

## Leaving Nothing On The Table

Thinking back to the first call he made as a rookie DSR, Kosmas "Kos" Christidis remembers leaving on the verge of tears. "I walked into one of the roughest customers. He chewed me up one side and down the other just for coming into his restaurant. I wasn't prepared for that," says Christidis. "I composed myself, walked back in the next day and told him I didn't appreciate the way he'd treated me and that I could be a future customer of his. That was what started me feeling confident about handling tough sales situations."

Kosmas "Kos" Christidis

Maines Paper & Food Service

Conklin, NY

Over his 20-year sales career, the past 14 with Maines, Christidis has experienced far more ups than downs. His confidence these days is unflappable, and with good reason. He's built a \$22-million territory, \$7 million from traditional street accounts and the balance from Wegmans supermarkets that feature extensive retail foodservice programs. Where Christidis is in the picture, competitors don't have great odds: He's prime vendor in 98 percent of his accounts, a product of a patient, persistent sales approach that strives to leave nothing on the table.

His Wegmans business is illustrative of that approach. "Some 13 years ago I started servicing one department in one Wegmans store and slowly penetrated the business. I now service eight departments in 30 stores," he says. "Each department is almost like an independent restaurant within the store. They range from sushi, to deli, sub sandwiches, stir-fry, seafood, coffee and cheese to prepared foods for takeout and catering."

While many distributors would transition such business to a national accounts department, the fact that Christidis has held onto it is testament both to his role in building it and his ability to service it while still taking care of street customers. Those run the gamut from independent restaurants and Greek diners like the one Christidis' father owned, to upscale and casual dining restaurants, sports foodservice, senior living facilities and country clubs/resorts.

He points to his strong work ethic and drive to help customers succeed as his greatest strengths as a DSR. He also never punches out. "I never decline an opportunity to help a customer. That's what they expect from me, what they know of me," he says. "And help comes in many forms, from actual manual help to consulting on how to grow their business

and providing the tools to do it."

Christidis draws on many resources to help customers, from product specialists to brokers and manufacturer reps, and even other customers. "I listen hard to identify needs and then determine what I can bring to the table. If I've helped customers with similar needs, I'll share what worked, what didn't, and I'll put them in touch with those customers so they can network and learn from each other."

Lately, he's been transitioning many of his accounts to online order entry, freeing up more of his time for consulting. He's also focused on recommending value-added, third-party services that Maines offers at a discount, services such as loyalty card programs, e-mail marketing, Web site upgrades that enable patrons to order online, and online hiring solutions. It's all part of continually adjusting his strategy to meet changing customer needs and finding ways to apply new technologies for their benefit, he says. "Getting a customers' business is really just the beginning. I'm prime vendor for my customers, yes, but it then falls on me to help them grow their business. These are some of the newer ways that I'm trying to do that."

Years as a DSR  
20 (14 with Maines)

Annual sales volume  
\$22 million

No. of active accounts  
65

Type of accounts  
Family, casual dining, senior living, sports, fine dining, resort/golf, supermarket foodservice

Territory  
Street, greater Rochester, NY; chain, five N.E. states

No. items carried  
16,000 plus

Biggest attributes  
Identifying needs and matching products/services to those needs. Constant availability.

Favorite category  
Fresh produce

Learned the hard way  
Never boast to competitors

Always  
Service customers wherever, whenever, however. Listen to needs and complaints. Adjust your strategy to help grow their businesses.

#### Never

Get complacent, assume you know what's best or let customers get out of terms.

#### Best thing about being a DSR

Partnering up with great people who become great partners in life. It's all good.

#### Worst thing

Time with family always includes business.

#### Top Trends Seen

Growing demand for value-added products and simple, fresh comfort foods. Appetizer combos as entrees.

#### Mojo Motto

Ask for what you want, then ask for more.