

Instilling Pride in Operators

By Ihor Dlaboha; Photography by Jonathan Nourok

Hardworking and creative independent operators deserve their rightful place under the sun and October's ID DSR of the Month Giselle "Gigi" Woodhead of Jacmar Foodservice Distribution, Irwindale, CA, is doing everything possible to make sure that they get exactly what they merit.

Woodhead, who has been a sales rep for more than 13 years, is convinced that by instilling her operator-customers with a feeling of pride in their restaurants, menus and accomplishments not only will they grow their businesses but also, ultimately, this will reflect positively on her sales.

ID DSR Profile

Giselle 'Gigi' Woodhead
Jacmar Foodservice Distribution
Irwindale, CA

"Gigi"

Woodhead, right, works on building her customers' pride in their restaurants. Here Tony Turski of Stadium Pizza in Redhawk, Temecula, CA, listens to her encouragements.

Years as DSR

13.5

Annual Dollar Sales

\$5.2

million

Number of Accounts

54

Territory

Riverside

County, CA

Calls on Average Day

8-10

Types of Accounts

Pizzeria,

Italian family dining, deli

Products Carried

Broadline,

specializing in Italian, Mexican and other markets

Number of Items

5,000-plus

Sales "High"

Succuessfully

suggesting a new item or upgrading a customer to a better quality and better yield product.

Sales "Low"

Despite

my better efforts to make sure that my customers get everything they need, something beyond my control happens.

Favorite Food

Pizza,

Mexican and Persian

Favorite Movie & Book

"Shawshank

Redemption," "Forest Gump" and "Sound of Music"

Role Model

My

father

Hobbies/Free Time

Running

my daughters around and eating and shopping.

Special Dinner companion

All
of my family and friends
Mojo Motto
Deal
with it; fix it and move on.

"If they're proud of what they're doing, of how they're presenting their products and their restaurants, their patrons will know it. Then they'll come back despite competitors' temporary coupons because my operators' products' quality is consistent," Woodhead said in a recent interview with ID Access.

Woodhead began working in the foodservice industry in the 1980s, experiencing different tasks and responsibilities as she built her skills. She was a wait staffer, marketer, banquet and wedding coordinator, bar and dining room manager, and unit general manager. The only job that she didn't have, Woodhead admitted, was kitchen manager.

In 1983-91, she worked at a small Southern California Mexican chain that grew from 10 to 18 units, when she left. "I got a pretty good taste of everything," she said.

"They see that I don't just come to take their money." The skills and insights that she learned on the operator's side of the aisle turned out to be very beneficial in her further foodservice career. Today Woodhead is able to convey to her customers the advice and knowledge that she accumulated through those experiences.

"It takes my awareness level even higher. I don't come into a restaurant as a customer but as an owner or operator. I see things that the operator may have forgotten about. If I see a light bulb out, I'd say something because the restaurant requires lightning for the proper ambiance," she explained.

NO DISINTERESTED ORDER TAKER IS SHE

Taking to heart the business motto of owning a project or job, Woodhead keeps her eyes peeled for out-of-the-ordinary problems or questionable food safety behavior at her customers' locations. By pointing them out to her busy clients in the course of her 20-30-minute call, Woodhead demonstrates that she is more than a disinterested ordering-taking sales rep. Concern for the fate of her customers becomes a major part of her consultative process.

"If it's too cold or the music is too loud or the tables are dirty or the employees are hanging around idly, I'll make a comment," Woodhead said. "Sometimes operators get so caught up in what they're focused on that they forget the things that the patrons see. They're focused on the food, the operation or the prep and they don't have the luxury of having managers doing the work for them."

Therefore, Woodhead becomes her customers' freelance manager, looking out for irregularities, and, in this manner, she continues to implant pride in her operators.

After their initial amazement that she said something when she saw something, Woodhead said her customers are genuinely appreciative and take steps to correct the problem.

"They see that I don't just come to take their money. I'm trying to help them," she said. "I'm not the pushy salesman. If there something that I have that could make life easier for them, then I suggest it to them."

After a satisfying operator career, Woodhead taught foodservice at a high school regional occupational program for 18 months before her good friend suggested that she apply for a DSR job at ID Top 50 Jacmar.

"It was a scary transition. I was in sales and with people so that wasn't an issue. However, Jacmar's Italian specialty wasn't my expertise, it was Mexican. While I was worried in the beginning, now it's second nature," she recalled. "The food business is part of me. It gets into the blood of people in the foodservice industry. Even if you'd have a transfusion, you still couldn't eliminate it."

DEMONSTRATIONS, RIDE WITHS HELP GAIN PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE

Through new product demonstrations and vendor ride withs, Woodhead quickly got up to speed about pizzeria and other Italian products and markets. Woodhead's sales achievements were recognized by her management as well as by Pochontas Foods USA, Richmond, VA, of which Jacmar is a member. She was invited to attend the marketing group's first Top Gun Academy for successful DSRs in 1999.

Referring to the training as a great experience, Woodhead, who also attended the following year's Top Gun Academy, took to heart a very important lesson, enunciated by John Gray, former president of the International Foodservice Distributors Association, Falls Church, VA.

Speaking on the topic "Foodservice 2010: America's Appetite Matures," Gray opened her eyes to the relevance of what she called planting seeds now for the future.

"That's what I do with my customers. It's not about the quick fix for today; it's about keeping your customer base for the long term. You have to spend money to make money. You have to present a quality product to get the patrons to come back," she observed.

This concept, too, neatly folds into her consultative concept of imbuing pride in her customers. Woodhead regularly explains to them that stocking and menuing inexpensive food does not do the operator credit nor does it grow his business. With an eye toward her and their enduring business relationships, Woodhead patiently instructs them on the benefits of high-quality products and good-naturedly coaches them on upgrading their menus.

All of Woodhead's 54 accounts are predominantly one or two-unit independent operators. She also has one five-unit and one 10-unit independent chain that have been her clients for a dozen years. She believes that she is prime vendor for about 70% of her accounts.

Her territory, Riverside County, runs the economic gamut of very wealthy and low-income communities, where increasing fuel and commodity costs have created a difficult environment for foodservice operators.

As for all successful DSRs, developing relationships is a major part of their achievements, even if they originally began on an awkward foot.

PROSPECT HELPS WITH MISSING PRODUCT

Woodhead vividly recalls an incident that occurred years ago, when her regular customer was shorted a critical product. "He needed it right then and I couldn't get to the warehouse to pick it up and there was no way for us to send a van. I thought for a moment and decided to go to a prospect for help; not a customer, but a prospect," she remembers.

Woodhead had been calling on this prospect from time to time but hadn't secured any orders. However, she was confident that she had developed enough of a trusting relationship that she felt she could borrow the missing product from him. She promised to return it at the crack of dawn, and he, much to her surprise, accommodated her request. "What was the result? My current customer was happy because he knew he was my priority and he was being taken care of. The prospect saw how my customers were my priorities. He saw the service that my customers were receiving from me, something that, apparently, he wasn't receiving from his supplier," Wood related. "I visited him again a couple of weeks later and he said that he has an order for me. It wasn't a huge order but in those days I was taking everything."

That was 12 years ago and the nine-unit chain is still her account.

Taking small orders and working with all types of operators is another hallmark of Woodhead's career, which, she said, saw many \$300 customers turn into \$3,000 ones.

"It takes a little bit of sacrifice on the DSR's part to let the customers know that they're important, whether they're big or small," she said. "The little guys are important because that's how you build. That's how I built my \$5 million business."

For Woodhead, the consultative approach is nothing more than doing her job properly — the fun and exciting part of it, she pointed out.

"Knowing that something will work, suggesting it and then going for it. If it does, great. Then you know that you're part of that menu and restaurant," Woodhead said, quickly adding that if it doesn't work "you suggest something else."