
MAFSI Members Wrestle With Change

In 1948, a small group of salesmen met in Massachusetts with the goal of forming an organization to help salesmen flourish in the foodservice industry. This modest meeting was the beginning for what today has become Manufacturers' Agents Association for the Foodservice Industry (MAFSI).



MAFSI became a national organization in 1949 and hired its first paid executive secretary the following year. Shortly after, the organization put together its constitution, bylaws and established a code of ethics.

As the 1950s progressed, MAFSI found that in order to effectively sell equipment, the catalogs provided by the manufacturers they represented were not technical enough. The impact of the organization was felt as agents and manufacturers worked together to improve the catalogs. From this joint effort, the association created an associate membership where manufacturers joined the organization to support the rep function. The group met annually at the National Restaurant Show in Chicago.

In 1963, fewer than 100 salesmen attended the first MAFSI Marketing Conference. Despite the relatively low attendance, what attendees found was the priceless value of the exchange of information, gathering different points of view from different parts of the country.

Association Membership

MAFSI's membership has continued to grow over the years. In 1985, the management of the organization moved from New York to Chicago and in 1997 to Atlanta. Since that time, MAFSI has established a number of progressive programs that serve to bring

The MAFSI File

Manufacturers' Agents Association for the
Foodservice Industry (MAFSI)
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With more than 600 member companies in the United States and Canada representing 2,000 sales and marketing professionals, manufacturing executives and others, MAFSI members are a major force in the foodservice equipment, supply and furniture segment in the foodservice industry.

To serve its constituents, MAFSI provides a number of services for its members including training and education, business management tools, sales and marketing tools, a technology certification program, industry policy development including ethical standards development, liaison with other industry groups, annual conferences and trade shows, personal networking opportunities, and communication through its quarterly magazine, *OutFront*.

These programs and services are designed to:

- Enhance member company efficiency and profitability.
- Strengthen customer and principal relationships.
- Augment manufacturers' agents' role in the marketplace.



Alison Cody

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the rep to a closer working relationship with manufacturers and other facets of the industry. Included in these programs are MAFSI’s Annual Conference, the MAFSI Business Barometer, MAFSI Technology and End-User Roadshows, MAFSI Technology Certification (MTC) and continued liaisons with allied industry partners such as MANA, NAFEM, FEDA, FCSI, CFESA, and increased involvement in industry trade shows.

Today, more than 50 years after the formation of the association, it has seen revolutionary developments in the food service industry, many of which MAFSI was instrumental in bringing about. Included in those developments are a heightened awareness and respect for the importance of the manufacturers’ representative function, the rep’s professional image and the association.

MAFSI currently has a membership of more than 600 agent and associate companies across the United States, Canada and Mexico, representing more than 2,000 individuals.

Facing Challenges

Just as its sister associations have had to come to terms with a changing marketplace and meeting the needs of its members, MAFSI has made adjustments over the years.

Commenting on some of the challenges that reps in the foodservice industry face, Alison Cody, MAFSI executive director, notes that the typical MAFSI rep today “is much more involved with the end user/operator than ever before. Typically the rep makes the initial sales call in an effort to get the product speci-

fied with or on behalf of the dealer. The rep then tracks the order, demonstrates the products and follows up on service. These additional services require more labor and technology expenses. Predictably, the current commission rate alone is hardly enough to offset the additional expense the rep incurs.”

If that observation sounds familiar to what reps working in other markets encounter, Cody has other observations:

- “Reps are still dealing with the after-effects from all the merger/acquisition activity that took place in the ‘90s. The new conglomerates are still trying to deal with or figure out the merging of different corporate cultures, different IT systems, plant consolidation and channel-partner issues. At the same time, we’re seeing the merging of different rep groups. More groups are merging and weaker groups are attempting to strengthen themselves. At the same time, single rep firms are trying to gain more market share and diversity by buying or merging with other groups.”
- “The increase in the cost of raw materials and fuel — which are being passed on as price increases — are causing almost every project reps deal with to be value-engineered. Reps spend a good part of every day negotiating between the dealer, factory and consultant.”
- “And finally, globalization continues to impact reps and their activities. North American manufacturers will have to prepare and strategize how they are going to deal with European manufacturers who offer quality solution-oriented equipment focusing on end-user needs, and Asian manufacturers that offer quality products manufactured to the end-user specs — for much less money.”

To assist the rep in meeting these and other challenges, Cody observes, “The pace of change is staggering. As a result, reps have to be prepared to grow their businesses during turbulent times. To do that, reps have to be able to share information. Part of the ability to share information comes from the rep’s ability to network — effective networking will allow reps to make the right strategic decisions in order to grow our business.”

What does this mean for MAFSI? According to Cody, “The organization will have to continue to concentrate on education, gathering and sharing information and providing effective networking opportunities for its members.” □

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