Mobile Cafe, or Just the Roach Coach? 

Behind the Scenes of the Mobile Food Service at Your Job Site

By Michael J. Major

One of the most important aspects of your workday—one you think about the least—that mobile food service wagon that greets you early in the morning with coffee and doughnuts and provides you with snacks during your breaks, and even full breakfasts, lunches and dinners when you need them.

What are these businesses like? What goes on inside them? And what motivates people to do this kind of work? To tell you the truth, we had no idea what the answers to these questions might be. But we were curious, and thought you might be too. So we did a little investigating, and this is what we found.

Bigger Than You Thought

First of all, as reported by Kelly Ramirez, executive director, Mobile Industrial Caterers Association, International, Anaheim, Calif., this is a $5 billion industry. “Most people don’t realize the scope of it,” Ramirez says. “Subconsciously, they know it’s there, but they don’t realize it’s an industry.” One reason this industry is generally not well known is that its operators generally don’t do much advertising. “When we’re in the yellow pages, we’re grouped with caterers who do parties,” Ramirez says.

The strange thing is that much of the industry is also invisible to itself. MICA, as the industry association, represents only about 150 members in the United States, Canada and Australia. True, these are the largest members, which operate about 35,000 trucks, nearly 5,000 in the Los Angeles area. But there are countless other smaller “mom and pop” industrial caterers who do not know about association, and the association does not know about them.

Some of these businesses can grow quite large, which puts them in a professional arena considerably removed from the mom-and-pops. But even these larger businesses started from the same mom-and-pop roots, and retain much of their original orientation.

“Most of the companies are family owned and entrepreneurial in spirit,” Ramirez says. “Big companies have tried to move in this business but have failed. It’s a very street-wise business, and that’s why it remains in the hands of the people who work on the street and know what goes on in the street.”

Douglas George, president, Douglas Foods Corporation, Garden City, Mich., agrees. “It’s a hands-on, not a corporate board business,” he says. “One of the largest, a 500-truck company, sold itself to a large corporation and then had to buy itself back.”

The typical association operator has about 30 trucks. Some operators have their own trucks and discover their own routes, while buying their products from a commissary. Others also own both their trucks and their own commissary. More typical, at least for association members, is that the company owns the commissary, routes and trucks, and leases the latter two to independent agents. These agents shop at the commissary but otherwise run their businesses any way they want, including setting their own prices. This is typical of 90 percent of the businesses, George estimates.

5,000 Sandwiches Made a Day

George started his business in 1963, and now has 45 mobile units plus 15 hot wagons, which are, in effect, mobile cafeterias with full cooking units. His commissary makes 5,000 sandwiches a day.

“The business has been good for
me,” George says. “I’ve been doing it 31 years, and it’s challenging. There’s always another sandwich to make.” He has an automated cleaning process for his contractors’ trucks, and solves a lot of the mechanics for them, so they put in only nine hours a day, less than many others.

It’s a hard business, though; the fatality rate is high. “Five years ago there were 10 main players in the area, and five dropped out, with the remaining five picking up that business,” George says.

“It’s a challenging business for sure,” says Roy LaCroix, chief executive officer of LaCroix Food Services, West Warwick, R.I., who has been in the business for 20 years. “To be successful you have to be a person who can start yourself without someone else pushing. The hours are long and destructive for a standard way of living. We open the plant between 2:30 and 3 a.m. People have to go to bed early, and it changes their night life and family life.”

Weather plays critical part, especially in the northeast, LaCroix says. In the winter there might be too much snow, in the summer it might be too hot, or it might be too windy to blow concrete. The operator can drive in poor weather conditions to reach the site only to find the job has been called off. “You never make up for a lost day,” LaCroix says.

Some operators branch out to other events, such as
weekend dog or horse shows, school, fairs or other gatherings. “Any place where there are people, people are usually ready to eat,” LaCroix says. However, once an operator has a route, he has to stick with it. “Workers’ stomachs are timed,” LaCroix says. “If they’re looking for a break at 9 a.m., you can’t be there at 8:30 or 9:30.”

Another difficulty is meeting all of the customers’ schedules, for they tend to want their breaks and lunches at the same time. “Fortunately, many companies have some flexibility,” LaCroix says, “generally the larger, and unionized contractors are the more demanding.”

The name of the game is to build customer loyalty during a single job and then be invited back to the next. Large projects like airports and bridges can take years, shorter jobs as little as a month, while most last from six to nine months.

Generational Business

Johnson’s Industrial Caterers is the oldest outfit of its kind in the United States. President Bob Johnson says, “My grandpa and grandma made sandwiches and sold them through the fence at the International Harvester Company where they made tractors.” Johnson now has almost 100 trucks serving industrial plants and construction sites. “Some of our industrial accounts have been with us since the 1930s,” he says.

Most operators start small, like his grandparents, but not very many continue to grow from generation to generation. “Most operators are small, and they come and go,” Johnson says. Like other large outfits, Johnson leases his routes to independent contractors, but gives them their trucks, rather than leases them, to save on the sales tax. “Like any other business it’s hard work, but the contractors will make $25,000 to $45,000 a year.” While the 100 contractors work an average nine-hour day, Johnson’s own employees average seven.

“We offer a complete menu, all
kinds of sandwiches, salads and four dinner plates. We produce 150 different kinds of sandwiches, which we alternate. Anything we sell on Monday, we don’t sell on Tuesday. This lets the customer know he’s getting a fresh product,” Johnson explains.

It’s been a good business for Johnson, who has shown an increase every year for the past 20 years. “This year it’s up almost 20 percent because of increased construction,” he says.

Johnson, almost 72 years old, has been on the job since 1939. Now, his son and daughter, the fourth generation, are working in it.

“We all love it,” he says. “We wait on 25 people a minute, which is a lot faster than a vending machine, and what we offer is a lot fresher.”

Another well-established outfit is Stover’s Kitchens, Inc., which is the largest industrial caterer in the Pacific Northwest. The company has been working for more than 51 years out of Seattle, with branches now in Everett and Tacoma, Wash. Stover’s has more than 125 employees and some 100-plus independent operators.

As in most other businesses of this kind, Stover’s Kitchens provides the commissary from which the drivers purchase most of their food, as well as dry goods, at wholesale prices.

“This makes the shopping convenient for them,” says Steve Sposari, vice president, mobile catering. “We’re here to help them and give them advice, but each operator makes his own decisions in terms of what he stocks and what his prices are, which can vary from truck to truck.”

Unlike many of the other mobile caterers, Stover’s operates 24 hours a day, which means it can relate to any type of job situation any time of
the day or night. A large array of breakfasts are offered, including omelets, egg sandwiches, french toast and burritos. There are more than 100 different types of sandwiches, including deli and hot sandwiches. Other entrees range from soup to full lunches and dinners, anything from spaghetti and meatballs to a roast turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

“It’s a highly competitive business, and there are a number of restrictions, since you can be in only one place at one time,” says Sposari. “We take it upon ourselves to go out and find new routes, which we lease to the drivers. This saves them the time and effort of marketing for new business, and we all gain from the added business. We’ll serve any size site. It could be five guys, or 500.”

As to the type of person who gets into this kind of work, Sporsari says, “All sorts of people get involved, but the characteristics they share is that they work hard, are disciplined and are able to adjust to a lot of different factors.”

“You have to be in the right place at the right time,” he continued, “and that can make for a pressure-paced day. An operator can make from 10 to 35 stops per day. But the main thing is that someone who works in this kind of business is a people-oriented person, who can develop a rapport and keep it going.”

Sposari himself started in the business in 1979 and has been with it all his adult life, for the past three years being in management.

“There’s nothing I dislike about the business, and I want to see it continue to thrive,” he says. “But what I do miss by being in management is not seeing the same customers every day. Some of the best friends I have I’ve met on my route. It’s like going out every day and setting up the corner cafe.” CD

About the Author
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