



Roll up your sleeves, and ask yourself why

IF YOU ARE A RETAILER, YOU MAY BE EXCUSED IF YOU DON'T RECOGNISE THE name SSF. That's because the company is a service provider rather than a supplier. However, most certainly you have come into contact with their services over the past 15 years.

With 200+ representatives on the road, SSF regularly calls on around 12,000 retail outlets Australia-wide with market-leading products and newly released products from as many as a dozen suppliers.

Yet the company is mentioned more often than not when industry awards for customer service are handed out. In fact SSF is currently rated among the top three companies in the industry for quality of service to retailers in the Impulse Channel.

In a two hour chat with C&I, joint owner and Managing Director, Jamie Lobina explained why.

"Our mindset around here is to roll up our sleeves and take on our clients' challenges," said Jamie.

"That's 'WHY' - we turn up in the morning and 'WHY' we are in business. This focus drives our company and our culture. We have spent a lot of time in recent years understanding our WHY. We fight for our clients' brands, and you will often hear in the hallways of our offices the words 'just get it done'. We look for companies that share the same WHY.

"Phil Constable and I started the business 15 years ago this year. We'd both been working hard to set up a sales force in WA for Frito-Lay Snack Foods during the previous 6 months. Over a drink one day in early 1996 we asked each other: 'Why can't we do this for other companies?' That's how the concept of SSF came to be.

Colleagues say that Jamie Lobina often tends to attract pugnacious clients and steadfastly refuses

to hand-pick the easy jobs. If Superior Sales Force is driven by a philosophy, it's worth spending a moment to understand how that philosophy was created.

The Early Years

Born in 1972, there was every reason why Jamie would not succeed; his mother had him when she was 16 years old, and he didn't have a father. Before the age of 5 Jamie faced challenges within the family and doctors told his mother that due to health issues her son may never grow as other kids. Open heart surgery however didn't slow Jamie down. The challenges continued as family issues forced Jamie to move school 7 times before the age of 11.

"The difficult childhood I faced really moulded the person I am today. I had to fight for everything. No one gave me anything; I had to work for it, and to believe in myself. At an early age I learnt these attributes of survival, which made me who I am today.

gave me the opportunity to grow and develop academically. I started out in the lowest classes for all subjects and slowly progressed through the ranks. I loved school, worked hard at it and eventually did very well academically. I still regularly see one of my wonderful old teachers, who took me under his wing and mentored me during my six years at high school."

"I learnt a lot in those difficult years", Jamie explains. "I learnt how to fight for the underdog and I found myself standing side to side with those kids from broken homes who were being bullied, and got myself into some hot water sometimes by sticking up for them."

The Traineeship

"Towards the end of high school I had decided that I wanted to get into engineering and was selected for a ground engineer's traineeship at Qantas. After six months I was in the top five per cent of the students, but it was clear that being on the tools, and doing shift work and not being able to train with the Dragons, wasn't going to work for me. My grandfather owned a business that operated about eight canteens at some of Sydney's biggest technical colleges and I naturally went to him for advice.

"He had strong connections with most of the major suppliers and said that there was either a cadetship at Coke that came with a car, or a job as a van salesman at Arnott's. He said the Coke job was easier. So, at 18 years of age, I took the job at Arnott's and was proud to become one of the youngest van salesmen in the company. I was senior relief driver soon after and then Business Development Manager at 21 in Sydney before moving to Perth as State Manager. I had also started a part-time Associate Diploma in Management, which I completed before leaving for Perth.

"Mind you, the Human Resources department at Arnott's, which was now Frito-Lay (later to become Snack Brands), were not in favour of me being promoted so far at such a tender age. But Richard Kaiser, now Sales Director of Snack Brands Australia, and Phil Constable, now my business partner, over-ruled them and off I went to Perth.

"Perth was exciting and I loved being able to roll my sleeves up and get stuck in, working very long hours, both in the office and on the road. We cut freight rates, opened new accounts and grew the business more than tenfold in less than 18 months. At age 24, I received the highest

“I loved being able to roll my sleeves up and get stuck in...”

accolade with Frito-Lay receiving the Managing Director's Award for 1995, which at the time was one of the proudest moments of my life."

By this time Jamie was married to his childhood sweetheart.

"Natalie was my first love. We have known each other since we were 14 and when I was 22 we were married. Natalie has always been my biggest supporter and without her I am not sure where I would have ended up."

It was no surprise then that Natalie was very supportive when Jamie was asked to relocate back to Sydney as Sydney Sales Manager Frito-Lay Snack Foods.

"By age ten, my mother had a serious back injury and I moved back home to take care of her - everything from bathing, cooking meals and doing the laundry and the housework, as well as going to school. That went on for three years as she slowly got better.

It was about this time Jamie got involved with sports and, especially, Rugby League. It was a great outlet and he says he loved the training and the discipline. Jamie captained most sides he played in and his strong leadership led him to play at the senior grades with St George Dragons Under 21's alongside several gifted players who were to become household names in Rugby League.

"One of the great breaks for me, after my disrupted primary schooling, was being admitted to Kogarah Marist Brothers High School in Sydney. They

ADVICE FOR RETAILERS

- Always support the companies that support you and who make an effort to understand your business.
- Understand that suppliers are giving you the best deal they can and that, because of crazy supermarket anomalies in the business, no supplier can match supermarket specials.
- Profit is a result of getting things right and not a goal in itself.

ADVICE FOR SUPPLIERS

- Independents are the lifeline of our business, support them. Ask yourself where your company will be if you were to lose them?
- Find the WHY in your business. It will change everything.
- Read the recent article on Supermarket buying in C&I* and understand that as manufacturers you're in control of the impulse market destiny.

* "Supermarket Bombshell" pages 6-9, C&I, October/November 2013

ADVICE IN GENERAL

- Try to always understand the WHY and never allow the negatives in your life to define you. "Getting the job done is more about the doing than the saying."

"But it seemed that my career had halted so I moved to Spring Valley Beverages as National Account Manager, where we launched Frucor's V into the route and convenience channels in mid-1998."

"I mentioned that Phil Constable and I had been working on the Superior Sales Force concept for about two years. In February 1999 I left Spring Valley and we started SSF three months later, operating from my home, in a three metre square bedroom that we shared with my new born son, Mitchell.

"The early years were very difficult for Phil and me, but I was used to that in my life. We just rolled up our sleeves and got the job done. I think Phil and I had approximately one and a half weeks of annual leave in the first eight years of the business."

What started in a room of my house, has now grown to the point where we are a recognized brand and we are proud to be supporting 200+ team members that have become our family. I am conscious of the fact that I want to provide an opportunity to people that I didn't have when I was young, to provide a family atmosphere that was lacking in my life.

"These days, I make time to do a bit of work with children from broken homes, mentoring kids who are doing it a bit tough in life. But I spend every spare minute I can with Natalie, our 14 year old son Mitchell, and our five year old daughter Mathilda.

"For me, family is now a very big part of the WHY."

