

## Convenience on Demand

By Lauren Hubbard

August 10, 2009 - Convenience in shopping isn't just a benefit for the modern college student -- it's an absolute necessity that defines where and how they shop. Looking at the needs of college students, Philadelphia-based ARAMARK Higher Education saw the opportunity for a profitable specialized store, and took it with their Provisions on Demand (P.O.D.) Market.

The group, a subsidiary of ARAMARK World, provides food and support services for colleges and universities, including campus stores, coffee kiosks and branded restaurants. In addition to facilities management, the company serves more than 200 million meals annually to students, faculty and visitors at more than 500 institutions, so it was hardly a newcomer when it came to understanding the demands of college-age consumers.

"Our research told us students were looking for fresh prepared foods and everyday essentials in one convenient location on campus," said Mark Walker, associate vice president of convenience retailing. "Our goal was to develop a highly customized solution that delivers quality, convenience, variety and value."

The P.O.D. Market pilot stores began opening on campuses in fall 2008 at Brandeis University, University of Tennessee and University of Toledo, and so far they're performing above expectations.

The company chose particular schools for the pilot program as a way to test out the breadth of the P.O.D. Market system. "[These locations] were selected because they represent a small, medium and large installation. We wanted to be sure we could create the brand experience in all size locations," Walker said.

Ranging from 800 square feet to a little more than 2,000 square feet, the P.O.D. Markets are located in school residential buildings or other high-traffic areas on college campuses, such as student centers.

The P.O.D. stores are run by each school's food program -- which is in turn run by ARAMARK Higher Education -- and carry selections for the campus meal plan, as well as proprietary foodservice options. This type of site management allows for changes to be made on a school-by-school basis.

In October, for example, the student union at Brandeis University successfully advocated to have more P.O.D. Market selections added to the school's meal plan. Likewise, the University of Tennessee store recently made the decision to remain closed on the Sabbath, according to reports from the schools.

### Specializing for Success

Today's college students, or "Millennials," are a particularly tech-savvy group, having grown up in the midst of the "on demand" revolution, and it's not unusual for them to have products geared toward their particular tastes. "The whole idea of 'demanding results' led us to creating a store name that immediately stated the brand promise: Provisions on Demand (P.O.D.)," said Paul Wolski, creative director of Miller Zell Inc., the creative team behind P.O.D. Markets. "We extended this promise to include five core brand pillars -- Customer Attention, Choice, Full and Fresh Quality, Fair Pricing and Environmental Responsibility."

With these concepts in mind, ARAMARK Higher Education set out to do campuswide research to determine what products students wanted to see in their stores. This research led them to the

individualized product selection, now a hallmark of its locations. One campus, for example, may offer a wide range of organic and kosher products, while another will feature a more traditional selection. "The biggest difference between us and a traditional convenience store is that we offer organic, kosher, gluten-free and locally grown foods," Walker said. "We also do not sell cigarettes or lottery."

The stores specialize in foodservice, combining the concepts of a specialty grocery store with fresh, grab-and-go selections. Each location features daily fresh options such as breakfast sandwiches, burritos, wraps, sushi and salads, as well as fresh produce, bakery items and a coffee selection. There is also limited seating available for students who want to sit down and grab a bite, making the markets a social center, as well as a convenience outlet.

Though beverages are the top seller overall in addition to the foodservice options, some stores also offer items including bulk candy, gallons of milk and all-natural frozen meals, as well as batteries, one-dose packs of medication and beauty items.

This kind of customization has become a buzzword for P.O.D. Markets, since each one is specially crafted to fit its particular environment. In addition to the kinds of products students can get, each store is made unique to its campus through a signature in-store mural. "Our designers work with each school," Walker explained, adding they go through their photo archives and select an image that best reflects the campus environment.

"We knew it was important to find a way to inject individual campus identity into each store design without altering the overall P.O.D. aesthetic," added Wolski. To avoid the challenges of incorporating specific school colors and logos, as well as the dangers of becoming dated, the group decided on vintage black and white photography with humorous captions to give a nod to the college campus' history.

"Focus groups with college students revealed their desire to be viewed as adult consumers; they did not respond well to concepts that were too lighthearted in tone or humor (they read that as "cheesy" or "condescending") or too communication heavy. They wanted a self-guided experience with subtle shopping cues," Wolski explained.

With this in mind, ARAMARK sought to give the P.O.D. Market convenience stores a warmer, more residential feel with touches such as wood tones, stainless steel finishing and pendant lighting. "Those details also break the notion that convenience stores have to be cold, glaring and unrefined spaces," he said.

The P.O.D. Markets store design has been a success, having been named the Retail Design Institute's International Convenience Store of the Year, along with other awards.

But underneath all of the specialized products and design, one key element has remained the focus -- serving the specific demands of the college shopper.

"College students are smart, savvy consumers," said Walker. "They want quality, convenience, variety and value."

Though specific locations were not given, following the success of the current stores, ARAMARK plans to rollout more P.O.D. Markets on campuses over the next three years.