

Viewpoint

Size doesn't always matter in a food service contractor
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Q*uestion:* When I'm looking for a food service contractor, should I stick to the big national companies or include the regional and local companies?

A*nswer:* It all depends, and that's a more responsive answer than you might think.

"It" depends on the size, scope and nature of your operation, and the degree of risk you're willing to take.

If yours is a large, multi-unit university, your choice is limited to the three national companies, Aramark, Compass Group and Sodexo. For a company with multiple locations you can add Guckenheimer, the fourth-largest national company, to your list.

For single-site campuses and companies, even pretty big ones, the choice is much wider. Regional and local companies can be considered as well.

There's a risk with any company of any size you select. No matter how carefully you vet proposals and check references, there's a chance it will fail to deliver the promised quality, service and/or cost reductions.

Big companies and small ones can assign the wrong manager or misunderstand your objectives or otherwise fail to perform.

The larger companies have an advantage in systems, marketing resources and the like, but whether and how they are implemented at your location depends on the regional vice president and district manager. Unless you have a huge operation, the regional VP is the highest-level executive who will pay any attention to your operation.

At the regional and local level, in most cases, the company's success rests on the shoulders of the owner/president. He/she sets the standards, makes most decisions and, if the company will succeed, remains very close to his/her clients and operations.

When Terry Vince led Daka, Inc, the regional company he founded, he would disappear from the office for a week every so often and appear at Daka accounts anywhere the company operated. If something was wrong, he'd fix it on the spot.

Other entrepreneurial company leaders do much the same.

So, what should you do? *Don't* make a decision based on size alone. Consider all the companies that have a track record with comparable clients. *Do* make the capability of the contractor's people you'll work with directly a primary factor in your decision.

- Tom Mac Dermott