



# DISTRIBUTOR ENVY

**Is your  
broadliner  
going the  
extra mile  
for you—  
like these  
guys do?**

BY DANA TANYERI

**W**HAT'S YOUR DISTRIBUTOR DONE FOR YOU LATELY? If nothing comes to mind besides dropping off cases at the back door, maybe it's time to start asking some questions.

Today almost all foodservice distributors offer at least some value-added services to help restaurants—especially independents and small chains—improve their performance and profitability. A handful set themselves apart with beyond-the-norm initiatives. Here are a few worth knowing about.



**PFG-NORTHCENTER**  
THEY'LL MAKE YOU SMARTER



**MARTIN BROTHERS**  
MEET YOUR MARKETING TEAM



**COSTA FRUIT & PRODUCE**  
THE SAFE CHOICE



**J. KING'S**  
THE CULINARY PROS



**SYSCO OF MINNESOTA**  
THE BIG THINK SMALLER

DELIVERY PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PFG NORTHCENTER



FOOD COSTING, INVENTORY CONTROL AND A LOT MORE.

## It's like having your very own marketing team

### MARTIN BROTHERS DISTRIBUTING

CEDAR FALLS, IOWA

"Our job isn't complete after we sell a customer his No. 10 can of green beans," says Martin Brothers' marketing services manager Shannon Bown. "Our job is complete after that customer has sold those beans to his guests, is successful and profitable and comes back to us to reorder."

That's where Bown's team comes in: "We provide independents and small chains with their own in-house marketing department."

The marketing team includes graphic designers, copywriters and support staff. What do they do? Menu engineering, design and printing, for starters. They'll also come up with promotion ideas and design and produce signage, table-tents and other support materials, even Websites. Most services center on in-restaurant tools, but external advertising is occasionally done. "We have capability to do things like radio and billboard advertising," Bown says. "But we focus primarily on helping operators market themselves within their own four walls."

It's all free to key customers. All you have to do is "commit to working with us to create a business partnership"

One such partner is Okoboji Bar & Grill, a seven-unit chain based in Des Moines. "We work with them to design and print their menus, and our chef helps evaluate individual menu-item performance," Bown says. "We engineer the menu to capitalize on things they want to emphasize, signature items or those with the strongest profit margins. A member of our team works with them to create seasonal menu specials and promotions, as well, designing and producing menu inserts, table tents, placements and other materials."

Bown says flexibility is a big advantage her department delivers. "With menu printing, we can do small batches whenever they're needed. If something's not working, it's not a big hassle to make a change. Some operators don't change their menus as often as they should because, frankly, it's a big pain. We take that pain away."



## If you want training, this is the place

### PFG-NORTHCENTER

AUGUSTA, MAINE

PFG-NorthCenter offers a staggering range of education and training services. "We start by making sure our own sales reps are trained to train their accounts on key issues, such as food costing and inventory control," says Bill Bolton, vice president of sales and marketing at the Performance Food Group. "We then extend more formalized training opportunities directly to customers."

From an on-site training center and test kitchen, the distributor hosts four to six culinary and menu workshops a week. Most are conducted by its own executive chef, who also helps clients with recipe development and menu engineering. Sessions on garnishing and knife skills are offered, as are wait-staff training workshops. Frequent product cuttings help customers better evaluate quality, performance and yield differences among items and brands they're considering buying.

NorthCenter customers can also tap security review, operations and site review programs. A trainer evaluates kitchens and storage areas and makes recommendations on how to minimize the risk of theft. Operations and site reviews focus on identifying opportunities to improve inventory, receiving, storage, meal production and service procedures to maximize efficiency, quality and productivity. There's a secret shopper program; a manpower analysis to help control payroll costs; and ServSafe certification classes are held all year.

"A lot of operators have expertise in some areas but not others, and they can't afford to buy that expertise," Bolton says. "We look at where the need is greatest and try to fill those gaps."



THEY SELL YOU BEANS AND THEN HELP MARKET THE BEANS SO YOU CAN SELL THEM.



AFTER 9/11 ALL FOOD SECURITY PROCEDURES TIGHTENED.

## All the safety measures you'll ever need

### COSTA FRUIT & PRODUCE

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

The stronger your distributor's food safety programs, the better you'll sleep at night. If only everybody slept as good as Costa's clients. The New England firm tightened its food-security operations after the 9/11 attacks. They include extensive employee screening; pass-card restricted zones within its facility; photo ID badges for delivery personnel; and security camera monitoring of all areas, inside and out. "We also implemented sealed trucks to prevent tampering," says CEO Manny Costa. "Once a truck is loaded and ready to be moved off the dock it is sealed and all information about its contents is recorded."

To reinforce the importance of food safety among its employees, Costa calls its warehouse and transportation employees "food handlers." "They're always reminded that they're not just moving boxes. They need to understand sources of contamination and the role they play in guarding against it."

The ServSafe certification classes the distributor hosts every six weeks are often attended by employees, as well as by customers. And an on-staff HACCP trainer works both internally and with customers. Earlier this year Costa initiated a full-day Food Safety Symposium co-sponsored by the Massachusetts Restaurant Association. The event drew more than 150 people.



## Culinary inspiration is part of the package

### J. KING'S FOODSERVICE PROFESSIONALS

HOLTSVILLE, NEW YORK

If you go to a J. King's "Culinary Extravaganza" food show, don't expect to wander around sampling the latest twist on chicken fingers. King's annual show, like its myriad culinary programs, is a spicy affair that puts the focus squarely on food—applications, recipes, demonstrations, education and face time with an army of chefs charged with providing excitement and traffic-building ideas.

"[Owner] John King hired me to start the culinary program a decade ago. We now have two additional executive chefs and a group of chefs who operate our own on-site cafe," says Sinead Corcoran, director of marketing and corporate chef for the Long Island broadliner. "We also tap corporate chefs of manufacturers for our major culinary events. At our food shows, we want as many chef jackets on the floor as possible."

Beyond shows, frequent seminars and workshops educate customers on topics like catering and how to tap hot menu trends. King's also takes its "show" on the road via "Rolling Markets," specially fitted trucks driven by executive chefs Chris Neary and Bill Dougherty. "They pull up to customers' locations and do mini demos of seasonal specialty produce as well as complimentary items such as drizzles, dressings and artisan cheeses," Corcoran says. Culinary tours, including to farms that supply J. King's local produce and to specialty food destinations for menu R&D, are also offered. "We're now planning a tour to Italy so customers can experience the culture and the sources of some of the items we're bringing in."



FOOD DEMOS, SEMINARS, SHOWS, TOURS: THIS PLACE HAS IT ALL.



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## A heavyweight that helps the locals

**SYSCO FOODSERVICES OF MINNESOTA**

**MOUNDS VIEW, MINNESOTA**

Here's a case of big thinking small. Sysco Corp.'s Minnesota operating company touts a farmer's market initiative that might seem positively quaint for a company its size.

Nurtured over four years, the program taps a network of local farmers to supply the bulk of Sysco's seasonal produce—everything from peppers and cabbages, to berries, sweet corn, apples, pumpkins and specialty items. Harvested within a 50-mile radius of the distributor's warehouse, the products are delivered on Sysco trucks in the farmers' own boxes, proudly labeled "Minnesota grown."

"It's important to keep the products identified with the farmers who grow them," says Jeff Larson, vice president of merchandising. "From a marketing standpoint, it's that connection that makes the program so powerful. We do flyers during the produce season noting items available and always include stories of the people behind the products in those, as well as on our Website."

Farmers are given free booth space at the distributor's food shows to display their wares. Sysco sales reps are regularly educated on the products, the farmers and how to sell the benefits of locally, sustainably produced foods. Sysco's buyers keep in close contact with farmers well before the growing season to forecast demand, discuss quality requirements and go over logistics.

And the program extends beyond produce. Beef and poultry are included, as are dairy products, artisan cheeses, honey and maple syrup produced in Minnesota. "We even source sustainably grown products from other regions—canned and frozen vegetables from Oregon, for instance," Larson says. "And we're always looking to add suppliers. We're talking with a local trout guy, and a farmer who grows great specialty garlic in northern Wisconsin."

Sysco corporate is looking at the Minnesota program as a prototype, and a similar initiative was launched recently at the company's New Mexico division. Says Larson, "They agree with us that sourcing more products locally is the wave of the future." □