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Community-Suffolk understands the value of hard work

By

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Thanks to more than 70 years of success working in the Boston area, Community-Suffolk Inc. was able to use its knowledge and experience to keep business steady since March of 2020, when the COVID-19 crisis through the industry into chaos.

That knowhow trickled down through the years from the early 20th century, when the company's first leader, Larry Piazza, Sr., hawked produce from a pushcart operating out of Boston's Faneuil Hall.

"We're in our fourth generation of the Piazza family at the company, with my niece, Gianna working here now for a few years," said Steven Piazza, managing partner for of Everett, MA-based Community-Suffolk. "This is hard work, and we probably average 12 hours a day, but we know that's important."

He added that it was Larry's devotion to the business and hard work — something that resonates with all Community-Suffolk employees today — that has kept the company on top for so many years.

"Business has been OK this year, but it is tremendous work because of what we've been through," Piazza said. "We're open earlier, we're staying later, and between the investment in the product, in transportation and COVID-19-related costs, we are working our butts off to maintain our figures. There's no rhythm or rhyme to anything anymore. It's just crazy."

For instance, during the summer, if there was a nice weekend, outdoor dining was hot and the company did well, but if it rained, orders would be cut in half. Add to that the delta variant and outbreaks, it was hard to plan anything with any reliability.

"We're trying to stay lean, mean and clean and create any efficiencies we can between the whole team," he said. "We keep the place immaculate, keep the dock open so no one is spending a lot of time at the warehouse and trying to stay ahead of the curve."

Today, the company works out of the New England Produce Center and recently added a brand-new, 12,000-square-foot, free-standing facility right outside where the Boston Market once operated.

Community-Suffolk serves all of New England, New York and the Canadian Maritime Provinces, working with about 30 different products, such as potatoes, celery, carrots, broccoli, onions, lettuce and associated greens, spinach, artichokes, squash, peppers and rutabagas. The company also has a citrus division that includes oranges, lemons, limes, clementines, pummelos and murcotts, along

with apples and pears.

“We have been in the Boston area for a long time and support everyone from Rhode Island to the Canadian border that we can, and it’s been our proving ground,” Piazza said.

Private label offerings include its proprietary Rosebud Brand “Heart of the Harvest” and its MF (Mighty Fine) label for its citrus division.

While no one product seems to be trending in the fall, maintaining a consistency of supply has resulted in some products being pushed more than others, and has been a challenge.

Another challenge is the consistency of transportation, with both issues being on the front burner of the company all year long — and is not getting any easier.

“The logistical issues have been a nightmare,” Piazza said. “What we try to do is between the salesman group is mix loads more efficiently — mix heavy loads with light loads to try and get 25-26 pallets on a truck. We have great relationships with our shippers, and most of them we have been doing business with for 50-60 years, so we can make multiple load deals.”

The latter, he noted, is beneficial for both parties, and savings can be passed on to customers.

“We do strategic advanced planning as far as ads, rebates and special occasion deals,” Piazza said. “With the more mixing of the loads, we have more arrivals, so that makes us fresher every day, and better buyers and sellers.”

Knowing it needs to find the next generation of leaders, Community-Suffolk also works to introduce people to the industry, such as the two young salespeople it now employs — one in the potato division and one in the broccoli and celery division — who started working while in school in several aspects of the business.

“They are now working beside the salesman and eventually will either continue to work with them or aspire to take over an item or two,” Piazza said. “We need to be ready for the future.”

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