

Ilfracombe Wholesale Foodservice – going the extra mile

Ilfracombe Wholesale Foodservice has two key characteristics: it is high-tech and it has a keen sense of customer service. These two factors have combined to create a company with a contemporary outlook, where phrases like “going the extra mile” are just an everyday part of its culture.

Improved efficiency and reduced costs

The company, founded in 1972 by its present owner and managing director Mike Watson, provides a flourishing example of what the modern day independent wholesaler can offer. This includes a seven day collection facility, a live stock-ordering system and the backing of the Today’s Group - not to mention golf days and exhibitions held for the benefit of suppliers and customers.

Originally, when the business was founded, it was a small retail operation called Windsor Wholesale. Gradually, it began wholesaling to the catering trade. Five years after it had been established it moved into new premises - where it still is today. This was in 1977 and, in the same year, sales director Nigel Robinson came on board, the company joined Nisa-Today’s and the decision was taken to focus principally on the catering trade.

“When we joined Nisa-Today’s it was because we needed the power of group purchasing,” says Nigel. “However, membership has become increasingly essential. The Nisa-Today’s name is so widely known that we can get good benefit from simply telling prospective customers that we are a part of the group - this gives them a huge amount of reassurance.”

Today, Ilfracombe Wholesale Foodservice is the only independent foodservice supplier covering North and Mid Devon, West Somerset and North Cornwall. It employs some 30 staff and runs a fleet of eight dual temperature vehicles. Turnover is in excess of £4 million and the 1,000 strong customer base - among them hotels, guest houses, restaurants, pubs, schools, hospitals, retirement & nursing homes, shops, leisure parks, outdoor attractions and caravan parks - is spread across a wide geographical area. Customers receive an average of two or three deliveries each week, taken from a range of 3,500 products, including 500 own label catering lines from Country Range and, more recently, janitorial products.

The Country Range Foodservice Group has played a major part in Ilfracombe Foodservice’s development. It was back in 1992 that a specialised catering group (CDA) was formed by three Today’s members - Mike Watson, Colin Birchall of GC Birchall and Chris Creed of Creed Wholesale. By 1998 there were 12 members and CDA had become involved with the Countrywide Group, finally amalgamating in 2000 to form the Country Range Foodservice Group - 16 members, with 27 depots and a turnover of £215 million, compared to the original CDA members’ turnover in 1992 of £33 million. As trading director of the group, Mike Watson is quick to acknowledge the benefits that the company has derived from Country Range, in tandem with membership of the Today’s Group.

When Nigel Robinson talks about the drive to provide excellent customer-service, he has a number of examples ready to hand and a look at the company web-site (www.iwgltd.co.uk) puts the case comprehensively.

Solution Summary

Customer Profile

- Leading wholesaler of catering products, focusing on chilled, ambient, and wines and spirits

Challenge

- Integrate all aspects of wholesale operations
- Improve customer service to differentiate from competitors

Solution

- Fully integrated Swords software solution

Benefits

- Live ordering facility for telesales customers
- Individual trading terms and pricing structures
- Ability to generate quotations and reports easily



Ilfracombe Wholesale Foodservice distributes catering products to more than 1,000 customers

"We are open seven days a week, with sales staff available on both Saturday and Sunday mornings to take customer orders for Monday delivery," he says. "And we offer a weekend collection service, so if a customer is really stuck for something they can call here on a Saturday or Sunday and pick it up. The collection service, particularly, is something we have offered for a very long time. It's a facility which many locals use and it's demonstrative of the type of difference that we like to offer."

Making life easier for customers

"In addition," he continues, "we have a wonderful team of loyal and experienced staff who know our customers and the catering business in the West Country inside out. There's a great team spirit here and staff are committed to meeting the needs of our customers. Our pricing is also extremely competitive - if it's not, our customers won't buy from us, however good our service is. We have the benefits of national buying power through the Country Range Foodservice Group and Nisa-Today's, without the colossal overheads of our larger rivals. And our customers reap the benefits."

"Furthermore," he says, "we've undertaken considerable and ongoing investment in our computer system, again to improve customer service." Of all the examples Nigel provides, it is the latter which most differentiates Iffracombe from its competitors. Over the years the company has kept up with trends in new software and has determinedly adapted the programmes to make the most of its in-house systems. The latest update came in February of this year, when a system called Swords was installed by the International IT Services Group, Sanderson. Nigel explains: "This was really a major upgrade for us. I'd seen one or two other systems, but felt that this one was the most appropriate for us and would take us another step forward. Not only is the Sanderson system fully integrated, but it does all of what we were doing before plus a whole host of other features, such as excellent report generation, doing quotations and controlling waste packaging. It also has a very full direct-to-screen sales order entry system for telesales, which is a major plus. This means we are offering live ordering and customers know exactly what they will be charged, because we can tap into their own individual pricing structure - which is a very important part of our operation."

Of course, while the business focus is very much in the present, there have been changes and adjustments along the way. But Nigel has the knack of presenting even these in the light of improving its customer service. Take the company's decision to stop delivering frozen food as an example. The move was made ten years ago and was not wholly popular. But, he explains: "The decision was taken because frozen food was becoming a part of everybody's supply chain and, at the same time, we felt it was difficult for us to do justice to widely different product ranges, each of which needed to be loaded and handled in different ways. Instead, we decided to focus our maximum effort on chilled, ambient and wines & spirits. We saw this as the best way of fulfilling our customers' ranging needs."

According to Nigel, the removal of frozen food from the line up is the only sudden change that has taken place within the business over the years. Other than that it has been a tale of steady improvements, not least to the size of the customer base, as the business has gradually worked to conquer new regions. As for the future, Nigel explains that he never looks too far ahead - concentrating on the immediate opportunities is far more effective. He is presently engrossed in implementing the company's winter strategy, which includes the annual programme of activities aimed at increasing the customer base and preparing for the next annual supplier exhibition, to be held in February 2003.

He concludes: "Throughout our history we have always taken the biggest steps we possibly can, in order to better serve our customers. That is what we must continue to do."



Iffracombe Wholesale Foodservice uses Swords software to integrate all areas of its wholesale operation



Swords means customers can benefit from live ordering and individual pricing structures



Nisa Today's members like Iffracombe Wholesale Foodservice benefit from the buying power of group purchasing

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