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A BETTER WAY

BY CHRIS METLER

So, you've got an exceptional new brand and want to crack the Canadian foodservice sector, or are looking to ambitiously expand your brand's reach nationwide. Or, you're an operator seeking that unique product to set you apart from your competition and bolster your menu.

Who you gonna call?

As a supplier, you could try getting a listing with one of the dominant regional or national distributors; only they're already pressed for storage space and favour products with guaranteed turns. Your company could try hiring a local food broker, only that approach often leads to patchwork pricing and varying service levels for brands looking for national representation. You could even try establishing your own in-house sales team and build a dedicated distribution system; only it can prove onerous and time-consuming. Plus, the associated costs entail a prolonged payback period.

Entering the Canadian marketplace is not easy for new brands or brands originating from other countries. And, if you're an operator seeking unique and innovative products to give your venue a critical point of difference, it can be especially challenging.

No wonder Paul Bourrie and the Tree of Life National Foodservice Partners decided there had to be a better way.

The vision was to create a national foodservice brokerage network to support brands looking for service across provincial borders. Bourrie's goal, along with his partners, was to market a diverse portfolio of products to the foodservice industry. Bourrie himself has been the architect behind many brand launch strategies and a key go-between that markets brands to operators.

He cut his teeth in the brokerage trade over three decades ago at Thomas, Large & Singer, a preferred value chain solutions provider. Today, McCormack Bourrie represents dozens of foodservice brands across all categories. Think BeeMaid, Dare Foods, Tyson Foods, Sara Lee, Tetley, Hershey's, Hain Celestial and Sabert, just to name a few.

Here's where this particular story picks up:

"We all know that freight has gone crazy," Bourrie laments. "That's adding a lot of cost at the restau-

"The common denominator for all us is really simple: grow the foodservice business," Bourrie muses.

rant level. Very few companies have the mass scale to service the Canadian market. We have a lot of geography with very few people. Getting products to market is a challenge. The challenge was complex... How could we create a system to service the Canadian marketplace?"

Bourrie did not foresee a future in establishing his direct-to-store delivery system, as he simply did not have mass volume and all the logistical requirements. However, he certainly did contemplate how collaboration with Tree of Life Canada could work. Tree of Life Canada is the largest Canadian retail distributor and marketer of branded specialty and natural foods. They have all the necessary built-in logistical requirements.

When the partnership was being contemplated, Tree of Life was only dabbling in the foodservice channel through their national foodservice broker network. They certainly had the ability to expand. Together with Bourrie, they approached other key foodservice brokers to discuss a national, "made-in-Canada" brokerage solution.

"We took a minority interest in four broker partners in an effort to help create a national network," Jamie Moody, president of the Tree of Life, explains. "We thought we could capitalize and leverage the Tree of Life's retail warehousing and logistics services and apply it to foodservice. Plus, we could provide added marketing and financial support to our broker partners."

➤ CONTINUED ON PAGE 48



That is for the foodservice distributor; it's not our game. Instead, we are providing the backend logistics and warehousing to support distributors.



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A new partnership was formed between Tree of Life Canada and McCormack Bourrie, Binner Marketing & Sales in Western Canada, Performance Courtier Alimentaire in Quebec and Concord National in Atlantic Canada. What resulted was the Tree of Life National Foodservice partnership, a first-of-its-kind national brokerage network with all the built-in backend service logistics.

"The common denominator for all us is really simple: grow the foodservice business," Bourrie muses. Indeed, if a manufacturer or operator needs coverage regionally or nationally, the Tree of Life National Foodservice quintet can execute it. Tree of Life itself has no less than six distribution centres from Ontario to the west coast. "We can now help brands from the logistics end, and we can execute from a sales and marketing perspective," he adds. "There's no sunk start-up costs. There's no hiring people or buying trucks to roll out a brand."

Indeed, brokers that don't have "feet on the street" usually only call on larger chain operators who are going to move the needle, because the distributors won't list a product unless there is enough volume to warrant shelf space. Conversely, Tree of Life National Foodservice is looking to provide the same support to independent operators well, by providing distributions with just-in-time service for their specialty products.

Tom Nist, vice president of sales and marketing for Fresca Mexican Foods, agrees. "We sell specialty Mexican products. We don't move trailer loads or pallets. This combination has been described by distributors as the best brokerage system in Canada. This new system now makes it as easier to service Canada as servicing the American market. We decided to participate in the national RC Show this year because this brokerage network allows us to service operators nationally."

Moody still clarifies that Tree of Life National Foodservice is not delivering directly to operators. "That is for the foodservice distributor; it's not our game. Instead, we are providing the backend logistics and warehousing to support distributors."

Tree of Life will provide just-in-time delivery, so distributors don't have to warehouse brands that don't necessarily churn as fast. Distributors can now expand their product mix without impacting warehousing, which remains one of their largest cost drives. They

are also working with distributors to identify brands that may be pain points from a sales or distribution stance to help them further improve efficiencies.

"We will expand the array of products available to operators, as we are in a unique position to provide a range of healthy and sustainable offerings that we carry in our retail division. These are products that are now being demanded by millennials," Moody continues. "And, on the brand side, we can enable regional or national reach for those growing brands and can establish national pricing and service level programs. Immediately, we're able to do what others can't."

Sure enough, the advantages of a one-stop shop that offers sales and marketing, warehousing, inventory management and logistics services to the entire Canadian foodservice industry are readily apparent. And make no mistake, it's a win for distributors and for brands that want listings they may not be able to otherwise obtain.

Shifting to chain operators, one clear benefit is greater efficiency across Canada thanks to standardized products and representation. If a service problem arises, Tree of Life National Foodservice will make assistance available. "We have 60 salespeople dedicated to foodservice across Canada, all are well-established in their respective markets," Bourrie contends. "We now have the largest specialty products sales force in Canada."

So far, so good. Although Bourrie will admit the pioneering partnership that's still in its first year remains a work in progress. Each of the four regional brokers and Tree of Life Canada continue to represent different brands. But, down the road, Bourrie sees all aligning so that Tree of Life National Foodservice is representing all the same brands from coast to coast. "That's where it's going to evolve to, and we're working on strategies collectively to drive us to that goal...What we can now offer a brand coming to Canada, or one that is already here, something that nobody else can. This is truly a 'made in Canada' solution."

A better way, indeed.

In May, Paul Bourrie joined Restaurants Canada's trade mission to Milan and visit TUTTOFOOD, the international B2B show dedicated to food and beverage, organized by Fiera Milano. There, he scouted out new trends and brands for Canadian operators. 🍴



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