

The independent Supermarket industry is in a very healthy state. Our members are experiencing very strong increases in sales, profit and capital growth within their businesses. Retailers around the nation are to be congratulated, particularly, those stores that have invested in refurbishments, whether they be large or small, as without exception these investments have contributed significantly to business growth.

Please see inside this edition the opening of Ritchies Supa IGA, Griffith in NSW. We would also like to congratulate the owners and staff of IGA Pyrmont, Sydney which opened on the 24th October and FoodWorks Bradbury, NSW which opened 29th November.

Christmas and the very busy times are fast approaching which I am sure all retailers are looking forward to. Needless to say the success of this once a year trading time will greatly depend upon store owners and managers rigorously planning their product range, stock quantities, merchandising, display, storage and most importantly staffing. Now is also the time to ensure all staff (existing and new comers – don't forget those casuals) are well versed with OH&S in your store. 'Prevention is much better than cure'.

It has been a year of rapid change for the entire industry. This year we have witnessed further national consolidation of independent brands with a clear focus on raising retailing standards in every facet of an independent supermarket owners business.

Consistent customer service can only be achieved with a vigilant approach by all independent supermarket owners adhering to what the customer wants. Attention to exceptional personalised customer service is the number one strength and advantage all independent supermarkets have over the chains.

As a Western Australian retailer said recently, "we listen to our customers and give them what they want to the best of our ability. We put in the extra effort and customers see this."

In our journeys around the nation we have been receiving feedback that supermarket consumers are looking for every excuse to not shop at the chains. Customers are saying "they are not being recognised and feeling valued."

Independent supermarkets have never been provided with a better opportunity to put 'a stake in the ground' within their respective communities.

Leon Gettler, The Age newspaper business reporter, is quoted as saying in an article published on 27th October, that "despite the enormous strength and presence Woolworths has, it is vulnerable because it lacks emotional connection with Australians." This is precisely the strength independent supermarkets do have!

He further states "the chains have overlooked the things that excite customers. The opportunity for the new Coles and probably Woolies is to start listening to customers in the stores. Whilst there is plenty of data to interpret customer demands the chains have not been listening". To make the change he said, "was not that difficult". The key for Coles was to start engaging with the customer. "What retailers have is space where they can talk to you, have conversations with you, engage with you, inspire you" he said. "The supermarkets fail to do that in this country. They (the chains) should take the step and make it work for you (the consumer), get you in, slow you down, inspire you."

Independent supermarket industry leaders are saying "now is the time to identify what your businesses are renowned for with your customers and staff. Now is the time to ascertain how you can exploit those opportunities to attract customers and in turn raise your sales and profits."

The MGA has enjoyed a wonderful year of growth and change, growing from 620 to 1,100 members including Western Australia, Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales/ACT and Queensland. We envisage MGA membership growth in all states to continue in 2008.

The team at the MGA has grown from 4 full time employees to 10 full time employees as well as establishing a close network of national service provider partners. The MGA's particular expertise and focus is on industry Workplace Relations and Training.

The MGA is fast becoming renowned for being the 'Workplace Relations Industry Experts' under the leadership of Marie Brown, MGA's Workplace Relations Legal Counsel. There is a wonderful team of advisors ready to assist our members with any workplace relations queries and issues, regardless of size.

I strongly encourage our members who may be looking for an expert in Occupational Health and Safety (Safety and Health in WA), to assist them in their businesses, to look no further. The MGA, under the direction of Michael Russell, MGA's National Training Manager, has developed a strategy to reach all our members nationally in the areas of store audits, assessments and importantly, training.

Independent supermarket owners saying "she will be right" when discussing OH&S for their staff and customers is something of the past. Call the MGA if you wish to know more about this vital area of importance to your businesses. 'We are here to help you.'

The past month has taken the MGA team to many locations in Australia to take up the opportunity to engage and understand our member's needs. The MGA team has relished the opportunity to meet with retailers face to face to address their concerns and issues.

We have attended the FoodWorks National Conference in North Queensland, nine IGA NSW/ACT Village meetings, conducted Junior Wage/Trainee Wage Rates retailer forums in Perth, Sydney, Canberra, metro Melbourne and regional Victoria, visited Tasmania and conducted training courses in WA, NSW/ACT and Victoria.

On behalf of the MGA team, I would like to sincerely thank all industry stakeholders and retailers from the FoodWorks and IGA brands for their assistance and support to enable these opportunities of engagement in 2007.

As most members are aware, the Australian Fair Pay Commission (AFPC) is reviewing Junior Wage / Trainee Wage rates and is seeking input from industry bodies such as the MGA. The MGA is currently working on a major national Junior Wage / Trainee Wage rate submission to the AFPC. This submission, due in February 2008, will incorporate all the views of our members around the nation.

Thank you to all retailers who responded to our request to fill in and return research questionnaires and who attended the retailer forums. It is of paramount importance that you have your say on this matter. The response has been wonderful from all states and the feedback has been outstanding. Owing to the collation of data and information still being forwarded to us, we will not be able to share the insights from this research until the next edition of this magazine.

Finally, on behalf of the MGA board and staff, I would like to wish all members on top of a brilliant Christmas and New Year trading period, a safe, restful and happy festive time with your families over the Christmas and New Year period.

Jos de Bruin

*Current initiative: Junior wage rates. Review our statement on page 12. We welcome any feedback.*