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Mutual admiration among Falls bottlers, iconic KISS singer Gene Simmons, leads to successful soda partnership

BY JOSHUA MALONI
GM/Managing Editor

When someone has a chance to meet their favorite celebrity, they usually get an autograph or take a picture. It's a special moment – but just that: A quick interaction and a happy memory.

Rarely do these encounters lead to a lasting relationship – but that's exactly what happened when John and Paul Janik and their friend, Chris Haick, met Gene Simmons.

"I've been a KISS fan since I was 3 years old," John Janik said. "Since 1979. I was 3. My brother, Paul, is five years older than me. He got me into KISS. So, we grew up – from very, very little kids – being KISS fans. Fast forward to 1987, Chris is in my class in sixth grade, and he comes to the school and he has a KISS shirt on. So, I say, 'OK, this guy's cool. I'm going to be friends with him,' obviously, because he's a KISS fan. Chris and I have been friends and KISS fans since we were in sixth grade together. We graduated together. Chris is an accountant, and he was doing stuff for our family business," a Niagara Falls soda bottling company.

"And we basically saw Gene Simmons was coming to Cleveland in 2017. It was like a comic con/convention-type thing in Cleveland that he was speaking at and signing autographs. So, my brother, Paul, and I brought our families there, and we brought some posters for him to sign.

"And when we got up to his booth where he was signing, we said, 'Hey, Gene, our family makes soda. We would love to do a soda for KISS.' And he gave us his business card, and he said, 'Well, I have a couple ideas.' He goes, 'I'll give you a call.'

"So, we didn't think anything of it. Two days go by, my brother gets a call. 'Hello. This is Gene Simmons. I would love to do a line of soda,' based on his trademark 'MoneyBag.'

From that chance encounter, a partnership was born. Rock Steady Sodas was created, and MoneyBag Sodas was launched to great fanfare – including an event at the 7-Eleven on Hyde Park Boulevard, when Simmons met lines of Falls fans wrapping the market over the course of a few hours.

Janik said, initially, his goal was to create a KISS-themed soda. However, when he learned Simmons had trademarked "MoneyBag" and used it for other products, he came to the realization that "it's something that's more



Rock Steady Sodas CFO Chris Haick and Vice President John Janik proudly display their MoneyBag Sodas partnership with Gene Simmons, who is shown in replica form.

relatable than KISS.

"Everyone knows money. Everyone loves money. Everyone knows the logo. So, we designed that with him," he said.

Since then, Simmons has proven to be more than just a celebrity spokesman.

Haick said, "He does everything on his own. So, if you need something, you talk directly to Gene. And he's very insightful. He knows business, and obviously he knows advertising and marketing and branding. It makes it very easy to do business with somebody who makes themselves accessible. ...

"He gives a lot of very valuable advice, and he's open to having discussion about things. We couldn't ask for a better partner."

Janik added, "He donates a lot of his time to doing promotions for the soda – a lot of the times all on his own dime. You know, he'll pay to fly into Philadelphia to meet with PFG Food Group to say hello to their customers. He comes to 7-Eleven in Niagara Falls to help launch the product. And he does that all on his own dime and time; and he's 100% behind the product.

"With the soda, it's really a top-notch soda," Janik said of the product that is served in painted glass bottles. "It's really a nice option for people that they want something a little different, a little more upscale; something, perhaps, maybe if you're not drinking alcohol at a party, but you want something a little more special. You reach for one of our sodas."

There are six flavors in the MoneyBag line.

"It's cola, diet cola, root beer, cream soda, ginger ale, blood orange," Haick said. "We started off with four flavors. We started off with the core four: cola, diet cola, ginger ale and root beer. And since that (7-Eleven) event in 2018, we added the cream soda and blood orange. Blood orange is our newest flavor."

Simmons left the flavoring decision up to his partners – "He pretty much said, 'Hey, you guys are the experts with the soda,'" Janik said. "His initial idea was to have a cola. 'I want to do a MoneyBag cola.' And then he said, 'Well, I really enjoy drinking diet cola.' So, we said, 'Hey, Gene, listen: You just can't have just a cola and a diet cola; you've got to have some type of flavor profile to offer. So, we suggested the ginger ale and the root beer. Root beer, you've got to do: In glass bottles, that's always the No. 1 seller. So, we did the root beer and the ginger ale along with that, and then added the cream and the orange."

Simmons said he doesn't have a favorite flavor: "I rotate.

"Sometimes it's orange. I love the ginger ale. Sometimes, when I'm watching my girlish figure, I go to diet. They're all really terrific. So, my recommendation is try them all. Bring them all for the family; you'll see.

"And that's what the menu of life should be. Whatever your favorite is, your family members may like something else.

"And there's more to come. We're going to do a lot more fun stuff, but it's going to be better

than whatever is out there."

Simmons, who now also has alcoholic products, vodka, and a MoneyBag wine that debuted in Europe, said he chose soda because, "Initially, the appeal of sodas was my childhood."

Of the product, Simmons said, "Let me tell you about our sodas: It's the champagne of sodas. It's soda royalty. No chemicals inside, no food coloring – none of that crap. We try to use the best ingredients – and we're not in cans. We believe it tastes better (in glass). When I was growing up, you bought your bottle. It just tasted better when it got cold. Got real cold. I don't like the tin part of it, but good luck to Tab or whatever's out there. Cans. We hold nothing against all the other brands, but this is the best soda that's out there – bar none."

He added, "Sugar. We've all heard lots of bad things about sugar. So, we don't use all the chemically-induced sugar. This is real cane sugar. It's just better for you."

Janik said, "My brother, Paul, and I, our family, soda has been our family's heritage since 1935, and we've been producing soda since then in Niagara Falls. We make soda the way it was initially meant to be, with the natural flavoring and the cane sugar and the glass bottles."

He added, "We just wanted to go with the best ingredients, with the taste and just for aspect of being a healthier choice. You know, it's by no means a health product. It's a treat. It's like a candy bar or a scoop of ice cream. That's what soda is. It's meant to be a treat. It's not meant to drink a thousand bottles a day. Just like anything else. If you drink too much water, you'll drown.

"Our product is a treat. Our product is something that people who aren't your average soda drinker will have a MoneyBag Soda. It's a special alternative to what you normally see out there."

MoneyBag Sodas is available locally at Tops, throughout the U.S. at chains including Hy-Vee and Rocket Fizz, and sold in Poland, Germany and Sweden.

"One of the things that we've done is we've expanded our online presence, and we've started selling our product online to get to areas right now that currently don't have the soda in chains in their area – and that's been a major success," Haick said. "The website is www.moneybagsodas.com, and we do a **SEE GENE, continued on Page 5**

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