

PREFERRED MEAL SYSTEMS

Beyond the Books



Providing healthy, safe food at a lower price is the key to this foodservice company's reputation as a leading provider to America's school systems. George Chivari explains.



Outside of filling the brains of America's youth with knowledge, America's schools are charged with filling their stomachs as well. Founded in 1967, Preferred Meal Systems is a school meal program pioneer, well-suited to help school systems deal with expanding enrollment and modern economic and nutritional demands.

"We are unique because we offer districts a turnkey solution combining nutritional menu planning, equipment, multiple food options, manufacturing, and distribution for the school system," said George Chivari, president of Preferred Meal Systems for the last year. "The opportunity to participate in expanding awareness of what we can do for school systems is exciting and one of the reasons this position was enticing to me."

Good, better, best

The company aims to simplify its customers' foodservice operation through the expertise of its foodservice professionals who can provide fully prepared, nutritious, individually packaged meals. Preferred Meal Systems offers a comprehensive,

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cost-effective solution with a fixed price, attractive in these days of tightening budgets.

School systems that have worked with Preferred Meal Systems have discovered the benefits of efficiently using labor, minimizing nonessential costs, reducing waste, and maximizing usage of USDA commodities with no required equipment capital investment and menu planning that meets USDA menu guidelines. The company boasts a team of classically trained chefs and places food quality and safety as top priorities.

“From a quality standpoint, we only use quality ingredients and do a lot of testing to be sure we are sourcing ingredients that are really hitting the mark from a sodium and nutritional standpoint,” said Chivari. “We certify our respective suppliers with a third party food safety organization, and we’re ensuring that incoming food is as wholesome as possible and contributes to the nutritional marks we’re trying to deliver to the children.”

Once products are received at Preferred Meal Systems’ facility, it manufactures more than half of the items that are sent to schools inhouse. Continuous testing procedures from microbiology and taste panels make sure the products are healthy



and safe. Meal packages are safety sealed, and the company has daily USDA inspections at its production facilities. Flash freezing processes preserve freshness, flavor, nutritional value, and quality. The company also provides school system employees with food safety education and training.



The key to finding new customers is past performance. Much of its prospect identification process relies on referrals and showcasing experience in working with existing satisfied customers.

“For example, we’ve been serving Chicago public schools for 40 years, so the experience in Chicago can be used in other school districts as a reference point. We can show prospects the cost savings we have delivered, but the satisfaction we’ve gotten is from the food we deliver,” said Chivari. “We’re also in places like San Francisco, Boston, and Philadelphia, for example, and we serve charter schools and school districts of

all sizes. Our customers and their students are very satisfied with what we’ve provided.”

Preferred Meal Systems is always looking for ways to offer variety and choices in its menu to meet expectations of the children. By spending a lot of energy researching new products, the company aims to constantly understand what children’s interests are and develop new products to meet that demand.



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“We’re going to continue to do that because we want to add innovative, new products so children get some very interesting foods to eat that are well balanced and taste great. There is a lot of variety in what we serve, so the children aren’t just getting the same foods week after week,” said Chivari.

With a rotating menu providing that variety, Preferred Meal Systems continues to evaluate ways to maintain its low cost provider status. Chivari said the company must examine all its cost centers and challenge itself to do things better. This is critical because the company prides itself on delivering a strong price value relationship to school districts.

“Because of our size and volume purchasing power, we get prices that even large school districts couldn’t get on their own,” Chivari said. “We can leverage our economic power, and we pass it on to customers, and we must continue to do that.”

The company is also committed to providing customers with Earth-friendly products. Going forward, it is providing customers with items like 30% post-consumer recycled newsletters and biodegradable tray liners, biodegradable fiberboard trays to replace styrofoam, and fully biodegradable spork packets.

Three steps for growth

Working with a three-legged growth strategy, Preferred Meal Systems is first committed to working with current customers to enhance the relationship and exceed service expectations. Next, there are geographic areas, such as the southern states, where the company is working to grow its presence. In addition, the company is looking to penetrate more of the market around some of its biggest clients, such as the suburbs around the aforementioned Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, and Philadelphia.

“If we can develop the market, the cost of distribution goes down, and we’re in a position to share some of those cost reductions with the school districts,” said Chivari.

In a time of budget uncertainty, a company like Preferred Meal Systems can help school districts save money on food-service while improving quality. Schools won’t have to take more from the general fund and can focus resources on the rest of their educational mission. The challenge is getting the message out to school districts in a way that illustrates the magnitude of the cost savings Preferred Meal Systems can deliver.

“We can help them save money while reinforcing the importance of healthy and wholesome food. We have grown because our focus has always been on the customer,” said Chivari. “By doing a good job for them, we find more opportunities.” ♦

—Eric Slack



Preferred Meal Systems, Inc.

Quality food and service, simplified.™

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