

Cover Feature

# 2023 Bottler of the Year: Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co.

Hometown instincts drive Midwest bottler



*Image courtesy of Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co. LLC*

**January 9, 2023**

Iconic hometown communities are a celebrated part of American culture, portrayed in myriad of classic films because of the values and interconnections they represent.

In the beverage market, no one understands the importance of the hometown community more than bottlers and distributors. Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Lenexa, Kansas, is no exception. Its close ties and supportive programming for its local communities and its commitment to its team members have helped the Midwestern bottler thrive and grow.

With territory in Missouri, Illinois, Kansas, and some counties in Iowa and Nebraska, Heartland Coca-Cola's footprint is long established in the Coca-Cola

bottling history. But the current company structure dates back not too long ago to 2016 when The Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Co. advanced its North America refranchising plan. As part of that plan, Ulysses “Junior” Bridgeman closed on a deal that created Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co., and the bottler officially began operations in February 2017. Noting its fifth anniversary in 2022, Heartland has much to celebrate.

Bridgeman, whose earlier career includes 12 years in the NBA as well as the franchising and ownership of various Wendy’s and Chili’s restaurants, has strived to establish Heartland Coca-Cola as a business that serves hometown communities that invests back into local neighborhoods.

“Without a doubt, family is a core value — what we do together as a team, with our shared vision,” Bridgeman says. “And a lot of hard work. That’s what leads to personal and organizational growth.”

Chuck Wyant, president of Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co., further emphasizes the company’s love for the communities it serves and its commitment to supporting them.

“Our values of family, community, inclusion and service drive every decision that we make at Heartland — that is the commitment of the Bridgeman family,” he explains.

Referring to its team members as the “heartbeats” of Heartland, Wyant highlights that Heartland’s success can be attributed to the integrated work done by the entire team. As such, the team makes an effort to support organizations in the community that matter to them, and this commitment is reflected daily.

“The company supports many wonderful community-based organizations and has built a culture where it encourages employees to give back with their time and talent,” Wyant says.

One such organization is the Veterans Community Project (VCP). VCP was founded in the Kansas City area by veterans who wanted to help other veterans who were homeless. They created a tiny home village where veterans could stay, free of charge, until they were able to get a place of their own. VCP is now expanding in other cities across the United States.

“We are excited to see VCP expanding in St. Louis, Missouri. Recently, a group of Heartland employees spent several hours on a build project at the new St. Louis VCP village,” Wyant added.

Noting that the company refers to its regional sales centers as “hometowns,” each Heartland locale works at its local level with various organizations, including the Boys and Girls Clubs, the Special Olympics, the United Way and the Urban League. These regional sales centers also are involved with many smaller, local level nonprofits such as NubAbility Athletics Foundation in DuQuoin, Ill., which provides sports camps for limb-different children.



**Ulysses “Junior” Bridgeman (left) speaks to team members at a Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling event. Also pictured is Rick Frazier, chief operating officer at Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling.**

*Image courtesy of Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co. LLC*

Heartland’s senior management also plays an active role in community connections. To close out 2022, leaders from across the company met for several days to plan and hear about 2023 goals.

“During our planning meetings we used part of our first day to work with four different community organizations,” Wyant says. “We spent time learning more about their work in the community and then spent several hours serving them.

There was so much heart and energy reflected that day. It was a powerful way to bring leadership together and ‘live’ the culture.”

“From a communications perspective, we’re excited about our introduction of Yammer as an enterprise social network platform, providing an easy and effective way for our employees to connect, build communities, and share knowledge and information,” says Jeff Oberman, vice president of people at Heartland. “Yammer is helping us with employee engagement and collaboration across our entire organization.”

For these many reasons and more, Beverage Industry has named Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co. as its 2023 Bottler of the Year.

### **Designed for the future**

With more than 2,400 team members, Heartland presently operates 17 distribution centers in addition to its production facility in Lenexa, Kansas. As a result of the growth achieved during the past five years, the company has announced plans to build a state-of-the-art production campus in Olathe, Kansas.

“We’re modernizing our production capabilities and embracing our Heartland values of family, community, inclusion and service with this new, 600,000-square-foot campus,” Bridgeman says.

Noting that this is a “generational investment” for Heartland’s production capabilities, the company anticipates that the first saleable case will be produced in the fall of 2024, with production being fully operational sometime in 2025.

Heartland’s current facility was built in 1969 and opened with used equipment, but the new Olathe facility will be more than three times the size of this current facility. This all comes on the heels of the company’s fifth anniversary.

“Thanks to the hard work of each of our employees and the support of our partners and customers, we have delivered consistent, predictable, and sustainable results, allowing us to kick off the next five years and beyond with our announcement of the new production campus in neighboring Olathe,” Bridgeman notes.

Although still in the early stages of determining equipment for the new campus, Heartland notes that the facility will feature leading edge capabilities, with plans for four new production lines — two PET lines and two can lines.

“With modernization will come many advantages, including strengthening the company’s ability to produce more products and increasing our efficiency,” explains



Justin Bridgeman, Heartland Executive Director. “Team members will also benefit from these improvements, allowing them to focus on growth for the company and for their own professional careers with Heartland. As Heartland grows, we will continue our close connection and support of our communities.”



**Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling’s leadership team help guide not just the business but are heavily involved in the company’s community outreach.**

*Image courtesy of Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co. LLC*

## **Sparkling foundation**

As consumers beverage demands continue to evolve, sparkling still remains the key category within Heartland’s portfolio. Accounting for more than 60% of its portfolio, sparkling makes up the lion’s share.

In fact, sparkling offerings were some of the company’s top performers. That includes spicy cherry flavors (Cherry Coke and Pibb), lemon lime flavors (Sprite), and citrus flavors (Fanta, Mello Yello, and Fresca).

The Coca-Cola Co.'s Creations releases also were a great boon in terms of usage occasions. "We've also noted that when we launched products like Starlight and Dreamworld, Gen Z consumers began purchasing additional Coke products," Jeff Carter, vice president of customers, says. "These new flavors helped us capture new consumers."

In line with the sparkling success, Carter notes that zero sugar innovations remain popular within its portfolio.

"Moving into 2023, we have high expectations for our expanding zero sugar portfolio," Carter says. "We've seen many consumers moving toward these zero sugar options, such as Coke Zero Sugar and Sprite Zero Sugar. Also, this past year, our limited time offerings in the sparkling area have done very well."

The company anticipates that its zero-calorie offerings will continue to perform as health and wellness influences more and more consumer choice.

Sustainable packaging also is playing a role in consumer choice within Heartland's territory. "[Consumers] also value sustainability, paying attention to our packaging and asking for products in recycled packages," Carter says.

Within the non-sparkling portfolio, still and enhanced water and performance beverage are key drivers in Heartland's markets.

"Heartland is the second largest Body Armor distributor and is among the Top 5 distributors of Monster Energy in the U.S.," Carter says. "Heartland also has the highest brand development index and a No. 1 share in the category with Gold Peak Tea."

With such a diverse portfolio, Heartland operates in lockstep with The Coca-Cola Co. to ensure the needs of its partners and ultimately consumers are met.

"Heartland works closely with The Coca-Cola Co. to develop the right strategies for its various channels, such as hyper/supermarkets, convenience stores, gas stations, and on-premise/foodservice," Carter says. "The company begins by determining whether the product purchase is for future consumption or immediate consumption."

"Heartland also partners on advertising and marketing strategies," Carter continues. "The companies invest together to ensure that Heartland has the right packaging in the right channels. In addition, Heartland partners with The Coca-Cola Co. to ensure the products are available to all our customers."

## Heart of the operations

Producing approximately 30 million cases a year out of its Lenexa production facility, Heartland's 17 distribution centers and its production facility utilize a fleet of approximately 900 vehicles to deliver its products.

Comprised of tractors, trailers, side-bay trucks, box trucks, pickup trucks and vans, Heartland's delivery operations are equipped to support safe deliveries through dash cams as well as GreenMile, a program that supports driver performance. The company also is addressing one of the key challenges impacting the bottling industry: the CDL truck driver shortage.

"Across the country, one of our industry's most significant issues is the shortage of CDL truck drivers," Oberman says. "CDL drivers play an essential role in our business, and their work is invaluable. This past March, we launched Heartland's CDL Program in hopes of acquiring new Heartland drivers while combatting the driver shortage epidemic. Our five-week CDL class A program is available to any Heartland employee or external hire interested in obtaining their CDL license.

"Our program is unique because we cover the cost of attending CDL school and pay participants while they are in training, which varies based on your location," Oberman continues. "After our driver completes the five-week program and passes their final test, they will be officially graduated and ready to hit the roads in one of our big red trucks."

Oberman explained that since its inception, the program has graduated 13 CDL drivers. Ivan Luna is a recent graduate of the program who noted that being a driver at Heartland has allowed him to quit his second job and spend more time with his family.

"Our CDL program is an excellent example of how we continue to prioritize equipping our employees with the tools and resources to advance their careers," Oberman notes.

Whether its proactive approach in the warehouse or its involvement in its local communities, Heartland has shown it is a true leader in the bottling community.

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## The Heartbeats of Heartland

As a leader in the Midwest bottling network, Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Lenexa, Kansas, knows that this is all thanks to the team members that make up the company.

Chuck Wyant, president of Heartland, offers a glimpse into the shared comradery that exists within the organization with his fond reference to all team members as the “heartbeats” of the company. Highlighting that fun and community are an integral part of the Heartland team, the company celebrated its success this past year with a competition centered on safety practices.

“This past fall Heartland hosted a safety skills competition, where our frontline employees in distribution, warehouse, merchandising and other functions, competed on obstacle courses, showing off their skills and emphasizing safety,” Wyant says. “The event, held in Kansas City, brought together team members and their families from various facilities and proved to be a high energy, fun way to celebrate the success of the year.”

Heartland also emphasizes the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEI&B) in its company culture.

“Our vision is for Heartland to be as diverse as the brands and communities we serve,” Justin Bridgeman says. “We want to foster a culture and workplace where employees from all ethnic, socioeconomic, and other backgrounds can reach their full potential in making Heartland the best beverage company. Together we will achieve an environment where we listen, engage, advocate for, and develop each member of the Heartland family.”

Heartland provides DEI&B 101 training for every team member and hosted its first DEI&B Summit earlier this year.

“Some of the topics that were covered at the Summit were Moving Beyond Unconscious Bias, Navigating Diverse Leadership with Differently Abled, and Being an Ally Leader,” Justin Bridgeman says. “The work Heartland is doing in this space will position us for success and continued growth in a marketplace where diversity and inclusion are true business imperatives.”

Heartland’s commitment to curating a company culture that not just supports its team members but helps them thrive exemplifies the heart of what it takes to make a leading bottler.

KEYWORDS: Beverage Bottler of the Year Carbonated Soft Drinks (CSD) Sales Coca-Cola Bottling executive leadership