

COVER

Karen Bressler Continues to Carve Out Added Value at Agar

By Helen Graves

Growing up, Karen Bressler never talked with her father about joining, never mind running, the family meat and seafood distributorship, Agar Supply, so when he asked her to come on board when she was at a career crossroads, she told him she'd have to think about it. Nine years later, Bressler is CEO and, following an intense transition to broad-line foodservice, she's continuing to move the \$350 million, 280-employee supplier forward.

"I'm sitting here through a large course of events that I couldn't have possibly anticipated when I joined in 1992," Bressler says. "Today, I feel great. There were a couple years when a lot of us had no life, but I always had a sense there would be a light at the end of the tunnel."

Agar is now basking in that light, thanks to a new 275,000 square-foot warehouse and headquarters in Taunton, a state-of-the-art computer system and a full-service reorientation to distribute meats, poultry, seafood, fresh and frozen produce, dairy, foodservice grocery and non-food items. The transition, however, wasn't easy for the company or for its current CEO. A family leadership change — with a woman at the helm — only compounded matters.

Bressler freely admits to growing up wanting a career in the international arena. Working at Agar, founded by her grandfather Karl around 1940, was never an issue for her or her two sisters. Bressler studied international relations first as an undergrad and then in business school and is fluent in several languages. She began in the toy import business and, after six years, though happy in her industry, was mulling a company change. At that point, her father, Alan, asked her to consider joining Agar.

The company at that time had expanded from its beginnings as a pork distributor to Chinese restaurants to become New England's largest meat distributor to restaurants and retailers.

"There were risks for both of us in terms of what my joining would do to the culture," Bressler says. "I made a deal with him: I'll work for Agar but no promises and we'll see how it goes and no hard feelings if it doesn't work."

Bressler began in sales and administration at then Agar-owned Genoa Sausage. She next spent a year sampling different departments within Agar. "I didn't have a clear path once that was over," she says. "We're not a company with layers of management where you can just insert people. I didn't know where I was going to wind up. I basically had to go to my father and say, 'I've been in positions of responsibility before, let's find a place for me.'"

As it turned out, Bressler was able to step into the newly vacated credit manager's position, a role she had performed during her import days. Over the next six years, she took on other responsibilities, including sales manager of the Chinese restaurant department, until the company hit a crossroads. Not only was the retail market changing and so Agar saw an opportunity to expand its foodservice business, but the distributor had also out-

grown its Boston Meat Market location.

"We either had to sell off a piece of the business, sell altogether or relocate," Bressler says. "My father and I sat down at that point and did some heavy strategic planning. He wanted to know my commitment level before he took the next step. I was fully committed, and although he wanted to pursue other interests, he made another major commitment to the business."



Karen Bressler sustains Agar's momentum after transitioning to broad-line foodservice with a new 275,000 square-foot facility.

The 1999 decision to build an ultra-modern facility in Taunton and use the opportunity to realign around broad-line foodservice while maintaining all current business set off a tumultuous year-long chain reaction. Employees left for a variety of reasons: the 30-mile commute, the new focus on foodservice and, possibly, the leadership change now underway.

"My father was clearly looking to retire and some people weren't comfortable with that change, whether it was not being comfortable with me or simply not being comfortable with change," Bressler says. "Coming in being a woman was highly unusual and I think being the owner's daughter was a second strike but I just put my head down and tried hard."

There was so much to do with so much impact at every level — from maintaining the trading-floor feet within the new headquarters to creating an efficient distribution facility to implementing a new foodservice computer system to adding a first-time road sales force to leasing a new fleet of trucks to hiring 90 percent of the top-line managers — that everyone on board grabbed pieces of whatever needed to be done.

"I once spoke at a seminar about all the changes we went through for a half hour. I didn't go into them, I just listed them, there were so many," Bressler says. "We went from a meat/seafood rough and tumble kind of business to taking the best talent that's out there and putting them together in one place."

The transformation, however necessary, did present a temporary downside. Some customers left during the

glitches of a new system getting underway. There were competitors who spread rumors that Agar was going out of business and others that simply capitalized on the opportunity to lure customers away. The HR director was stricken ill during the most complicated of times. The company president left in 2001.

"There were more changes at the top and then I became president through default, since I was the one holding the bag," Bressler says,

laughing. "We eventually hired a president and COO. My father wanted to get out of the day-to-day at that point, so I became CEO and he became chairman."

In retrospect, Bressler would have preferred a longer timeline for change, but with so few people, she doesn't see any other way to get from point A to point B. And time has smoothed the bumps in the road.

"Out of all that turmoil came an incredible team. It's not just my opinion, it's also the opinion of the people who come in and see what we have and who we are. There's definitely a sense of being on the other side right now and landing together," Bressler says.

"Customers feel good

that there's an Agar in the marketplace. They like that we're family-owned and they feel a bigger connection to us than to some of the large corporate houses. And our employees really want to be here. Three or four years ago, I'd say the water wasn't as warm."

Going forward, Bressler expects to expand outside the New England region with imminent customer acquisition. In the coming year, she plans to reevaluate systems and efficiencies plus focus on initiatives ignored in the scramble of transition. "We're in a really unique place right now. There aren't many independently owned distributors in our size bracket and no one does business the way we do," she says. "We're still New England's largest meat distributor and we'll keep that ideology going. As a distributor, our focus is always going to be the 'how' and the how is going to be about providing more value to the customer."

In her role today, Bressler operates with two key goals in mind: maintaining the health of the company and its employees and reaching out to customers. Although Agar doesn't "scream" woman-run business and Bressler doesn't expect to be joined by her sisters, she believes she lends a unique perspective.

"I think we've created a great place to work, and so leading that might be a bit more female, and we as a company have focused on listening to the customer," Bressler says. "It's nice to look around me and smile and see that we've arrived where we wanted to be, but also know that we can never let up, that this is a fiercely competitive business and there's always going to be a long road ahead."

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