easter?

Just Born takes full advantage of the Easter connection. In addition to Peeps sales, [www.peepsbrand.com](http://www.peepsbrand.com) offers Easter craft ideas. The company has turned the animal-themed treat into an Easter tradition. But that's only part of the story. Hooking up to a holiday helped, but was hardly the only thing on the path, and in the story, that made Peeps more popular.

### A company is born

Sam Born opened a small candy shop in Brooklyn, but soon went from retail to manufacturing. He and brothers-in-law Irv and Jack Shaffer grew the company together, relocating their plant to Pennsylvania. Sam's son, Ira "Bob" Born, joined the company in 1945, after graduating from Lehigh University with a degree in engineering physics and serving in the Navy in World War II as a radar specialist and a lieutenant on a destroyer in the Pacific. The Navy reportedly sent him to the University of Arizona and MIT for graduate studies in math and physics.

Bob Born applied and was accepted to medical school and, while he was waiting for classes to start, decided to help his father with the family business. The rest is history, as medical school fell to the wayside.

### Appetite for acquisition

Born wasn't interested so much in treats as in technology, which would soon play a major part in the company's growth. Just Born soon went from low tech to tech innovator, which helped it scale up sales.

In 1953, Just Born bought the Rodda Candy Company, which primarily made jellybeans. It also made marshmallow treats by hand. Bob Born's engineering background came in handy as he and another engineer spent a year developing machinery to manufacture the product.

"There was nobody doing that kind of thing," Ross Born, a former Just Born co-CEO, told the Lehigh Valley News. "You couldn't buy a machine like that, so he built it."

The machinery reportedly speeded up production from 27 hours to just a few minutes. And Peeps went from a niche product to a national sensation as

Easter helped rev up sales. Now the company could meet sudden spikes in demand.

### Snack Sales and Holidays

Easter, it turns out, doesn't just have a big place on Just Born's balance sheet. It's a big day for F&B as a whole. Consumers plan to spend an average of \$53.61 on food per person for this year's holiday, up from \$37.67 in 2009, which equates to \$6.58 billion, up from \$4.11 billion.

Easter remains a big part of Just Born's Peeps brand plans. And the holiday remains a big part of Bob Born's life and legacy. Born understood the connection between holidays and brands. And a holiday can become an opportunity to grow revenues as well as reputations.

Bob Born last visited the Just Born factory on February 15, 2019, when the city of Bethlehem, PA, proclaimed the first day of the Easter season "Bob Born Day."