

New MD faces DNA test

Dana Nelson is managing director of Delaware North Companies Australia (DNA), one of Australia's most successful catering companies. She spoke to **Sue Cartledge** about her plans for DNA and the challenges facing the catering industry in general.

You are the only female MD of a corporate catering company in Australia. Are you starting a trend?

DNA has always had a large number of female employees in senior positions. On our executive, four of the eight positions are held by women. DNA recruits and promotes on ability; I think catering is an industry where a lot of women have the right skill sets. But you don't see this level of female management in other longer established catering companies. It's one of the strengths of DNA, which having been operating in Australia for only 17 years, is still a young company.

What does your role involve?

The full management of the company's Australian and New Zealand businesses — venues, airports, defence, transport hubs, education — and leading the team in Australia and New Zealand. There are four divisions: venue services, retail services (airports), foodservice division (covers educational and defence facilities) and DNA New Zealand.

How big is DNA in Australia?

We have more than 40 sites in Australia, mainly on the east coast, but also in Western Australia and South Australia, and one in New Zealand at Massey University, Auckland. We have 750 permanent employees and between 3500 and 5000 casuals.

What area of the business is your main priority?

The sporting sector is our biggest [market]. We supply all the food and beverages for the large sporting venues, Telstra Dome and the Melbourne Park complex, all the corporate and retail catering on both event and non-event days. During the Australia Open in Melbourne we put on an additional 1500 casuals to handle the extra demand.

Who are your five biggest clients in terms of business?

Melbourne Park (includes the Olympic precinct, Collingwood's Lexus Centre); Telstra Dome; Qantas at Melbourne and Perth airports; retail outlets for NSW State Rail, and the Massey University at Palmerston, NZ.



Dana Nelson, MD, Delaware North Australia is changing the shape of venue catering.

Who are your top five food suppliers?

Coca-Cola, Bidvest, CUB, Bunzl and the Victorian company, University Meats.

Do you strike deals to use them across all your sites?

We have national purchasing agreements with some of them, but we also have state-based agreements with companies like University Meats, which caters solely to Victoria. Also our requirements differ in different states — for example in South Australia our business is more in airports and defence, while in Victoria it's more sporting venues and airports, so the site requirements differ.

What are the challenges in catering for such large numbers?

In any market with entertainment attached, people are looking for more than just the traditional food product that you can get at the footy. They are expecting that wherever they go they'll be able to get good product and experience choice. Instead of the five or six food choices, now they are demanding greater variety and quality at a reasonable price, and they expect to see the branded products they can get on the High St. The challenge for us is to incorporate the brands like Boost and Subway into our portfolio and still leverage off our generic brands.

What are your plans for DNA over the next 24 months?

To continue to leverage off the rebranding we

did in mid-late 2004 and defining our position in the market. We know what we're good at and we know our market, as we've always been aligned with food and beverage service. That's our core business. So we're looking for growth, to move into areas where catering is a core function. We've had recent successes with F&B in Adelaide; we've got the Athletes' Village for the Commonwealth Games, so we want to capitalise on this work we've already done.

What trends do you see emerging in foodservice over the next two years?

Particularly at venues and airports, the trend is for ways to serve the customer faster and offer them innovative products not normally associated with the venue. Customers are increasingly expecting to be able to have a wide choice and they're looking for the branded products they can get anywhere. There is a growing trend in airports for these branded franchises — Starbucks, Subway, Boost, Hudson — all these strong brands are moving into airports and to venues like Telstra Dome and the MCG. The challenge is to deliver service to the client, to incorporate the right number of brands into our portfolio and still leverage off our generic product. Do we take on 15 brands or only one or two? How do you balance the commercial reality of going with franchises with an attractive return to the client and good customer service?

What are the biggest issues the industry currently faces?

The lack of skilled staff or staff interested in being trained. It's a very transient workforce. The catering industry is becoming less attractive to people, and many of them are only doing it as a means to an end, such as earning a living while studying. Managing our human capital is a growing challenge. We've very nearly got zero employment across the country, because of the hard work and long hours and having to work weekends and nights.

How to attract the best possible staff with our inflexible hours, how to manage them and get them to the skill levels we need to deliver the quality product and service. The quality management of our people is our biggest challenge. ●