

CONSISTENCY AND FRIENDSHIP DRIVE BUSINESS



By Ihor Dlaboha; Photography by Michael McCracken

Administratively, he is consistent. Consistency and punctuality are excellent attributes of a successful foodservice DSR, he preaches.

Emotionally, he is a friend. As a matter a fact, December's ID DSR of the Month, Greg Crowe of Wood Fruitticher Grocery Co., Birmingham, AL, is a friend to his operator-customers before he is a salesman. Crowe has spent enough time with each of his 50 accounts in the course of his career in professional and extra-professional environments that he can truly call them friends.

**ID DSR Profile
Greg Crowe
Wood Fruitticher
Grocery Co.
Birmingham, AL**



Greg Crowe of Wood Fruitticher, right, analyzes food costs with Gena Shaul, purchasing agent for NHS Management LLC of Tuscaloosa, AL.

Years as DSR		12
Annual Dollar Sales		\$7 million
Number of Accounts		50
Territory		West Alabama
Calls on Average Day		6-8
Types of Accounts		Healthcare and independents
Products Carried		Broadline
Number of Items		15,000
Sales "High"		Helping customers be

		successful.
Sales "Low"		A customer going out of business.
Favorite Food		Spaghetti
Favorite Movie & Book		"Hoosiers" and "The Bible"
Role Model		I have been blessed with many influential people in my life.
Hobbies/Free Time		Music and playing ball with the kids.
Special Dinner companion		Franklin Graham (Billy's son)
Mojo Motto		Be a friend first, salesman second.

Why is friendship more important than salesmanship?

"If a customer can't trust you, if he doesn't like you, if he doesn't know who you are, it's going to be hard for him to give you all of his business. It's hard to write someone a \$30,000 check a month if you don't like him or you don't know a lot about him," explained Crowe in a recent interview with ID Access. "I think people buy from people they're comfortable with. Deals come down to service and pricing but once you have established a relationship, the deals become easier."

This philosophy has paid off handsomely for Crowe. In the 10 years that he has been working for the family-owned broadliner, his sales have grown from \$2 million to \$7 million this year.

Crowe is no stranger to foodservice. His initial exposure to the restaurant business was in his grandparent's eatery, which they owned for some 30 years. Afterward, he and his father operated a restaurant in Andalusia, AL, for 10 years. It was a family-style barbecue and hamburger establishment with seating for about 150 patrons.

That was where Crowe learned the benefits of consistency. The DSR who called on him was consistent and always on time, and he built a relationship with Crowe and his father.

"We were good friends and played golf together," he said.

Crowe took this message with himself when he transitioned to distribution sales. If a DSR is consistent, explained Crowe, the customer can count on him or her.

CONSISTENCY BUUILDS BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT "In building a relationship, it helps that customers know that you are a consistent person and sales person. They're looking for you, scheduling their time for you. If the DSR is consistent, arrives at the same time and day every week, customers will be more prepared to sit down and do business with him," he elaborated.

After a two-year stint with the regional Sysco Corp. company, Crowe, having forged a solid reputation in the marketplace, was drafted by Wood Fruitticher to replace a retiring sales rep. He decided to leave Sysco for a smaller regional because after two years management split the territory that he had built from scratch.

At Wood Fruitticher, he found an appealing family atmosphere, in which even the owners, Dave and John Wood, are constantly present to provide guidance, support and instructions.

"The two owners are still involved on a daily basis. From top to bottom, everybody is concerned about service," Crowe said. "It's a great place to work. I've had offers from other companies but I couldn't imagine working for anyone else in the food business."

Singling out the distributorship's focus on service, Crowe indicated that many sales reps have been with the firm for more than two decades. He said the company's business philosophy cultivates the reps' desire to turn their careers into lifelong commitments to Wood Fruitticher.

"Their philosophy is that sales people are the key to a successful food company. Sales reps build relationships, they do a good job, give customers a fair price, are honest and Wood Fruitticher backs them up. That's a successful formula for a long-term relationship. It works," he said.

UniPro Foodservice, Inc., Atlanta, figures highly in the company's growth, he added, with sales growing from \$47 million, when he started, to \$200 million this year.

< AND FOOTBALL WITH TERRITORY>Crowe's territory is mostly rural though a large portion of his accounts are located in Tuscaloosa, home to the University of Alabama. The town has a population of 150,000, which swells to 250,000 on a good Crimson Tide football weekend. Since Mercedes built an SVU plant near town eight years ago, the economy has been booming.

Sixty-five percent of his accounts are healthcare establishments with the remainder independent restaurants, including upscale steak and seafood, diners and regional burger and wings chains. Despite the apparent disparity in customers, they are united by his consulting skills.

His healthcare accounts require him to be knowledgeable in food cost, inventory control and new products.

"In healthcare you deal with patient per day cost. Operators want to spend a certain budget on each patient per day because they are reimbursed in that manner. They want good quality food but they need to stay within their budgets. Consequently, there is a lot of consulting, not just selling," he said.

Furthermore, healthcare sales are not as rote or mundane as it seems. Crowe indicated that he works closely with Wood Fruitticher's dietician and procurement department to bring the most economical, healthy and high-quality products to the table. Since being involved in this market segment, the distributorship has stocked so-called healthy drinks and snacks for their customers. They even sell products that hasten healing of wounds, he added.

"Another important issue with dieticians is weight loss. We stock a 200-cal. liquid that is taken with medicine that is now a foodservice item. There are many more things available now in foodservice that can be helpful to healthcare facilities," he said.

Crowe works closely with his district sales manager, the company's dieticians and buyers in preparing successful bids. Then he assures his customers that he's going to give them prices that are good, fair, solid and consistent.

"When I give them a price, I'm not going to increase it \$2 next week. I might not be the cheapest guy but I'm going to be consistent over the long run. My customers are going to save money by buying from us and they're going to know what they're paying," he said.

FOOD COST, QUALITY, SERVICE ARE KEY Crowe has found that on the commercial side, food cost and quality are the top-of-mind issues. Occasionally, it is difficult, he said, to satisfy his independent customers' requests for good and inexpensive products.

"Restaurants want to have something that is easy to look at, tastes good and is feasible to serve in the realm of their food costs," he observed.

Service and delivery are additional not-too-distant concerns, he added, noting that restaurateurs need their regular deliveries but healthcare operators that have larger storage rooms may not need

weekly drop offs.

While there may be differences between the segments, Crowe said, both require the same amount of his preparation time and attention to detail. Independents demand more creativity to attract patrons who immediately pay for service but in healthcare, with its larger staff, he continued, once the deal is done, everything else takes care of itself.

“When considering a new item for an independent, you have to consider whether it’s feasible for the operator to prepare it. If the operator orders 200 items for lunch, will he have the time to serve all of them? Is the product’s holding time adequate? Does the product have eye appeal,” Crowe stated.

His first hint that his customers need guidance with food cost surfaces when his customers begin complaining that the price they’re paying for the products is not in line with their food costs. That’s when he puts on his consultant’s cap and diligently explains to his customers what is actually happening with the menu and the cash register.

“Ninety-five percent of the time, food cost is not based on what operators pay,” he said. Crowe first examines how his customers handle the products, whether there is waste and how much they are charging for the items. He has found that oftentimes operators are underpricing their menus and consequently, if the pricing is not high enough, they aren’t making the profit that they’re expecting.

“Then we rearrange their menus, look at their plates, look at the items that they’re selling, their most profitable items first and then their least profitable items. We work the menu to steer patrons to most profitable items. We try to move the unprofitable items off the menu or find a way to make it more profitable. It’s not brain surgery. Once I get the ‘MO’ of the customer and what he’s trying to do, I can advise them to stop pushing high food cost products or raise their price,” he related.

Crowe, who admitted that he learned costing by listening to his operators, chefs, managers and dieticians, seeks to keep his customers’ food costs in the profit-generating 33-34% range.

LONG-TIME RELATIONSHIP Some 85% of Crowe’s customers, according to his tally, have been with him for 20 years and he’s the prime vendor for nearly all of them. In that time, he has grown up and learned with them, and witnessed their expansion.

Having developed a close relationship with all of them, Crowe is ready to step in and help any of his accounts when they’re tied up with other matters. He has managed one friend’s restaurant when she had to take care of a pressing personal issue and taken care of another operator’s delivery when she was detracted from pressing “enter” on her on-line order.

“My customers know that when I tell them that Wood Fruitticher and I are going to fix something, then we’re going to fix it. If we can’t, then we will sit down with them and tell them why and discuss others options that could help,” he said.

Crowe, who underlined that he would rather work smarter than harder, is an advocate of penetrating existing accounts rather than cold calling. His basic explanation is that it is more profitable for everybody concerned.

“Account penetration is the only way to go. It makes more sense to the customer and the company,” he explained. “If you have a driver who’s dropping off \$500 of food and you’re not selling the operator any paper, smallwares, chemicals or produce, then you’re just killing your company. You’re also not making the profit that you should be making. You can give the customer better deals when they’re buying \$5,000 from you.”

A DSR can’t repair a bad reputation.

In addition to sales, Crowe spends time lecturing on foodservice at a local college, where his favorite lesson is that an inattentive restaurateur can lose his life’s savings very quickly.

“If you go into the restaurant business under funded and without knowledge of food, labor and overhead costs, then you can go bankrupt quickly,” he cautions aspiring restaurateurs.

According to his DSM Reid Frazier, Crowe is also a very talented singer, who has a weekly Christian television show that is seen across the United State and in many foreign countries. Crowe sings with the gospel group Poet's Voices and travels across the country on weekends, performing in churches and concert halls.

Just as he brings his foodservice knowledge to college students, Crowe also brings his signing talent to his foodservice customers by entertaining the residents in his nursing home accounts.

With a treasure chest of foodservice experiences, the one that he passes on to rookie DSRs is honesty.

"If you want to be successful in this business and have a long-term career, you can only achieve it with honesty. If you don't treat people fairly, eventually it will catch up with you and your customers will drop you and won't let you back in," he advises new DSRs. "If you stab your customer in the back or if he catches you lying about prices, they won't let you return. A DSR can't repair a bad reputation."