



CEO Profile: At Goya, it's all in la familia

By Barbara De Lollis, USA TODAY
March 24, 2008

SECAUCUS, N.J. — Bob Unanue and his three brothers grew up mostly in suburban New Jersey speaking English instead of their father's family language, Spanish, and eating their Irish-American mom's meat and potatoes.

But today, Unanue is as fluent in Spanish as he is in the world of yucca, cactus and chicharrones.

CORPORATE PULSE: [Executive Suite index](#)

As CEO of Goya Foods since 2004, the 53-year-old leads the third generation that's running the privately held company. Talkative and alternately serious and dry-witted, Unanue is most passionate when talking about Goya's mission and its customers.

"We are the nostalgia," says Unanue (pronounced oo-NA-new-way), the eldest of six children. "We welcome the immigrants into the country with food."

The company fills the pantries, refrigerators and freezers of the growing number of U.S. Hispanic households. It has 3,000 employees, excluding hundreds of sales representatives and truck drivers, and is estimated to generate more than \$1 billion in sales per year. It's the USA's largest Hispanic foods company and one of the biggest family-owned companies.

Goya was started 72 years ago by Prudencio Unanue to give Spanish immigrants authentic ingredients.

Prudencio Unanue initially sold Spanish condiments in New York until the Spanish Civil War cut off his supplies. By then, he had a wife and four sons to feed, so he began importing "Goya" sardines from a Moroccan cannery. He bought the rights to the Goya name for \$1 because it was easier to pronounce than his own name.

The company's longevity makes Goya a rarity. Just 10% of family-owned businesses reach the third generation, with most failing due to family rivalries, says Joe Astrachan, a management professor and executive director of Cox Family Enterprise Center. The businesses that succeed typically have members who take pride in their mission, as opposed to working only for the money, he says.

"If you don't have that sense of legacy, it's going to be real hard to get past it," Astrachan says.

Unanue faced family conflict head-on about five years ago when relations grew strained among board members. An uncle died, and Unanue and his cousin Francisco disagreed with Joseph — Prudencio's last surviving son who'd been running the company since 1974 — about leadership because they said Joseph had been making decisions without their input. The result drove Bob and Francisco, with the blessing of family shareholders, to oust Joseph and his son Andy from the company.

That rift has been healed, Unanue says, as family members have settled business matters and reconciled. Joseph will soon return to the Goya board, where he will join Bob and Francisco.

"There were differences of opinion as to the direction of the company," he says. "Now, we're all on the same page."

On a day-to-day basis, Unanue runs the company with two brothers and four cousins.

"We're all hands on," says Peter Unanue, 41, Bob's younger brother who joined Goya almost 11 years ago and oversees Goya's distribution network. Another brother, Tom, runs the Florida operations with their cousin.

Since the change, Goya has reinvested more profits, Peter Unanue says. Family members and top executives, for instance, recently approved construction of a \$26 million facility to expand its reach into central and South Florida, where more Hispanics have been moving.

Outsiders can practically chart immigration patterns by Goya's growth, which has risen in places such as Columbus, Ohio; Pittsburgh; Raleigh-Durham, N.C.; and Moab, Utah.

As challenging as predicting future growth spots is, though, charting the variety of Hispanic cooking styles is equally difficult. A simple dish of rice and beans, for instance, varies widely depending on whether it's made by a Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban or Peruvian. Some like black beans, some like red, and some like pink.

Purchasing habits are also influenced by the length of time a shopper has lived here. New immigrants often buy a 99-cent bag of dried beans that need to soak for hours to make traditional dishes, while their children, who earn more money, may buy more expensive, ready-to-eat canned beans to save time, Unanue says.

"As people assimilate, they go to the can," he says.

Dizzying product range

To meet divergent needs, Goya sells 1,600 products ranging from bags of rice to ready-to-eat, frozen empanadas, up from 1,100 five years ago. The mix includes 38 varieties of beans alone, including the "powerhouse" frijoles negros favored by Cubans and the recently added mayacobas favored by Peruvians, he says.

Just as critical as knowing the nuances of each group's taste buds is knowing how to get the products to them.

Almost daily, Goya drivers deliver cases of products to tens of thousands of U.S. food stores, from supermarket chains in Texas to independent mom-and-pop bodegas in New York City to the Wal-Mart chain. It's a more costly method than dropping off jumbo shipments once a week and letting stores warehouse goods, but it lets Goya offer greater variety and ensure that products match each store's demographics, Peter Unanue says.

"Pink beans might sell in New York City but not sell as well in Texas or California," Peter Unanue says.

Astrachan says there's no evidence that Hispanic-run businesses are any different than non-Hispanic businesses, especially at the billion-dollar level. But visitors can immediately sense that Goya is different when they enter its headquarters' surprisingly modest 1970s-era wood-paneled lobby.

There's no sleek, modern office furniture, high-price artwork, flat-screen TV screens or uniformed security guards. In what could be a symbol for Goya's throwback culture, the lobby instead features portraits of Unanue family members, posters that depict Goya products and two friendly, bilingual receptionists.

Here, it's still a badge of honor to stay at the company for decades. Rebecca Rodriguez-Llerena, a Goya employee for more than 35 years, for instance, worked her way up to running Goya's Secaucus warehouse, a job her father had when he retired after 37 years.

People's desks also look different. They're cluttered with framed photos of babies, relatives and famous Latinos employees have met at Goya functions, such as Latin jazz band leader Tito Puente and pop singer Marc Anthony. Many employees display flags that declare their background, whether Colombian, Dominican or Mexican.

The culture reflects that most Goya employees are Hispanic and speak Spanish, although neither is a requirement for employment. The familylike culture is intentional, Unanue says.

"We try to keep a family environment where there's a pride to being a part of this," he says. "And you can feel it."

Unanue contributes to the atmosphere, regularly buying Dunkin' Donuts coffee for executives and assistants. He also demonstrates uncanny familiarity with longtime employees' lives, often

reciting their résumés with dates in detail. Often a joker, Unanue claims he'd never been a history buff but likes it more "as I've become historic."

At Goya's annual Christmas bashes, he shows his Latin roots by taking his wife, college sweetheart Muriel Fitzpatrick, to the dance floor and dancing merengue and salsa. He says they took dance lessons when they lived in Puerto Rico, where Unanue ran operations for seven of the years they lived there from 1980 to 1990.

He says he doesn't take vacations often, but when he does, he'll take his family skiing "to be a cool dad." He enjoys boating, and has a small sailboat in Cape Cod, Mass., where his wife's family lives and the Unanues have a summer home.

Unanue can be outspoken when he wants to be. When activists in 2006 sponsored "A Day Without An Immigrant," he agreed to be interviewed on CNN about the importance of immigration.

"Maybe we should have stayed out of the fray, but we see the importance of the immigrant community throughout the country," he says. "If we close our borders, we become less competitive. ... I think we need to protect our borders, but we are a country of immigrants."

Unanue and his five younger siblings were raised with the family business. "Our parents were bringing us into the business as we grew," he says. "We really did grow up around the business. It was part of our everyday life."

His father, Anthony, an engineer by training, exposed his kids to life outside Goya. For a brief stint, the family moved to Maryland where Anthony worked for the federal government. When they returned to New Jersey, however, Anthony started bringing 10-year-old Bob to Goya's packing plant on Saturdays. He says he can still remember the smell of yerba mate, the aromatic tea from Argentina that used to dominate the air.

His father died at age 48. Some Goya milestones — such as the inauguration of the Secaucus plant in 1976 — are entwined in his memory with watching his father suffer with leukemia.

Outside experience

Like his father, Unanue took time to explore life outside the company. He studied accounting at Merrimack College, a small Catholic college outside Boston, and in the late 1990s, he took about a year off and bought and briefly ran a 1950s-style restaurant in New Jersey.

"I wanted to do something different," he says. He returned to Goya when family called, asking him to run the Florida operation in 1999.

Some of his favorite dishes are pink beans made the Puerto Rican way, and tostones, a typical side dish of flattened dried plantains favored by Dominicans. But he adds, "not all of the time."

Though none of his children, ages 9 to 29, work at the company, Unanue is intent on seeing Goya make it to that rare fourth generation someday.

They could sell out, especially now with the USA's weak dollar. European companies are shopping for bargains in the food industry, he says. And Goya may look attractive, with a debt-free balance sheet, leading market position and double-digit growth last year. But Unanue says the family has no intention of bowing out.

"Even though it's been 72 years, we're really at the beginning of something," he says.