



Contributed photo

The Growth Engine Co. of Norwalk helped Thomas' introduce several new products, including Mini Squares Bagelbread.

Beyond breakfast

Norwalk-based Growth Engine helps Thomas' innovate and diversify

By Richard Lee
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The co-founders of The Growth Engine Co. in Norwalk call themselves an innovation agency, but for management of Thomas', the company that made the English muffin a breakfast staple, Gary Fraser and Bryan Mattimore are much more.

Fraser and Mattimore have been more like members of the Thomas' staff, offering advice over the long term on a variety of topics and resulting in a financial wind-

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fall, said Pete Rollins, general manager of Greenwich-based Thomas', a unit of George Weston Bakeries.

"Hiring The Growth Engine Co. as our innovation agency of record has been strategically important to us," Rollins said. "The innovations they've helped us with have led to \$125 million in new annual

revenue. And now we have a wealth of ideas in our innovation pipeline that will help us continue that growth."

Founded in 1999, The Growth Engine has reinvented itself as well, evolving from a new product development consultancy to one that forms long-term partnerships with clients, with the goal of developing a deep knowledge of their businesses, Fraser said.

"Our clients were frustrated because true innovations weren't happening," said Fraser. Please see **B2B**, Page B3

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Fraser, a veteran of 25 years of creative marketing and brand management with Kraft, Chesebrough-Pond's and Unilever.

A year after Thomas' hired The Growth Engine to develop ideas for improving sales of its English muffins, the Selleck Street agency invited Thomas' to pioneer with it the application of the "innovation agency" concept.

As a result, it became Thomas' "innovation agency of record," creating a team that includes Thomas' product management, research and development, sales, manufacturing, engineering, packaging and finance per-

sonnel, as well as staff from the company's advertising agency.

The Growth Engine came along at the right time more than three years ago when the low-carb craze heating up, said Joe Morrissey, senior director of marketing for Thomas'.

"2003 to 2004 was a pretty tough time. We were focused on day-to-day business," leaving little time for innovative thinking, Morrissey said. "We didn't start out saying we need an agency of record for innovation."

The innovation team executed focus groups and in-home tests with consumers to explore and validate new ideas. That resulted in new products such as Hearty Grains English Muffins. With

five new flavors, the line quickly became more than 30 percent of Thomas' English muffin business.

After learning that Sara Lee was planning a whole grain English muffin, The Growth Engine helped Thomas' step up its plans.

"Thomas' wanted to do the same. We got the whole grain white English muffin out in three months," Mattimore said.

The Growth Engine's also helped Thomas' introduce Squares Bagelbread, a three-flavor line that helped Thomas' move into the lunch arena. This year, the company launched its Mini Squares Bagelbread.

The Growth Engine staff has

become a key player in planning sessions, Morrissey said.

"We feel that we've proved the concept. It's a huge win for us," Mattimore said. "Thomas' talks of us as their arms and legs."

"We're about evolving ideas into successful marketplace innovations," Fraser said. "That takes persistence, patience and drive, which are made possible by a long-term innovation agency partnership."

Several agencies have similar business models, said Kevin McEvoy, marketing professor at the Stamford campus of the University of Connecticut.

"It's called a retainer contract. In marketing, it's not as common as in other avenues. You see a lot

of it in information technology," he said.

Hiring an agency like The Growth Engine is a way for Thomas' to outsource a responsibility, he said.

Mattimore and Fraser plan to use the Thomas' model as they expands their client base, adding more staff to provide the same hands-on, long-term service.

"Our goal is to have a 20-person agency," said Mattimore, who wrote the book "99 Percent Inspiration: Tips, Tales & Techniques for Liberating Your Business Creativity." He said he expects to add three to five "innovation agency" clients in the next 12 months.