



Woods Foodservice caters for a highly demanding customer base, delivering dry food supplies to the top end restaurant trade, in and around London. Superior service drives the business, together with the delivered wholesale solution from Sanderson.

Michelin star service

Delivering excellence is the perfect motto for Woods Foodservice; it describes both the company's service proposition and its product range. The £5 million, 24-employee business is a supplier of high quality dry food products to the London restaurant trade, including several Michelin-rated establishments, and it offers unparalleled service to this demanding clientele. Woods Foodservice is a long-term user of Swords, and has continually added new modules to meet evolving customer needs and take advantage of new business opportunities.

The business was established more than 40 years ago, when Alfred Labbett set up Woods Caterfoods. For years, this was a very successful operation, delivering catering products to pubs and cafes around London. In 1982 his son Richard took over; he continued to steer the business in the same direction and continued the firm's good reputation. However, other competitors had begun to emerge and by the late 1980s, demand was changing too - the arrival of the gastro pub meant a different type of customer, requiring different products and services.

Darren Labbett
Managing Director

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Darren Labbett became the third generation of the family to work in the business, eventually taking over as managing director in 2000, at which time he seized the opportunity to refocus the business and rebrand it Woods Foodservice. “My parents had a tried and tested formula for the business, and it worked,” he explains. “However, in the late 1990s just before they retired, I could see the business was in danger of being left behind – as our customer base changed from individual publicans to corporate buyers, we had to raise our standards to be more professional. Our competitors were using the latest systems and we weren’t; it was putting us at a disadvantage.”

Darren proposed the company invest in a software system and they evaluated several solutions, before choosing Sanderson and Swords. The task of moving the business - a completely paper-based organisation - to the new automated system was a major project but it was to prove a great legacy. “It was a hugely different way of working, but the introduction of Swords was the significant step we needed to lay the foundations for our future,” he says.

Prior to Swords, Woods ran entirely on manual systems, with orders and invoices

handwritten. “We had to change,” says Darren. “Working the way we were at the time, it was hard for us to deal with corporate buyers from the pub chains and difficult to become a recognised supplier.”

The next couple of years proved to be a challenge. Woods saw its customer base change from hundreds of independent customers to three or four large firms, and eventually those buyers moved their accounts to major national suppliers. Darren is convinced that without the Sanderson solution, Woods Foodservice could not have adapted to these market changes. “Swords helped us change the way we worked, which was critical, and it gave us the means to develop and move in new directions.”

When Darren took over in 2000, the business was breaking even. Many of the customer accounts were not profitable and the business was highly inefficient. His goal was to refocus the company and return it to profit.

“We started by looking at the customer groups and decided to focus solely on the top end restaurant trade, for whom the key requirement is service. At that stage, we couldn’t compete with national suppliers on cost, but we could beat them on service, because we were

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very flexible and willing to go the extra mile, irrespective of order value.”

It was a bold move. Darren went to the restaurants; he told them he could offer the service he knew they craved and he started to stock the product lines they required. “It wasn’t only about products and service - we had to improve our image, too,” says Darren.

He relaunched as Woods Foodservice, with a smart price list using Swords, a new logo, uniforms and more. The revitalised brand image was critical to secure the quality restaurant trade. “As we secured more and more new restaurant contracts, we could stop supplying the people we no longer wanted to target – and this meant we could also gradually remove unprofitable product lines.”

However, this sales approach of one in, one out meant turnover remained fairly static. “As a matter of fact, revenues didn’t increase much initially, but I knew we were making a huge leap, evolving from the business of old and moving to a new level,” says Darren.

Since then, turnover has increased fivefold and today Woods Foodservice offers 1,700 product lines. It delivers daily to restaurants in the West End of London and surrounding areas,

many of whom order in the early hours of the morning once they have cleaned down for the night. Typically, 150 orders are placed each night; the details are keyed into Swords and the required products immediately picked and packed, and en route to customers by 7am.

Fast turnaround like this relies on visibility, accuracy and confidence in the data. “We couldn’t manage without Swords – it runs our entire business,” says Darren. “We are confident we have the best solution for our company. Our business is built on service, and we enjoy a very good relationship with Sanderson who offer similarly high standards of service.”

Sanderson has continually added new system functionality for Woods as the demands of the business have evolved. According to Darren, a key addition was the email module. “The email facility was a big breakthrough for us. It saved us an enormous amount of work: each customer has a statement every month, and previously this was produced manually, printed out and posted. It took over half a day to do them all - now we send statements three times a month at the touch of a button. It’s much faster and more efficient.”

Woods can now also produce personalised



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price list order forms for each customer with ease. These are produced quarterly. “The price changes are entered into Swords as soon as they happen and the data is exported automatically. I know the prices are always correct: it’s error free and saves us a huge amount of time.”

Woods relies on reports from Swords for information on stock levels, purchases and sales. Darren says stock reports, in particular, are vital: “More than half our orders come in overnight for immediate despatch; there’s no time to bring in more supplies for the client’s order. Our entire operation is built on a highly responsive service which is impossible to provide without the right information. The reports from Swords are critical.”

Darren describes the new functionality as “heaven sent” and is now planning to implement automatic bank reconciliation, to create further efficiencies. “Sanderson is continually developing the system and ongoing enhancements like this make a major difference to our business.”

Woods Foodservice has recently moved into new, purpose-built premises in Southall, west London. The site is home to the company’s offices and a 10,000 sq ft warehouse, where

the company is considering further software upgrades, including implementation of RF scanners, to improve warehouse productivity and efficiency.

Currently, Woods’ website is not yet integrated with Swords, but only because the business profile doesn’t currently demand it. “It would make our life easier if orders were placed on the web, but our business is focused on meeting customer needs. I’ve no doubt that the time will come when clients want to order on the web - and when they do, I know Sanderson can deliver that.”

For Woods Foodservice, Sanderson provides much more than business-critical software. It provides full peace of mind. “Like us, Sanderson provides a superb service and great value for money. I know my staff have someone to turn to if they have a problem with the system. Sanderson often goes beyond what is contracted – and expected – to help us resolve a problem.”

For more than four decades, Woods Foodservice has evolved to ensure continued success. And, combined with its outstanding products and exceptional service, Swords is a critical ingredient for profitable growth.