

The whole nine yards

Wholesalers not only save caterers money, they open up a whole world of flavours

For busy university caterers, wholesalers are a one stop shop for anything and everything they need. Not only are they great for all the basics, but can offer caterers the opportunity to cover a wide range of cuisines too.

"With students having a much more adventurous palate, and most universities having a significant international student contingent, caterers could do a lot more to get them through their doors and spending, instead of seeking out other establishments for a taste of home," says Jag Singh, marketing manager at Wanis International Foods.

The diverse student base means that students come from all over the world and although they want to experience university life in the UK, including its culinary delights, they still want something familiar now and again. However, this isn't always easy for caterers to satisfy this demand.

"When new students arrive our menus give them a feel of home which helps them settle at the University of Buckingham much quicker," says Craig Decent, general manager of catering and hospitality at the University of

Buckingham. "Within our catering department our menus are so diverse it would be impossible to supply our students with their dietary requirements without the help of wholesalers like Wanis."

Cost effective?

It's assumed that using a wholesaler guarantees caterers savings, but how does that assumption compare with real day to day purchasing? The large volumes in which wholesalers purchase from manufacturers allows university chefs to buy items more cheaply, which can offer significant savings. However, it's the end result which counts.

"Any wholesaler can advise university caterers on a product's quality and cost price to help them make savings, but there also needs to be a

"A good wholesaler will have a wealth of product knowledge, will understand their customers' needs and will be in touch with cutting-edge trends"

focus on the reliability of the wholesaler, which can affect how much kitchens save in the longer term," says Colin Birchall, managing director of Country Range Group. "Does the wholesaler make sure each order is 100% correct and that everything is there? Does the wholesaler provide promotional, special offers and new product information?"

If the answer is no to these questions then university caterers could find that the wholesaler they are using might not be saving them as much money as it could be. Ordering through a wholesaler should not only ensure that caterers receive the best prices, but make other hidden cost savings such as admin time.

"All our deliveries are consolidated and compiled from one site with one invoice, saving caterers time and money," says Rachel Summers, director of Thomas Ridley.

As well as the significant cost savings, purchasing through a collective buying power like TUCO allows far more flexibility in terms of ordering as well as good value for money.

"Thanks to TUCO, members can achieve value for money and economies of scale in their purchasing, ordering minimum quantities and mixing products," says Kevin Curran, managing director of Tri-Star Packaging.

All wholesalers will be offered promotions on brands they stock which will, in turn, be passed on to caterers who will be able to make substantial savings.

"University caterers can find cost savings with wholesalers by negotiating on bulk purchases and buying from promotional activity," explains Adrian Hall, national sales manager for Yearsley Group. "An excellent wholesaler will keep you informed and up to speed in the market place."

Expert advice

With more and more companies saturating the foodservice distribution market, it is becoming much harder for university caterers to separate the



"Large wholesalers are able to negotiate best prices as standard and superb savings for products on promotion"

wheat from the chaff and find guidance about purchasing from a wholesaler.

"In all honesty, it can be quite difficult," explains Birchall. "Searching on the web for actual, useful information doesn't necessarily deliver the goods, and in university catering, which is very much a service business, this can be frustrating.

"Some suppliers can make claims that are not always accurate and, here, we see marketing triumph over substance."

These days most searches are automatically carried out via the internet, but even this can end up a fruitless task unless caterers know exactly where to look.

"A good starting point is to use wholesalers in the TUCO framework agreement, as members can be reassured suppliers and their products have been fully audited and rigorous standards have been met," explains Curran. "A good wholesaler will have a wealth of product knowledge, will understand their customers' needs and will be in touch with cutting-edge trends."

It is also a good idea to check that a supplier has British Retail Consortium accreditation, as this is a further assurance of quality.

OWN BRAND VS MAJOR PLAYERS

Just like consumer supermarkets, wholesalers offer own brand products too, but just how do they compare to the well-known established brands?

"Wholesalers' own brand products are made by the same people that manufacture the brand leaders," explains Steven Brewer, sales director of LWC Drinks.

"The only difference is that a massive marketing budget utilised to generate awareness adds to the cost of the brand leader. If you strip this out and look at the like-for-like quality, there is no difference."

For most companies, it's just as important, if not more so, that their own brand products are of equal quality as other items they stock. It's not just about getting something produced as cheaply as possible, but offering a good quality alternative.

"The Country Range own brand is developed to compete with brands while helping caterers make savings, and it is about quality and consistency, which is not

always the case with own brands," explains Colin Birchall, managing director of Country Range Group. "The range is, therefore, pretty unique in the marketplace. It does mean that it may not always be the cheapest, but it is a quality alternative to brands."

Creating own branded products also allows companies to champion British products, which is becoming increasingly important to wholesale customers.

"Wherever possible, Brakes favours British suppliers over international alternatives and seeks to champion British produce," explains Dave Hughes, Brakes' marketing director. "We currently have more than 800 British products in our own brand range, including 300 Red Tractor Farm Assured. We lead the foodservice industry with currently 51% of our fruit and vegetables (well in excess of the Defra average of 31%) and 70% of our Prime Meats product range is sourced from British farms.

"We've also recently added Red Tractor Farm Assured bacon to our product offering - which gives customers the option to source 100% of their meat from the UK - offering an attractive USP to consumers."

