

Small companies have big needs, too

An executive at one of the world's largest food companies was rattling off his criteria for what constitutes a good ingredient supplier when he said: "They should treat us like we're an important customer, even if we only represent a small part of their business."

At first this seemed like hyperbole, since there aren't many food companies larger than this one. But he was being quite serious. And that has to make you wonder about the special needs truly small companies have in choosing and working with a supplier.

As a daring entrepreneur who started My Own Meals, the first shelf-stable dinners for kids, Mary Anne Jackson knows the problems a small fry faces in the food industry. Jackson just expanded her line to include Kosher foods, a product category that has more special ingredient needs than most.

Ingredients in Kosher foods also play a decided part in their marketing. The boxes for Jackson's new Kosher foods will describe the special way that, say, wheat was harvested, or the particular method by which beef was slaughtered.

"In choosing a supplier of Kosher foods, we look for one who has been certified, and not just by a local rabbi," said Jackson. "We look to see what services they can provide. Can they special cut for us? Can they provide special blends for spices? Some suppliers are a little less agreeable in giving us suggestions about how to mix their cheese with our cheeses to make it come out smooth."

The first selection criterion for any small food company, of course, is that the supplier has to appreciate that the company is small. "Given that I'm not Kraft, I don't need a truck load of flour or rice on Day 1," said Jackson. "I might need a quarter or a truck load or a pallet. I need to work with suppliers who are willing to grow with us."

In her early days, Jackson approached some suppliers who advertised that "no size is too small."

"I'd test their product, it worked great, and then they'd say, 'You have to buy a truck load.' And their product had only a day's shelf-life!" said Jackson. "Well, we can't do it. If they say they're willing to work with you, they should work with you."

Fortunately, Jackson has found that most suppliers are quite agreeable. They'll not only meet her purchasing requirements, they'll provide technical assistance when problems invariably arise.

"A supplier must have a strong knowledge base," said Jackson. "It's important to us because we have so many varied requirements. We do children's meals, and now we're doing adult meals. We're using different kinds of spices, different kinds of pastas. We've had problems with rice sticking and then splitting and then finding out how to go about fixing that. I need an ingredient supplier's expertise."

In some cases, suppliers have dispatched a technical expert to her company to handle large problems. In other instances, Jackson is satisfied to have someone readily accessible by phone.

Early on, when a supplier discontinued the line of starch Jackson was using for her kid's meals, she had to find another. The starch from the new supplier was identical,

but it needed to gelatinize at a higher temperature—an easily correctable situation that was discovered only by closely working with the supplier. "Once we got through that hurdle, it worked," Jackson said. "But you need to be able to call someone up and say, 'Why isn't this working?'"

Developing this kind of rapport doesn't come automatically, though. "You need to find someone to communicate with on both sides," she said.

Once she does find the right people, though, Jackson has been surprised at how much they know. "When you go to the real worker, on the line in the lab mixing and matching, those guys will spill the information out. That's what you need. I need to know basic information. In some cases, this even means looking at basic reactions [of food components]."

A technician at a gum company told Jackson how to set up experiments to determine what ingredient was causing a problem so they could decide how to handle it from that point. "Ingredient companies can help you decide the questions you need to be asking," she said.

Another time, Jackson was trying to figure out a flavor, and an ingredient supplier invited her to come over to their test kitchen and work the problem out right there. Unusual? Maybe. However, several ingredient suppliers interviewed for this article say they'd love to have good companies come in and use their resources—they're just waiting to be asked.



Jackson: "I need an ingredient supplier's expertise."

—Joe Mullich