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Friday, May 30, 2008

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If you've ever set foot in a Bay Area grocery store, chances are you have experienced the work of John Sutti, a name you've never heard, yet a man whose influence is pervasive.

Sutti Associates was founded in 1969 as a design firm for grocery retailers. It has evolved to become a one-stop shop for design, strategy, construction and product development.

Twenty years ago, grocery stores didn't have salad bars, soup bars or hot food bars. Sutti Associates helped change that. Same with gourmet cheese departments, olive bars, and those charming tables set up with all the fixings for a themed meal, like the basil, pasta, cheese, chocolate and Chianti for Italian night.

Sutti helps his grocery clients, which include almost every grocery store in the Bay Area, and many across Northern California, think like fashion merchants, laying out products and ingredients to spark the impulse to buy or inspire a shopper to try something new for dinner.

In just the past three years, revenue at the privately held Burlingame company is up more than 50 percent. While the company declined to share specifics, its annual revenue is more than \$30 million.

Diversifying offerings

That owes in part to the efforts of Larry Bruscia, a natural food industry veteran who invented trail mix back in 1973, and who has been Sutti Associates' president since 2004. Under his leadership, Sutti has diversified, so to speak.

John Sutti, the founder and chairman, built a company that handled the design, architecture and construction of supermarkets -- an unusually robust offering of



Spencer Brown

"My role is to continue to build on the legacy, strategy, relationships that John Sutti created," says Bruscia (right).

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complementary services. With Bruscia, the company has gone further, adding the sourcing and installation of equipment and developing private-label food products and specialized food programs.

"My role is to continue to build on the legacy, strategy, relationships that John Sutti created," Bruscia said.

Sutti can shepherd a new store all the way from concept to ribbon cutting, and with most renovations generating a 20 percent return, the smart money would want Sutti for any remodel. Most grocers remodel every seven to 10 years on average. Indeed, Sutti believes he has touched every grocer in San Francisco.

Remodels are Sutti's bread and butter, particularly of independent grocers looking for an edge, but the firm does much more.

"We feel innovation is the lifeblood of what we do. We bring new ideas and concepts to retail," Bruscia said. "That's what brings us new customers."

Among the innovations that are now standard supermarket fare are gourmet cheese sections, ripe with bries, bleus and chèvres. That came when Sutti worked with **Mollie Stone's** and learned that some of the store's customers also shopped at a specialty cheese shop on 24th Street.

"I believe the way to grow your retail business is to get your customer to spend more of her money in your store. How do you do that? Ask her," Sutti said. "What we do is take the time to listen to our clients' clients," whom Sutti refers to collectively as "Mrs. Jones."

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