

How Jimmy Buffett became a master of business and branding

Inside Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville Empire

MARTIN DeANGELIS, Staff Writer | Posted Yesterday

ATLANTIC CITY — Ellen Donovan was doing a little shopping Tuesday for one of her family's favorite clothing brands. She picked out three T-shirts, a baseball hat and, on her way to the register, a drink koozie, all bearing the brand's name in different forms.

At the end, the checkout clerk put her haul in a signature shopping bag for the brand: Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville.

Donovan was visiting from Waretown and bought all that stuff for her grown son at the retail shop in Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville Atlantic City. That's the bar and restaurant inside Resorts Casino Hotel, the one directly across the Boardwalk from the Landshark Bar & Grill, which has a separate menu and identity, but is also a Buffett-owned and themed place.

"We're all Jimmy," one worker said Tuesday in the retail store.

And Buffett, the party-time singer who's set to kick off Atlantic City's 2016 beach-concert series Saturday, has a whole lot more products and places that fans can pick from. His name, song titles and lyrics are plastered on a long list of casinos, cafes, resorts, vacation clubs, blenders, boozes, snacks, beach chairs, bicycles and so on.

Buffett is in so many lines of business, he gets taught in business schools.

"He's really created a brand empire," said Jennifer Barr, a marketing professor at Stockton University who uses Buffett as an example of "brand extension" in her classes.

"He's an iconic brand, in a category with other iconic brands like Starbucks, Apple, Harley Davidson ... Disney and Google," Barr said. "To get to that level, the percentage is very small, and to maintain it is difficult to do."

But Buffett does it in part with help from millions of "brand ambassadors," she said, meaning the loyal fans who call themselves "Parrotheads" and are expected to flood into Atlantic City this weekend to go to his show and get together for good times before and after.

"In 99 percent of marketing courses, branding is a component, and Jimmy Buffett could apply," added Barr, who plans to be one of those people in Saturday's audience — even if she considers herself more a fan of the Margaritaville restaurant than the singer whose booze-blues anthem founded the whole empire.

Back in the restaurant's gift shop, Phyllis and George Nagy, of Lake Katrine, New York, said they've been to one of Buffett's concerts and enjoyed the show. But they're not the real fans in their family.

“My son and my grandchildren, who are 15 and 17, are in love with Jimmy Buffett,” Phyllis said as she flipped through racks of T-shirts. “For a kid to be that big a fan is amazing.”

But their son, Kevin, is the one who got a five-pitcher Margaritaville Frozen Concoction Maker — better known to most people as a blender — as the star gift for his 40th birthday.

“All his friends put together and got it for him,” Phyllis Nagy said. “It was something ridiculous like \$650.”

Then somebody pointed out a much smaller, Bali-model Frozen Concoction Maker on sale at the local Margaritaville store. The price was \$400, down from \$500, a little sign said.

Mark Giannantonio is another fan of the Buffett brand, mostly because of what it’s done for the brand Giannantonio runs. He’s president and CEO of Resorts, and he’s expecting Saturday’s beach concert to inspire a very busy weekend at his place.

Buffett played a concert on Resorts’ beach in June 2013, and “it was a tremendous day for Atlantic City and for Resorts,” Giannantonio said Tuesday. “It was really what began the rebranding of the property.”

He credits several factors for helping revive Atlantic City’s oldest casino, which struggled for years before its finances started turning around. They include owner Morris Bailey’s commitment and investment of \$70 million-plus in renovations and upgrades. But part of the success story, Giannantonio said, is because Bailey “cut a deal with Jimmy Buffett” to bring his restaurants and bars and more there.

“Jimmy Buffett’s brand is bigger than life right now. It’s everywhere you look,” he said.”

Along with the bars and shops, the casino also has a Margaritaville section of slots on its casino floor. And just within the past few weeks, Resorts got a hurry-up order of three brand-new Margaritaville-themed slot machines. They’re the first ones in an Atlantic City casino, added Giannantonio, who admits he was thrilled when he learned Buffett was in the lineup for this year’s beach concerts.

“That was important. I told the team we want them on the floor for this weekend,” the CEO said.

Barr said Buffett’s popularity as a musician was the start of his branding empire. But having his brand show up in so many places on so many things has spread awareness of the music — including to generations of fans born after the singer had his signature hit in the 1970s with “Margaritaville.”

“It’s like a two-way flow,” she said. “The brand flows into all different facets. The popularity of the Margaritaville brand flows back into Jimmy Buffett the personality, Jimmy Buffett the performer.”

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