

# The Art of the Dealer

**The right partnership between restaurant owner and dealer can help the restaurateur grow his or her business quickly and painlessly**

In the past, typical dealerships were often seen solely as sources for commodity items such as flatware, china, pots, pans, ovens, refrigerators, and other day to day cooking equipment. The items offered were strictly cash and carry unless the foodservice operator opted to pay an extra surcharge for what we now view as basic value-added services such as delivery or kitchen equipment installation.

Today's ever changing marketplace has bred a new kind of FE&S dealership. Dealers today are experts in not just distribution, but, out of necessity, have trained to become experts in all facets of our customer's businesses.

Now dealers specialize in kitchen layout and design, interior design, safe food handling, menu development, staff training and retention techniques, as well as many other areas of restaurant operations.

In the age of technology, a customer can find anything on the internet, for any price. Most direct mail houses actually offer supplies and equipment cheaper than any sales rep possibly could.

What a customer *does not get online* is personal and individually customized service. Therefore, the primary question that needs to be asked is, "what can I offer my customers to help their business succeed today just a little more than yesterday? How can I do this on their terms and/or budget?"

Restaurateurs now view dealers as consultants to their business, and many end users almost consider their FE&S dealer as an extension of their own operations. In today's technology driven marketplace, no one is ever more than a cell phone call or email away.

The services now offered help to create a more efficient and safe operation for the end-user.

A more efficient kitchen will result in lower operating costs and labor savings.

In addition, the principles incorporated in a well-executed kitchen design take into consideration many safety issues that end users may not realize early on in the design process.

For example, an operator may choose to place an ice machine in a walkway or an area that can create a slip hazard. Today, the average injury claim by someone who slips and falls in a kitchen may cost a restaurant owner hundreds of thousands of dollars. This is a costly risk which can easily be avoided through the use of a skilled designer.

Food safety is another primary concern when designing a foodservice facility. It is critical to keep food throughout any organizational process outside of the temperature danger zone.

Current HACCP laws dictate that food

may not be exposed to temperatures between 41F degrees and 135F degrees, "the danger zone," for more than four hours (note: HACCP regulations vary based on local municipalities).

As a result, operators tend to receive bulk shipments directly into a walk-in cooler or freezer. Then the operator must first begin bulk-breaking and distributing these food items to remote locations either in the same building, or on the same property, all the while,

staying fully aware of the changing temperatures of the various products.

As a result, the FE&S dealerships or consultant must design the facility in such a way as to minimize exposure to the danger zone and maximize staff efforts.

This means designing the receiving area with sufficient room to inspect, store and receive incoming food.

Then each kitchen or cooking location must have enough refrigeration for short term food storage. The dealer or consultant must work intimately with the operator so as to design these areas with enough capacity, while not over equipping and wasting the client's dollars.

Food safety also becomes a design concern when arranging the set up of any kitchen or prep area. Raw meats can not be prepped along side raw vegetables or fruits. Storage in a walk-in refrigerator or freezer has a proper and safe method of organization to promote less bacterial growth.

A knowledgeable dealer can use his/her training and experience to guide an owner through the food safety hazards ensuring a more successful establishment.

In addition to value engineering kitchen designs and food safety concerns, operators want FE&S dealers to keep up to date with industry trends. Not only do they want the foodservice dealer to stock the most cutting edge china and flatware patterns, but they also want the dealer to keep them informed of the latest cost-saving kitchen equipment.

A responsible dealership will act like the "eyes and ears" for a restaurant owner, and keeps the restaurateur informed of new items or changes in the industry when they occur.

As a dealer, we not only need to be following the current trends in the industry, but we need to be responsible for helping to create the future trends as well.

## The Test Kitchen

The latest trend in the industry is the evolution of the test kitchen. Many dealerships are now providing fully operational test kitchens for clients use, providing many exciting advantages.

These test kitchens give small, single-unit operators, or large, multi-unit chain operators the ability to test drive a new piece of kitchen equipment before making a purchase.

A chef can bring product in and test existing line items for increased efficiency, or create new menu additions on any piece of equipment.

It also allows managers to step out of their restaurants, get away from the hustle and bustle of daily operations, and concentrate on their particular experiment or training.

An onsite test kitchen makes it easy for district managers to train franchisees or store managers on procedures regarding new menu items as well.

The sales rep will schedule an appointment in the test kitchen and have any of the requested equipment available for their customer's use. This convenience not only allows a customer to walk away and feel confident about their recent equipment purchase, but it also allows a chef to feel more confident operating a new piece of equipment when they return to their own property. Lastly, in addition to a test kitchen, these facilities often include private classrooms that make weekly or monthly staff meetings a more pleasurable experience.

*Len Davis is owner of General Hotel & Restaurant Supply and an FRA member.*



**A dealership or consultant must design the kitchen and facility in such a way as to minimize exposure to the danger zone and maximize staff efforts.**