

COSTA HELPS 'FSDS' NAVIGATE GOV'T NUTRITION REGS



Along the Way, Distributor Makes Healthy Food 'Cool' For School Kids

NEW YORK – Costa Fruit & Produce, Boston, is reaping success with its unique IMOVE program for schools by helping their foodservice directors navigate the complicated government nutritional regulations and simultaneously making cafeteria food “cool” for school age consumers.

“Foodservice directors have a great challenge in developing menus that have great eye appeal and flavor, are nutritious and meet extremely low cost criteria,” observed Mike Scuderi, marketing director for the distributorship, in a recent interview with ID Access.

While the task can be accomplished, Scuderi said, it is difficult because of everyone’s high expectations. Since children eat out with their parents, both of them want a restaurant experience even in school cafeterias, he continued. Furthermore, organics and all-natural food have caught everyone’s attention.

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“We teach foodservice directors and their staffs that they need to start thinking about how they present food, a process that is a very big part of the success,” he said, noting that even in a cafeteria line kids eat with their eyes.

For more than three years, Costa Fruit & Produce, an ID Top 50 distributorship, has been achieving both tasks – offering schools nutritious and appealing meals while providing school kids with the positive reinforcement that they need to make healthy selections.

“It’s a turnkey program. Schools get 38 weeks of menus for which they have all of the nutritional analysis and presentation guides. We give them all of the order forms that will make ordering simple and easy. It takes a lot of effort to research and buy products that are nutritious. We make it easy for them with a simpler order form,” Scuderi said.

Costa Fruit & Produce rings up 35.8% of its volume from school accounts. This academic year 14 middle schools – sixth, seventh and eighth graders – were involved in the program, with a total enrollment of 12,000 students from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

Scuderi said the program works outside the traditional sales presentation by starting at the director and manager level. He said the distributorship has contacts with some 1,100 schools across New England, comprising 340 school districts. As he pointed out, the distributorship has been “rubbing shoulders” with foodservice directors at conferences for 25 years.

“We talk with them about the industry rather than what kind of products we can sell them. We felt there was a need for listening to our customers. We tend to be more proactive,” he said.

The selling and education doesn’t start and stop in the cafeteria, he said. The process includes the foodservice director, school administration, principal, health teacher and nurse.

“We reach out and partner with them, and ask them to make this an all-encompassing program that doesn’t stop in the cafeteria. Consequently, IMOVE becomes part of the school culture,” he said.

Success is predicated on back and front-of-the-house tactics, Scuderi said. The menus are “nutritionally dense” and meet or exceed USDA requirements. For example, IMOVE meals are less than 25% calories from fat compared with the government’s 30%.

“We set them up with menus, which helps them save labor because not only do they have menus but also complete nutritional analyses of every item in every meal in the program,” he said.

Six Monday selections, for example, include: Golden Chicken Nugget with dipping sauce, steamed white rice, fresh fruit and 1% milk; Double Stack Quesadilla with fruit ambrosia, chocolate ice cream and 1% milk; Taco Bar with corn nibbiets, chocolate pudding, fresh fruit and 1% milk; Chicken Sandwich with assorted toppings, herbed green beans, fresh fruit and 1% milk; Breakfast 4 Lunch with French toast, sliced ham, maple-flavored syrup, orange smiles and 1% milk; and Turkey Sausage and Egg with cheese bagel sandwich, fresh fruit and 1% milk.

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After meeting with the school staff and sending letters to the parents, the process moves to the front of the house – or rather cafeteria. Kids can win awards or positive reinforcement for making healthy selections rather than the daily alternatives.

“Every time a child makes a healthy choice or IMOVE, he or she earns chances to win prizes. We present prizes every month of the school year based on raffle tickets. Then in January and June we award grand prizes,” Scuderi said.

While the distributorship, which is a member of Pro*Act, has always provided school foodservice directors with nutritional guidance and training, this hands-on approach has been more successful, he noted.

“We’ve always provided that service. This is just another avenue. It motivates the staff to garnish meals with fresh produce and greens. The goal is to bring fresh fruit and vegetables to the forefront of the cafeteria as opposed to the end of the line, where it’s a second thought,” he said.

The distributorship is working with New England organizations to bring the program effectively to as many schools as possible, without tying itself to any single supplier’s product. Scuderi said the company would rather focus on the best menu that can be offered to the children.

“It has had great impact but we still have a lot to do. We’ve seen kids make better choices and we’ve seen it in the movement of our products through purchases of healthy snacks, fresh fruit and produce,” he said.

Costa Fruit & Produce has also benefited by being seen as a proactive, cutting-edge distributorship and dealing with customer needs, as well as industry and social trends, Scuderi said.

“People like to do business with companies that do good things. We do benefit from that,” he said. “Foodservice directors want to focus on a distributor that understands their needs, follows industry trends, has a wellness program in place, helps train their staffs as to what those programs are and how to use them. It’s great for business partnerships,” he added.

Scuderi said the company is developing a business relationship with a large New England healthcare company that could expand IMOVE to 50 more schools next year, taking the company “to places where we never thought we’d be.”