

Top 2009 Achievers

A Commitment to Excellence

By **David Farkas**,
Senior Editor

In an industry as vast and diverse as foodservice, one can measure success in countless ways. From significant sales growth to a lasting impact on markets served, to giving back to the foodservice industry at-large, *FE&S*' 2009 class of Top Achievers continues to accomplish all of these feats and much more.

Each of our Top Achievers found their own way into the foodservice industry, but their individual success stories share many common traits. Chief among them is an unwavering passion for the industry and an unflinching focus on customer care. They excel when it comes to forming relationships with their peers and other industry partners, which also plays an integral role in the success of our Top Achievers.

Although at different stages of their careers, the collective legacy of our Top Achievers will be one of innovation, professionalism and dedication. Beyond their customers and business partners, the foodservice industry remains the primary beneficiary of their efforts.

For these reasons and many more, it is with great pleasure that *FE&S* presents its 2009 class of Top Achievers.

Sean Girard and Paul Swanson, Jr.

Principals, Swanson-Girard and Associates, Charlotte, N.C. – Manufacturers' Rep

“It was just us girls,” recalls Sean Girard of the spring day in 1999 when he and Paul Swanson Jr.

opened their foodservice manufacturers' rep group, Swanson-Girard and Associates, in Charlotte, N.C. “Representing just two product lines, we were sitting around praying for the fax machine to ring. Every order was a celebration.”

Fast forward ten years and the partners continue to celebrate. Swanson-Girard's revenues now total \$28 million annually, boosted by a 2005 acquisition that doubled the number of the firm's employees. Not content to rest on their success, the duo continues to invest in the company, updating their document storage system and signing an agreement with a popular chef to demonstrate the equipment lines they sell.

One could argue their success was inevitable. After all, Swanson and Girard had known each other years before launching their business, and their parents are close friends. In fact, their dads work in the same industry: Paul's father is as a manufacturing executive, and Sean's father is as a manufacturer's rep. Paul's grandfather once ran an A&W Root Beer shop.

“This partnership was engineered by our parents, indirectly,” says Girard, 36. Like an arranged marriage? “Honestly, that what it's sounding like more and more, to tell the truth.”

“It couldn't have worked out any better,” the 35-year-old Swanson boasts. “We grew from \$2 million to \$28 million in annual revenue in less than 10 years, so a lot of good things have happened.”

Help Needed

Among the positive developments for Swanson-Girard was the merger with a successful manufacturer's rep group owned by Dave Collins, a respected veteran who was ready to slow down but lacked a suitable successor within his organization. “He adopted Sean and me,” says Swanson, half-jokingly.

The deal added six employees to the company, including Collins, who still manages a territory but more importantly, the partners say, acts as their guru. “People always ask us about the A-list lines we picked up from Dave, but what they don't understand is that we immediately had a mentor. We get his take on situations he faced every day.”

Swanson and Girard regularly tap the expertise of more experienced industry vets, many of whom are friends of their fathers. Jerry Hennebaul, Swanson's first boss, remains a positive influence on him to this day. And David



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Kuelpman, co-founder of Anaheim, Calif.-based KLH Marketing and a friend of Don Girard, recently advised them on database management systems. “One of the best things about these guys is they have sought out and listened to people who have been there to try to avoid pitfalls,” Kuelpman says.

One pitfall Girard and Swanson want to avoid is losing market share during the recession. Although they concede business is slower and orders smaller, they've decided to step up marketing efforts, hoping to maintain their customers' loyalty.

No Backing off

“It's easy to back off. But we just hosted a dealer social night that costs us \$1,500,” Swanson says. “It makes more sense to do more when the economy is sluggish.” In January Swanson-Girard and Associates hired Chef Doug Allen, a local culinarian who works with dealers and manufacturers to demonstrate equipment and generate leads.

Allen's expertise is crucial. “Chefs speak the lingo. They wear whites. They know how to prep food. There's professionalism and validity to what they do. Doug makes our equipment look

better,” Swanson says.

Not everything is going swimmingly, however. The men worry about conglomerates encroaching on their business. Manufacturers who will not hesitate to exploit the relationships Swanson and Girard have nurtured with end-users represent their biggest fear. This becomes particularly worrisome when it comes to restaurant chains, which may end up buying directly from the factory.

“We are seeing a trend to take the relationship out of the hands of the reps. It has gotten to the point where manufacturers feel if there's national-account potential they might as well manage it out of headquarters,” Girard says.

Girard predicts reps of tomorrow will have to discover ways to become much more useful and innovative. “Not to the manufacturer, but to the end-user,” he adds.

The pair claims the design of their decade-old partnership allows it to withstand these threats and others because of their own unique relationship. “We are 50-50 partners contractually and really in every sense of the word. That's not typical,” Swanson explains. “This kind only works when you have a brotherly relationship.”