

# THE PATHS TO BETTER SERVICE

Want to know the secret to better equipment service? Consider your service agents operating partners who have a vested interest in your success.

By Janice Cha

When your main fryer breaks down right before the Saturday evening rush, who do you call? Will they come right away? And will they have the right parts to make the fix?

Since equipment breakdowns and maintenance are inevitable, it pays to develop your service and repair strategy as carefully as you plan your menu. Readiness and real information are two of the cornerstones leading to successful equipment servicing for multiunit restaurants.

But it all starts with relationships, and equipment spec/buyers got advice on how to develop them during the "How to Get Service Done in a Multiunit Environment" session of *FER*'s recent MUFES for Fast-Growing Chains meeting. Panelists Don Campbell, construction project manager for Hardee's Food Systems, and Wes Tyler, president of North American Commercial Parts & Service, were on the same page when talk turned to developing good communication with service agents before you need to call them.

"If you wait until you need [a service agent], you're already in trouble," said Tyler. "Service agents have got to be part of the operating team running your restaurants. They have to know your brand, equipment and expectations."

Campbell, whose past experience includes serving as senior director of facilities management for Boddie-Noell Enterprises, a Hardee's franchisee with about 330 restaurants, seconded the point. "You have to develop a relationship with a service agent so that late at night, you have someone to call when things break down," he said. "If they think they're only going to get the 2 a.m. Saturday night calls, they're not going to be supportive. You have to guarantee steady work."

More to the point, if your concept is unknown to area servicers, you're putting yourself at greater risk when equipment goes down.

"When you enter our market, we often haven't heard of your concept, don't know you are coming and don't know your equipment package," Tyler said to the room full of multiunit operators. He suggested that operators acquire from manufacturers a list of must-have spare parts to keep in inventory and then share the list with their main service agent.

But no service company will be able to stock everything, Tyler cautioned. "Some of the control boards are fragile and cost \$1,000. That's tough to keep on trucks. If you routinely need a key piece, you'll need to negotiate with your service company."

As with any good relationship, communication is key. "The number-one reason for poor service is the company doesn't know what you want," Tyler said.

And please try not to play the field, he added. "If you, as an operator, have been calling different service companies to fix

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equipment, you're reducing your chances that they to have the right parts on hand when they drive up to your door," Tyler said. "You're also losing out on tracking service history for a given piece of equipment."

## Ready, Steady, Right Parts

Having the right parts ready for the job spells the difference between a first-time fix and a return visit.

"We would make more money if every call were completed on first visit," Tyler said. "Foodservice is unique in that some 75% of parts sold per year are only sold once. The biggest challenge [to service companies] is carrying parts in inventory that don't sell."

Campbell agreed with Tyler's points, and then drawing on his 20+ years of experience at Boddie-Noell, described how the company's in-house service team handled the parts challenge.

"Even our in-house service agents can't possibly carry everything they need on the trucks. But we were certainly trying. The Boddie-Noell trucks kept carrying more and more parts, a huge inventory that practically filled the truck," Campbell said. "We resolved to reduce inventory by about half, so we created a centrally located depot to hold all the key parts. When a part was taken from depot, a new one would be ordered to replace it."

Ongoing training classes for service providers was another key part of Campbell's strategy. "We held training programs sponsored by manufacturers," he said. "We made a point of inviting both our in-house service people and also local service agents to the classes."

Along with the open training classes, Campbell is a firm believer in the power of after-hours networking.

"How many of you have an ongoing dialogue with your service agents *before* something breaks?" Campbell asked the room. "We did that regularly with our service agents. Three or four times a year, we'd bring all managers and service agents together for a big party. It gives you a chance to solve issues before the next incident. I encourage you all to get to know your service people."

## Gather Data, Track Progress

Campbell's equipment repair database at Boddie-Noell is about as comprehensive as they come. It tracks equipment repairs at sev-

eral hundred stores in five states, and has served as the backbone of the service department for more than 25 years.

The company uses an alpha-numeric code system to record all repair work. "That lets us code every piece of equipment, plus its location, maintenance history and serial number," Campbell says. "We spent a long time recording information, and as we build new stores, we refer to that information as part of the new build. Sure, it's time consuming up front but it sure is worthwhile."

The hard part lies in gathering just enough data to do the job, and no more. "A person who's too anal retentive can accumulate too much data, which then becomes cumbersome and falls by the wayside," Campbell cautioned.

Sharing the data with other people in your company is equally important. Take preventive maintenance, for example. "You can use the data to help explain to senior management why something is crit-

ical," Campbell said.

However, Campbell has learned the hard way that communicating information requires a little finesse if you actually want people to act on it. Throw in some humor and you'll go even further. Campbell relies on cartoon-style drawings to guide his operations group in cost-saving measures.

"Cartoons work much better than e-mails, text and faxes," said Campbell, whose team would create the cartoon messages and send them out to units in the form of small posters. "The pictures are a meaningful, low-cost way to get people to look at the information."

### The Warranty Quandary

Warranty calls can be a service company's biggest asset and also its biggest headache. Ditto for operators. "They're probably the closest we come to government work," Tyler said wryly.

"Service companies want to represent a manufacturer because it's great market-

ing," Tyler continued. "We want to work for you during warranty because we want to continue doing work when the warranty period is up.

"That said, many of the so-called warranty calls are actually due to installation errors, and each manufacturer has different requirements for handling warranty calls. In that situation it can be challenging for a service agent to get paid, and we can get caught in the middle."

Tyler stresses to anyone opening new restaurants to always bring in a fresh pair of eyes to serve as the final installation inspector. "This should definitely be a different person than your main installer. Otherwise, problems could go undetected for a long time."

Campbell agreed, then added a final thought: "Your punch list should include a list of all authorized warranty service agents to turn over to the operator when the restaurant opens, so those agents can continue to serve that restaurant." ●