

Brooks Food Group, Good food guys

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Many of America's most renowned food service chains choose Brooks Food Group as a supplier. Recently, David Lawrence got a taste of what the company does to keep expanding its sales and reputation



Brooks Food Group is unique. Several other US companies are known for their breaded vegetable products, such as onion rings or twisters. Others manufacture fine chicken products. But only Brooks is a major supplier for both these markets, serving customers as renowned as Burger King, Ruby Tuesdays, Red Lobster, and Wendy's. Efficiency and customer focus have been the twin keys to Brooks Food Group's remarkable success.

"Our family acquired Golden West Foods in July of 1995," chief executive officer Robin Brooks explained. "We liked the company because it had plenty of technical know-how and had proved itself over a period of 20 years. But it was operating at only 50 percent capacity at that time, and we felt that we could grow it significantly if we concentrated on improving its manufacturing capabilities, processes, and techniques.

"We also set out to improve on Golden West's customer focus, in providing value added product and developing our custom food solutions. This has meant we have been able to pass on efficiency benefits directly to customers, in terms of increased output and delivery, as well as by reducing our prices or keeping them stable. Brooks Food's annual sales have risen since 1995 from \$23 million to \$83 million."

Two years after acquiring Golden West, the Brooks family realized that capacity at their plant in Bedford, Virginia, would soon be running at maximum. So, in their first phase of strategic planning, they canvassed their existing customers about a possible move into the chicken product market. "The response from our market studies was extremely positive," Robin Brooks added, "and we started looking for another facility. By 1999, we had completely retrofitted a second plant in Monroe, North Carolina."

The Bedford facility, covering around 90,000 square feet, contains Brooks Food Group's corporate headquarters, R&D facilities, pilot production plant, and a test kitchen. Some 190 staff are employed there, with around 170 more working in Monroe. "Both our plants are equipped in essentially the same way," company president Bob Lauffenburger explained, "and each has the same manufacturing capabilities. This allows us outstanding flexibility of production and both facilities are USDA inspected to guarantee our high standards."

Brooks Food Group's output can be divided, broadly speaking, into three product lines. They are, Lauffenburger added: "Firstly, protein products, including some beef but mostly chicken products, representing more than half our business in dollars of sale. The second is what we would call breaded vegetables, including onion rings and other onion products. These account for about 25-30 percent of our sales, while the balance consists of a category involving cheese products and French toasts."

In order to give some idea of his company's manufacturing processes, Lauffenburger chose the example of a typical chicken item. "We buy the chicken meat under contract from a number of suppliers," he said. "We have our own inspection team that goes into the supply plants before they are selected and, once the chicken arrives, it is inspected to ensure it meets all the necessary quality standards. Usually, it is brought in no more than 12 hours before processing begins.

"Then, depending on the product, it may go through a marinating process, or forming or grinding, before moving through pre-dusting. Later, depending on the product, it will go through either a series of batter machines or, perhaps, a macerator and press, before eventually dropping into hot oil for frying. Once fried, and almost all of our products are prepared in that way, it passes through the continuous high-speed freezer system and then on to an automatic weighing and packaging operation."

Lauffenburger added: "We carry, on average, a one-week inventory. Naturally, there are some products that are very high volume and we may have only two days of inventory on those, while others may run up to two weeks. But, in every case, after an item is frozen, it will go into storage before being transferred by trucks to distribution centers established by ourselves or our customers. We arrange all transportation, whether we deliver or customers pick up, and nearly all our production goes to major food service chains."

Robin Brooks considers it vital for her company's prosperity that the whole operation is proactive. "Number one," she said, "that depends on us knowing what kind of products and materials are coming into our plants. We audit all our suppliers to ensure sure they are complying with our requests and that specifications are correct. We make announced and unannounced visits to their facilities and then carry out microbial tests to make sure that quality standards are being upheld once the products are complete.

"Secondly," she continued, "part of our strategy calls for us to be a value added supplier to our customers and, in that regard, we have gone to their culinary or product development groups with new ideas for menu items. We have been doing a great deal of research to identify those products that are most suitable for a particular category of customer and then producing prototypes in our test kitchen. There has been a paradigm shift in our industry and this process is becoming more important to us all the time."

To back this up, Bob Lauffenburger proffered a fascinating statistic. "If you were to look at our customer base and product range, you would find that 40 percent of what we sell today is to customers and with products that did not exist two years ago. Our increase in sales has not been due simply to selling more of the same. We have added a lot of new customers and a lot of new products, while constantly looking for process improvements, cost reduction opportunities, and gains in efficiency. That is what you have to do in order to stay on top in a very competitive industry."