

## Facilitator — April/May 2016



### 2016 Vendor of the Year

*Tom Cullen*

Tom Cullen, President of Facility Solutions, has been an ardent advocate for RFMA since its inception.

For the past 11 years, he has worked diligently to promote RFMA and recruit members—both restaurateurs and vendors—because he had always wanted an association like RFMA to exist and succeed.

“In the late 90s and early 2000s, when restaurant chains were growing dramatically, they were promoting people within the industry to manage equipment, understand how the equipment operates and maintain buildings,” he said. “Being a vendor and having equipment manufacturing and general contractor experience, that all came easy to me. When RFMA started, I had a deep desire to train facility managers to be more successful. I thought, ‘Why not share my knowledge base with everyone?’ That’s what I do through my business: I work with facility managers so they can look good to their bosses and have a great career in the industry. I thought RFMA was just perfect for me.”

Cullen has been a member and a co-chair of many committees, including the Program committee, Membership Development committee, Member Services committee, RFMA Gives Steering Committee and Vendor Voice committee.

Cullen’s efforts to promote RFMA have not gone unnoticed. In 2008, he was the first person to win RFMA’s New Member of the Year Award.

This year, he and his company sponsored a scholarship program for new franchisee members, solely for the purpose of introducing RFMA to the franchise community.

For all that Cullen has done for RFMA, he is this year’s recipient of the Vendor of the Year award.

“Tom was fully engaged from the moment he joined, which is why we created a special New Member of the Year award for him that year,” said Tracy Tomson, Executive Director of RFMA. “He has gone from one volunteer leadership role to the next since that time and is fully committed to helping us recruit and retain new members.”

“I’ve always been actively promoting RFMA and have a burning desire to bring more people into the association,” he said. “After working for 11 years with that goal in mind and for people to notice that and recognize you for it, it’s humbling and very special.”

“Since the day I met Tom at the first RFMA conference, his passion for and support of RFMA is always unwavering,” said John Getha, Director of Facilities North America for Wendy’s.

It had been Cullen’s aspiration to win the award.

“It’s like the Emmys,” he said, laughing. “It’s the highest recognition you can get as a vendor member of RFMA. Winning was something I always had in the back of my mind.”

After he received the award at the annual conference in Nashville, many of his peers commended him, his employees sent him numerous emails and his family called to congratulate him.

“Getting all that recognition was a great feeling,” he said. “It was a high point in my life.”

“Tom is one of those individuals you feel blessed to meet and get to know,” said Tim Corcoran, Corporate Projects Department at Jack in the Box, and RFMA Chairman. “His unselfish involvement/participation on RFMA committees and volunteer efforts over the years is truly inspiring. This same effort is mirrored in his professional life, and I am also thankful to have him as a trusted partner on my various projects.”

To other vendor members who aspire to win the award, his advice to them is get involved with RFMA.

“Network, attend the Member Meet-Ups, other local events and the annual conference, and help develop solutions for restaurateurs,” he said. “All of these things will help them along with their career as well.”

“Tom is truly a valued facility industry partner,” said Kurt Gnessin, CRFP, Director of Facilities at Taco Bell. “He uses his tenured expertise in the restaurant industry to help facility professionals develop cost-effective solutions and programs to solve even the most complex programs and national rollouts. His personal passion to develop people and his customer focus has been leveraged by many in the industry to develop facility programs and people that enhance the industry as a whole. His passion to

spread the word with our franchise community has created opportunities for restaurant facility professionals that did not exist previously. Tom is a real champion and is very deserving of his recognition of Vendor of the Year.”

### With Every Challenge, There is Opportunity

Tom Cullen and his wife, Sandy, started Facility Solutions in their basement in 2001. Cullen has extensive experience with manufacturing restaurant equipment and as a general contractor with installing equipment and modifying restaurant kitchens. Leveraging his talents and strictly adhering to his core values of being customer focused, having a strong work ethic, remaining consistent and striving for excellence, he felt confident he could be successful with his own venture. He was right. The company was profitable after its first year.

“Tom Cullen and Facility Solutions are, and have been, great business partners with Wendy’s for many years,” said John Getha, Director of Facilities North America for Wendy’s. “Their name, Facility Solutions, is very appropriate as this is what Tom and his team thrives at: providing executable solutions for complex projects with tight deadlines.”

There also was a more personal reason Cullen started Facility Solutions. At age 21, he started losing his hearing. By 40 years old, his hearing capability fell to 15 percent—he was almost deaf.

“I couldn’t hear birds; I couldn’t hear my kids crying,” he explained.

With his hearing loss, he was determined to be in control of his own success.

“It was quite frightening because I was worried about my ability to provide for my family in the future,” he said. “I felt I had to drive my own destiny by not relying on being employed by others.”

For the first five years, a small team worked in cubicles in the Cullens’ basement, managing high-profile 1,000-store projects. In 2006, the company moved into an office.

As the team grew, Cullen moved the office again to its current location in Clinton Township, Mich., in 2011. The new headquarters was built to be green. He invested a substantial amount of time and capital to earn USGBC’s LEED Silver Certification for the building.

“I wanted to educate our team to understand how we can impact our environment in a positive way,” he said. “We are focused on energy conservation, recycling of waste, water use reduction, using Energy Star-rated equipment, using 100-percent wind power energy and many other sustainable practices.”

Additionally, he installed a fully functional test kitchen with a hood, EMS system and the same equipment restaurateurs use in their kitchens. He wants to experience first-hand what his clients are experiencing.

Also in 2011, Cullen received a cochlear implant, which changed his life.

“After it was turned on, I could instantly hear many of the things people take for granted, such as birds, crickets, babies crying or speaking, phones ringing,” he said. “It gave me a new outlook on life. I can hear now—around 90 percent.”

For the past 15 years, his company has remained in the black. The hearing loss has not negatively impacted Cullen’s success. If anything, it gave him the fortitude to start his own company and chart the path for his own success. However, he is quick to note that his success was not achieved alone. He gives credit to those who have supported him and believed in him.

“I am surrounded with a great team of talented professionals who have the same commitment toward our clients as I have,” he said. “For much of my career, I had to rely on lip-reading, the help of others, and the patience of my clients to communicate and succeed. I always had someone sitting next to me during conference calls and meetings to help me. This allowed me to still work well with my clients and be successful. A lot of my clients worked with me even though I couldn’t hear. They stuck with me.”

“There are people God puts in our lives to teach us, if you are willing to listen,” said Donald Newman, Director of Facilities at Jason’s Deli. “When talking with Tom, I listen. He and his team have built a world-class organization of listeners. Jason’s Deli and more specifically, I, am better at my job for knowing Tom Cullen. Facility Solutions exemplifies honesty, integrity, and care for their team and customers.”

Cullen never let his hearing loss impede his goals. At 58 years old, he has helped raise a beautiful family, leads a thriving business and actively participates with RFMA.

“Customer driven, flexible, quality workmanship, generosity and a great family man are just a few of Tom’s attributes,” said Jack McNertney, CRFP, Vice President of Real Estate and Facilities at Red Lobster.

Cullen will continue working to make his company, team and clients as successful as possible.

“I enjoy what I’m doing, I’ve got a great team and we have a lot of fun,” he said. “I hope to continue to be a relevant contributor to the industry for many years to come.”