

A day in the life of a

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Foodservice Distributor

Working for a broadline food distributor, Mary Jo Staertow is passionate about keeping CAB® center of the plate.

by **Miranda Reiman**, *Certified Angus Beef*

Before the sun comes up, before the bustle and sounds of a young family fill her home, Mary Jo Staertow is already tackling the challenges of the day.

The first task? Checking any messages that have come in overnight, just to be sure there are no emergencies that have popped up since she last glanced at her home office computer the night before. In her world, running out of coconut cream pie can create the same sense of urgency that a cows-are-out phone call might have on a cattleman.

Staertow works in sales for Palmer Foodservice, a broadline distributor based in Rochester, N.Y., that stocks 8,000 items — from protein and vegetables to cleaning products and napkins.

Every day breaks the mold, yet it blends together to follow the same “typical” pattern. Early this Tuesday morning, Staertow’s iPhone reveals nothing that just can’t wait.

So, after she prepares herself for a day on the go, she seamlessly transitions into her second full-time job: wife and mother.

Staertow and her husband get their 6- and 9-year-olds ready for school. As they bound out the door to meet the bus, Staertow is right behind them, now fully engaged in her role, not so much as saleswoman but as a solutions provider.

On the road

She first points her car toward the company’s warehouse 35 miles from her home, where she’ll pick up some fryer oil

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A day in the life ...

It takes a heap of work, coordination and planning to get a tasty steak from pasture to plate. In honor of National Beef Month in May, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) decided to check in with the people who devote their life’s work to providing, cooking and delivering the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand to tables around the world.

CAB staff shadowed professionals in various segments of the beef industry, walking in their shoes for a day. They shared their experiences with readers throughout the month on www.gorare.com

and www.blackinkwithcab.com, CAB’s foodie consumer blog and beef production blog, respectively.

With so many segments in the industry, the blog series helps connect the dots from farm to fork. We share some of those insights in this series prepared for the *Angus Journal*. We began the series in August with a feature on Chef Zac Alft. Our second article on retail meat cutter Pat DiBiasio was in the September issue. This month we follow Mary Jo Staertow, a broadline food distributor.

and ice cream for delivery to customers who unexpectedly ran out.

Staertow may cover 250-300 miles in a day, stopping for 20-40 minutes at a time to visit with loyal customers before making a “prospect” call or two.

“The bucket’s always leaking, so to speak, so you always have to be filling the top end of that,” she says. “We’re always keeping our eyes and ears open and continuing to pursue new business.”

Yet, it’s not just about ringing in the sales. The daughter of Italian immigrants, Staertow sees how intertwined food and family are. The love of it all is what called her to the kitchen during the first part of her career as a chef manager. That background helps her gauge customers’ needs, and it’s why she feels it’s her calling, not just her job, to respond.

The morning starts out with the regular rounds: a mom-and-pop shop known for their burgers and fries, a new nostalgic-style ice cream shop that serves a classic Philly cheese steak, and a high-end steak house that recently reopened with a new chef.

“We’re really excited about our opportunities with them,” Staertow says. She leaves, confident that the information she shared about putting additional beef items on the menu sat well with the chef. They discussed value cuts and adding steak sandwiches or salads as lunch items. That visit took more than an hour, though, which means that Staertow will not be enjoying one of those sit-down meals she helps create.

This is a regular occurrence, so she taps into her stash: an apple, banana and nuts in the car.

“Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday are the biggest selling days of the week. By the time we get toward the weekend, folks are pretty much set on what they need to get them through the weekend,” Staertow says, unless one of those emergencies crops up.

Between two scheduled stops, Staertow delivers that fryer oil to a relieved chef. It’s a quick drop-off, and she’s back in the car and on the phone.

“I do a lot of business when I’m in my car,” she says.

Food and people

The day is a blur of visits: at one of Rochester’s first microbreweries that offers upscale pub fare, a Greek family diner with an entirely made-from-scratch menu and a country club just getting cranked up for the golf season.

The restaurant operators expect her visits. They’ve become accustomed to her enthusiastically scurrying in around the same time each week and asking some



► As part of the CAB Master’s of Brand Advantages program, participants learn about beef cuts from meat scientist Phil Bass.

version of the same question: “What went right, and how can we support you going forward?”

It’s not a question read straight out of a customer service handbook. It is one Staertow asks because she genuinely cares.

“My passions are food and people,” she says. “This way I can help people be profitable and realize success and can really be part of their business, and I still feel like I have a creative outlet.”

Her company offers in-depth menu-profitability analysis; they build, structure and print menus, and serve as consultants.

“I like to call us the restaurant doctors,” she jokes. “Whether it’s going in and examining a customer’s line flow to make sure their menu isn’t bogging it down anywhere, so they can maintain a satisfactory ticket time, or helping them understand the profitability in their menu, there’s just so much that goes into supporting our customers beyond just selling them boxes of stuff.”

Center of the plate

Obviously, the job is more than a job. It’s a passion, and at the center of it is good beef.

“Developing relationships and menus are always based on the center of the plate,” she says. “It always gets your foot in the door.”

She is constantly “repping” what many Angus ranchers produce: high-quality beef.

“We carry life insurance and car insurance and homeowner’s insurance. Why wouldn’t we want to ensure our customer the highest-quality beef-eating experience out there? You

can’t afford not to have *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) as part of your program.”

As part of CAB’s Master’s of Brand Advantages program, Staertow traveled to Nebraska cattle country last fall and spent time on ranches and at a feedlot.

“These are families like my family and your family out there loving what they do, loving the animals that they’re raising. They really have an understanding of what they’re doing, and they’re working very diligently to bring the highest-quality product to market,” she says.

Knowing the people whose livelihoods depend on what she’s doing — from producer to restaurateur — keeps her energetic and attentive. It’s what keeps Staertow going until she reaches her home office in late afternoon. There she catches up on emails and phone calls.

When the kids come home from school, she’s mom.

“I have a family to feed, and they have homework and sports events and Girl Scouts and baths and teeth to brush,” she says. “It isn’t really until they’re settled down into a bed at night where I can really sit back and focus on what happened today and what I’m preparing for tomorrow, and then the cycle repeats itself.”

Busy weeks scamper by and quickly turn into memories of busy years, but Staertow says she wouldn’t have it any other way.



Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*