

businessfleet

GOURMET CATERER

Hones the Art and Science of Fleet Routing

With a delivery window of a mere 15 minutes, Toronto-based Marigolds & Onions uses fleet routing and scheduling software to manage details such as driving time between routes, details of each stop and time spent, and even food type.

BY DARYL LUBINSKY



John Valente emphasizes the importance of customer service in his business, Marigolds & Onions, and the delivery drivers on the front lines of the Toronto-based catering and event planning company are crucial to providing that service. A driver with a professional demeanor is a must when it comes to delivering the food to clients.

Ram Schapira, Marigolds & Onions' operations manager, concurs. "You have to look calm, you have to look good, the food has to look good, and you can't drive too fast and knock stuff over," he says. "It's all

part and parcel to have this whole system working together."

The fleet of 11 vans is paramount to operations for the company, which describes itself as a full-service, off-site caterer. Half of Marigolds & Onions' business entails daily hot food runs to downtown corporate clients, while the other half is social, charitable, corporate, and sports events such as an annual sit-down dinner for 3,000 people for Honda of Canada Manufacturing and the Rogers Cup tennis tournament, serving 150,000 people in one week.

The concept of delivering meals might

sound simple, but Valente describes it as "an incredibly complex business" that must consider many factors in safely and efficiently transporting food to clients.

The company has set a goal of delivering most meals no more than 15 minutes before the start of the client's event. To meet that goal, company officials and drivers must calculate variables such as traffic, how long a driver must wait to get the vehicle into a loading area, and whether the driver must wait for an elevator.

Valente describes performing the task as an "art form," but company officials decid-

ed about a year ago to use Paragon Software Systems' Single Depot software with street level mapping. "It does most of the hard work for you, so you can concentrate on the bigger picture," Schapira says.

FLEET USE

Using Paragon is necessary to manage the fleet of 11 refrigerated vans, which includes four Ford Transits, a two-ton Ford E-250, three 1.5-ton Chevrolet Expresses, and three Mercedes Metris commercial vans.

Valente runs the vehicles to about 18,000 to 20,000 kilometers a year (11,000 to 12,000 miles) and de-fleets them at about 150,000 kilometers (93,000 miles). The list of fleet assets still includes two Chevrolet Astros with more than 200,000 kilometers (124,000 miles), one of which is used solely for parts.

The vehicles, sourced through local dealerships, serve different requirements. The Metris vans work well for daily order drop-offs and are the appropriate size to fit in underground parking lots. "They fit just what is required for a breakfast run, which could be three, four, or five different drops at different locations," Valente says. "Then they come back, reload for lunch, and go back downtown."

Drivers with larger deliveries will use the larger vehicles. The drivers also use those after the events for later pickups of the "smallwares" such as dishes and serving utensils that were dropped off earlier in the day or the previous day, and those can fill a van quickly.

Larger vehicles are also used for larger events, which can serve 100 to 500 people; the company can usually fit 100 to 200 servings into each vehicle. Marigolds will typically send two vehicles to venues that serve more than 200 people.

According to Valente, the branding of the vans sticks in people's minds. Vehicle wraps stand out well, mainly with the Ford Transit and Mercedes Metris. "A lot of

people say, 'I saw your van driving around downtown,'" Valente says. "We have a very unique logo and color scheme, baby blue and bright purple. So it tends to stand out quite easily when you're driving around, especially downtown."

DELIVERY DETAILS

The numerous variables surrounding deliveries are now handled in large part by the routing software. "Back in the day (this information) was on a bunch of spreadsheets, and trying to manage it was a nightmare," Valente says.

Moreover, one employee at the business used to make all those calculations manually. "He was our maestro, and if that guy was sick, it caused so much stress," Schapira says.

Upon starting the relationship, Paragon representatives conferred with the company's IT personnel to understand the intricacies of the catering business to customize the system accordingly. Once programmed, the street level mapping helps ensure allocation of the correct driving time for each route through the dense urban area where most of the company's corporate clients are located.

This also includes designing "macros" that automate scheduling based on specific criteria of a client or stop. For instance, if the hot beverage macro is activated, the program will only allow coffee to come from Marigolds' kitchen. If not, the program allows coffee to be bought offsite before delivery.

One macro manages the scheduling needs of food type — cold or hot — while another identifies equipment and non-disposable serving ware for each order. The day after an order is completed, the software will schedule a stop to pick up the items.

Paragon understands stop specifics such as average time in loading docks and service elevators. Traffic information can be

NUMBERS SHOW PARAGON'S INFLUENCE ON CATERING COMPANY

A look at the numbers illustrates some of the benefits to the Marigolds & Onions catering business since the company began using fleet routing software

- Cost per individual order has gone down 9.25% for delivery charges.
- Fuel costs are down 11%, saving \$3,000 to \$5,000 per month.
- Labor is down 9%.
- The routing solution has removed up to one route per day from the delivery schedule, cut courier use by 50 percent, and reduced delivery labor by 20 percent, saving \$15,000 per month.

inputted to identify construction hot zones or approximate driving speeds at rush hour.

"Paragon has all that in the master data," he says. "We don't even have to think about that. It just schedules appropriately."

While Marigolds' employees must use intuition when using the Paragon software, it provides the top options to consider. "This is where the art part comes back in, to see how much we can tweak it to improve on what it's giving us," Valente says.

GREATER DEMANDS

Valente notes that clients are becoming more demanding when it comes to meeting delivery timeframes. In part because of the software, the business' rate of error is much lower than it used to be, and late deliveries are down. Client retention is up.

"I'm seeing more new names. Companies are calling out of the blue and staying with us," Valente says. "I think people notice the efficiencies of the deliveries."

In Valente's experience, Toronto businesses are more demanding and require more flexibility in their caterers than in other cities. "There are 10 other caterers behind us knocking on that person's door." **BF**

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