

A cup of coffee that is part of their day
and a brand that is part of their lives.



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'BRAND' NEW GROWTH



When your company's physical plant and employee population is the size of a small city, it's a given that a variety of foodservice operations are needed to satisfy the hunger pangs of a diverse group of workers.



At Microsoft's headquarters in Redmond, Wash., the company has managed to achieve this in a significant way, using a combination of contracted brands and local entrepreneurs. These efforts not only please customers but also link Microsoft strongly with the community. In the past two years alone, Microsoft has brought 18 local brands onto its 338-acre campus, comprising a total of 30 operating units.

The brands, which include The Teapot and Pho Cyclo (both Vietnamese), Typhoon (Thai) and Acapulco Fresh (Mexican), all come from within 10 miles of the Microsoft campus. The impetus for the implementation of these brands came from employee requests, says Thomas Teves, regional vice president for Compass Group North America, which manages Microsoft's foodservice program.

Compass brands are also well-represented on the corporate campus, with outlets such as Outtakes, Wolfgang Puck, Dream Steam and Olo Sushi dotting the landscape. But, in the interest of diversity, a number of stations are not branded. "Our customers don't want all brands," says Teves, "because [brands are] priced at market prices, and also they are looking for daily variety that a brand does not consistently offer."

There's no easy route to being selected for the Microsoft family home. Before they are chosen, the brands are thoroughly checked—their health department scores, their HACCP plans, their ratings online and their audits. Compass employees also drop in on them unannounced to check out their businesses—both the front and the back of the house operations.

"They have to be doing a great job before we bring them in," says Teves.

Growing pains: The software giant is currently in a growth mode that will result in the opening of 10 new cafeterias (six of which are already open) and nine more coffee kiosks by June. That would bring the total number of cafeterias to 34, and the number of coffee bars to 37.

These additional foodservice operations are needed both to feed an increasing employee base and to make foodservice more convenient. And the expansion won't be complete in June. Several more foodservice facilities are scheduled to open in April 2009, when the West Campus Commons Building opens. That site will feature 12 foodservice operations filled with local brands—some of which are



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already established at Microsoft and some of which will be new.

Company executives also hope that the Commons building will pull Microsoft employees from one side of the campus—divided by Highway 520—to the other. The East Campus houses 45,000 software experts, compared with only 5,000 on the West Campus. To encourage cross-fertilization, the Commons building will feature a bank, a bookstore, a full-service sports bistro offering wait-service dinner and alcoholic drinks and even a mini-spa.

Shoring up the present: In addition to its expansion projects, Compass Group has been working hard to improve its existing foodservice. One such example, implemented in September, is Lunch Direct. Under this program, an employee can order a sandwich or a salad from his or her desk and its delivery is guaranteed within an hour. Five rotating choices are offered every day—three sandwiches and two salads. The menu is designed so that all items can be pre-made in the central commissary, so they are ready to be delivered when ordered.

Microsoft Dining Services currently receives 70 to 80 orders per day for Lunch Direct meals, fewer than expected. Mark Freeman, employee services senior manager, explains that the difficulty may just be in changing customers' behavior.

"I think it's like when we introduced our laundry and dry cleaning service; people aren't used to bringing laundry to work" Freeman notes. "And we've got these people trained to go to the cafeteria, so it could take a while to change people's habits.

"If a program is not hitting the mark with employees, we reevaluate to ensure we are investing in the areas that mean the most to our people," he adds. "And we need to use this same strategy when changing their dining habits."

Satisfying vegetarians: Another major thrust at Microsoft has been providing more vegetarian and vegan foods. Several Microsoft employees don't eat any meat products for religious reasons, "which means there's no room for error," says Teves. "It's very intense; servers use different gloves, boards and knives," he points out. All self-serve utensils for vegetarian food have green handles so mistakes don't occur.

The vegetarian food here is very popular, even with non-vegetarians. "People like [local brand] Teapot so much that the fact that it's vegetarian is secondary," says Teves.

Organics are also getting some attention, and a local brand, Organics To Go, has been brought in to provide take-out options, which are clearly labeled as organic. Compass is also aiming to have the salad bars be 75% organic in the next fiscal year. "The salad bar is the easiest place to go organic," says Freeman.

In a similar vein, Microsoft is also working toward becoming more green and sustainable. It is working with the nonprofit Green Restaurant Association to see how much it can easily do and is in the process of creating a charter and navigating the various issues that going green creates. The team is also working on sustainability, but the scale of the Redmond campus requires detailed logistical planning to effectively implement it.

Dining with chefs: Another focus of the software giant's cafeterias are chef's tables, which are being showcased more frequently, as consumers become more interested in food and how to cook it. Each cafeteria offers at least two chef's tables a week, cooking dishes such as pad thai and Mongolian stir-fry. Occasionally dining services also brings in local or famous chefs such as Martin Yan and Carey Neff. Two chefs always man the tables—one to cook and one to explain the food to customers.

And finally, in keeping with the high-tech atmosphere in which these cafeterias are couched, digital signage is being installed in the cafeterias, highlighting specials. These have so far been implemented in five cafes and espresso kiosks, and are expected to be in the other locations sometime in 2008.

According to Freeman, the participation rate in the cafeterias here is 60% at lunch and 75% for the entire day, although he admits the high percentage has a lot to do with people not wanting to give up a good parking spot.

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Since they're its focus, the Microsoft employees dictate a lot of what happens with foodservice. A customer survey last year elicited an enormous 37% response rate, which certainly adds up when you have a base of almost 60,000 people. Raffles featuring Microsoft gadgets helped encourage employees to participate.

Cafeteria managers also conduct regular pulse surveys on the floor, chatting with customers. And, the MS Dining Web site draws 50 to 60 comments on an average day (from all U.S. Microsoft facilities), with a 5-to-1 rate of positive/negative feedback.

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