



Dante Lewis, Nichella DiFelicantonio, Gina Lewis, Natalie Promish of North American Produce



Bobby Medoff, RJ Durante and Frank McDonald of Nardella



Mark and Tracee Levin of M. Levin



Front Row (L-R): Alfredo Galan, Mike Keen, David DiPascale, Mario DiFebbo. Back Row (L-R): Paul Matthews, Sid Richardson, Mike McCormick, Bob Zimnicki, Dave King of Proccoli Brothers and Garden State Farms



Mark Levin, Brian Kolbeck, Ryan Miller, Pete Gabrielle and Joe Annata of M. Levin Sales



Jessica Kean, Teddy Kean III and Louis Kean of E.W. Kean



Margie Flechman of M. Levin and Company

markets because of food safety concerns," Proccaci says.

The cold chain integrity and cleanliness of PWPMS facility becomes more relevant with each day, says Frank McDonald, sales at Nardella. "Years ago, requirements may not have been as strict, but now everything is inspected and big buyers are stringent," he says. "It's about knowing what we're getting, how it's handled, and what we're giving to the customer."

CUSTOMER CHANGES

PWPM's customer base remains steady yet diverse. "Our current customer base is comprised of wholesalers, retailers, independent chain stores, big box stores, foodservice distributors, as well as corner stores and bodegas," says Mark Levin, chief executive of M. Levin and Company. "Over the past 10 years, we have seen an increase in the number of customers who shop daily for their corner stores and bodegas."

NAPCO owner John DiFelicantonio says the customer base is different than decades ago, owing to consolidation of bigger chains. "This means less buyers on that level in general, but there are more people in the market from different parts of the world," he says. "There is also more electronic communication day in and day out, so more delivery services are required."

Technology and communication developments have affected the dynamic of how some

customers shop. "More customers are ordering via phone, email or text and getting it delivered to their store or warehouse," says Hickey.

John Colliotti, sales manager for Colliotti & Sons, emphasizes the need for solid relationships. "With customers coming in less and added deliveries — the relationship is more important than ever," he says. "Customers must trust the relationship they've built with us — that we'll get them what they need and what we've promised."

Ultimately, emphasizes Dan Vena, sales with John Vena Inc. (JVI), it's about serving customers the way they want to be served, and not the way it was done 25 years ago. "For example, years ago most ethnic customers were happy to come buy and load their own product," he says. "But now in the changing landscape, we have to look at how we make ourselves and our product available to them. While we still have customers walking the floor at 3 a.m., we also have more customers calling us at 3 p.m. asking questions or ordering."

Levin adds, "In our age of social media, with text messaging and emails — we are constantly connected," he says. "In a way it's good, we're always available to our customers through these venues — but in a way it's also bad, there's less face-to-face with our customers."

Tom Kovacevich, general manager at T.M. Kovacevich (TMK), deems the company's strength is in understanding the market and competitive forces. "The typical retail buyer has more and more on their plate, and their ability to trust us to know their business is key to our success," he says. "This is where we get to prove our value in steering our customers down the right path with proper offerings for their specific clientele."

OPENING NEW AVENUES

Market forces stimulate new pathways of service for PWPMS merchants. "Produce buyers are savvier and more educated than ever, and we do our best to keep up with trends in the industry, whether that means food safety certifications, faster and more efficient delivery, or value-added services," says PWPMS's Smith. "However, we never lose sight of the fact that old-fashioned customer

service never goes out of style."

John Vena reports the new facility has allowed him to do things that couldn't be done in the old market. "We have repacking and ripening facilities that require a higher food safety level," he says. "We've put in new software to manage purchase orders and bills of lading. We're better able to service the customer and make the order process more seamless."

Ripening represents another significant service area for some PWPMS businesses. "Our company has been in the ripening business for 113 years," says Levin. "We ripen and distribute more than 35,000 cases of bananas per week. We have a team of ripening veterans with our company for 30 plus years, and we pride ourselves on our ability to ripen bananas to our customers' specifications."

Embracing technology allows for forward movement, and E.W. Kean has been working to leverage various technologies. "We're working on making the ordering process as streamlined as possible, and we eventually plan to offer the option to place orders on our website for customers that might prefer that," says Kean. "We're also hoping to expand delivery. We've always had a customer-centric approach to everything we do and think this is the next step in satisfying our clients."

Ryco has implemented a warehouse management system (WMS). "We are working to barode every area of our facility and track movements of all product in the computer to improve the speed of service to our customers," says Colace. "With so many different commodities and brands, it can be time-consuming for team members to find and get product. After our WMS is implemented, we will begin our e-commerce initiative to give customers the ability to order online."

New packaging choice and forward distribution are other areas of expansion. "Proccaci is investing in a new bagger to move into more pouch-type options," says Maxwell. "We're listening to customer requests for more packaging possibilities. And, the transportation crunch has resulted in us doing more forward distribution for our partner-shippers."

Proccaci notes the company is also excited about developments at its storage busi-

ness NANCO. "In the near future, we'll be upgrading our packing and repacking facilities and putting in all new machinery and lines," he says. **pb**



JOHN VENA INC. CELEBRATING 100 YEARS

John Vena Inc. was started in 1919 by the first John Vena — a young, entrepreneurial immigrant from Sicily who decided to buy wine grapes from wholesalers at the Port of Philadelphia and resell them at the Dock Street produce market to support his family. A full century later, his legacy lives on. The wholesaler is still located in Philadelphia, and still family-owned and operated. The founder's grandson, John Vena III, is at the helm, and the fourth generation, Dan Vena, leads the sales team.

In honor of JVI's 100th Anniversary, the company has retooled its mission statement to capture the spirit of the team today and will soon roll out a new logo. "We are in the produce industry to make the business of food more interesting, more exciting, and ultimately more fun for our customers and their customers," says John Vena III, president. "We think that mission is at the core of what has kept us going for a century, and what will make us successful in the next 100 years."

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