



## Facilitator — December/January 2012



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### What's New With You?

Charisse Luckey

Through hard work, belief and perseverance, Charisse Luckey has built a successful career that, years ago, many would have thought impossible. As the Corporate Account Manager for Roto-Rooter Services Co., she travels the country, visiting with her corporate accounts' headquarters to better understand their needs and determine how she can help through the services her company offers.

Yet, there was a time at the start of her career when she didn't have enough food to feed herself and entered the work force with only a high school education and the clothes on her back.

After starting her career as a secretary for a specialty chemical company, Luckey earned her college degree through her company's educational assistance program. Despite school work and working full time, she still found time for her twin sons, who are now 28 years old. Throughout more than 23 years working at that company, she advanced from a secretary to Vice President of Customer Support and Administration.

Luckey moved into her role at Roto-Rooter following a stint with her own consulting company that serviced large and small corporations, helping them gain higher ROI by automating their customer relationship management systems. She watched as many companies fell prey to the trap of focusing on new technologies, downsizing their staffing and neglecting their process design. By helping them match strategies, processes and people to the technology, she was able to achieve greater returns through better customer relationships.

Luckey's background with systems and focus on customer relationships prompted Roto-Rooter Services Co. to approach her about representing its network of self-performing company-owned branches. In that role, she works directly with key commercial accounts, primarily in the restaurant and retail industries. She also helps deliver training, resources and communications to the branches to ensure they can meet the needs of all commercial customers who service everything from basic plumbing and drain cleaning to specialized services, such as high-pressure jetting, water main/sewer line repair and replacement, water heater service, and backflow testing and installation.

The secrets of Luckey's success include:

#### Adaptability

Hard work and long hours

Buildings relationships within the company and the industry

She recounted the story of how her first network of coworkers was entirely within the company, making her departure difficult after more than 20 years. Because she was missing an external network, she had to start from scratch when it was time to explore new opportunities. Her experiences and new friendships made her aware of how valuable these networks can be, and she decided to never limit her network again.

Since then, Luckey has formed many rich friendships across trade and community organizations. Networking is one of the reasons she loves being a part of RFMA, she said, and she can remember being so excited when RFMA was formed. For years, she had been searching for an organization that could pull together restaurants and vendors that had common issues to share ideas and support one another. Shortly after Joe Robertson launched the organization, she was one of the first to get involved as they invited vendors into the conversation.

She was eager to volunteer and contribute the resources and tools that restaurants and vendors need to come together.

RFMA is her go-to family for help, ideas and camaraderie. She said she looks forward every year to the annual conference and cherishes the time she has spent on the Board of Directors and advisory board. She was the first vendor member appointed to the board following Joe Robertson as the inaugural Vendor Representative, and was the first to receive the Vendor of the Year recognition in 2007.

Luckey has relied on formal and continuing education to expand her mind and always remains open to new experiences. For instance, when she joined Roto-Rooter Services Co., she had plenty of customer management experience but zero experience with plumbing, so she voluntarily went in the field with plumbers to learn from the experts. She has to experience and believe in what she sells.

Luckey also stresses the importance of maintaining integrity. She wants up-and-coming professional women to know that who they are as a person 24 hours a day really matters. You can't be one way in front of a customer or on an exhibition floor and then forget about your professionalism during social times. In fact, she has heard from more than one customer that they literally watch to see how potential vendors act at social events before deciding to do business with them.

Luckey believes that behavior and image must be congruent and genuine to succeed.

It's not all about knowledge and doing, however. Luckey relies heavily on daily prayer and her faith in Christ as an integral ingredient for success. Her path is a study in possibility and grit, showing that women can succeed at a high level regardless of the obstacles they encounter along the way.

"We have all been given certain gifts," she said. "Make a plan, maintain peace of heart and strive to use your gifts for the greatest good of all."

When Lilit Bassenian was an undergraduate at UCLA studying languages and psychology, she never dreamed that she would head a company that offers fire protection services for the restaurant industry in the western United States. But after graduation, a man named George Marzbetuny swept her off her feet, and the two of them founded Pride Cleaning out of a Los Angeles garage in 1974.

Not long after, her husband, who was a screenwriter and director, signed contracts to co-produce two films and traveled to India, leaving Marzbetuny to manage the company's restaurant kitchen hood exhaust cleaning service. Marzbetuny returned to Los Angeles but never made it back to pride. He fell ill and passed away in 1979.

"All I could think of was that I had to hang onto the company and take care of my sons," Marzbetuny said. "I threw myself into a routine: taking the kids to school, going to the office, picking them up at 3:30, fixing dinner and then going to the YMCA. Under the pressure to survive, you get a lot of strength. It made me try my very best."

Through it all, Marzbetuny concentrated on building the business, perfecting her sales skills and adding restaurant clients weekly. "At the office, I shut things off and talked to clients," she said. "It was like therapy."

Three decades later, Marzbetuny is happily remarried and at the top of her game. Her company is responsible for fire protection at thousands of restaurants from California to Missouri, including chains such as Jack in the Box, El Pollo Loco, KFC, Pizza Hut, Panda Express, Denny's, Rubio's, Coco's, Carl's Jr. and McDonalds, in addition to contracts with the city of Los Angeles, the State of California and the federal government.

Marzbetuny's approach over the past 37 years has been to persevere: "Don't give up; stay positive." Her earliest accounts were secured by repeated calls and messages left with secretaries.

"One day I had an appointment with Collins Foods," Marzbetuny recalls. "I got there at 11 a.m., and the facilities manager was on the phone. Two hours later he was still on the phone. He got off the phone, apologized for the delay and went to lunch. So I invited his secretary to lunch and came back. Finally, I met with him at 2:30 p.m., and he gave me the account for 150 Kentucky Fried Chickens and 40 Sizzlers that day!"

Persistence and perseverance are important words in Marzbetuny's vocabulary. So is another "p" word: pride. In the company's infancy, before the business had become incorporated, a client told Marzbetuny that her cleaning crew took great pride in their work and that she should name the business Pride. She took the client's advice and has always made the quality of the service she offers a priority, which has earned her long-lasting professional relationships.

"What makes Lilit successful is her commitment to customer service," said Angel Alexander, former Facility Leader for KFC who is now in a similar position for the Cracker Barrel chain of restaurants. "I worked with Lilit for more than six years, and every time I call her I know I can rely on her."

Greg Lee, Facilities Manager for Panda Express, notes that Marzbetuny takes initiative and is detail oriented. "When I have requests or problems, I can e-mail or call her and she will respond immediately. And Pride gets the job done quickly and efficiently," he said.

One of the keys to Marzbetuny's success is her calm demeanor. "She's soft spoken and professional in her delivery," Alexander said. "She is approachable when we have issues. I have never seen her frustrated, disappointed or angry. She always works things out. Her priority is keeping the customer satisfied."

El Pollo Loco's Director of Facilities, Daniel Milojevich, has entrusted Pride Fire Systems with the chain's 170 company-owned restaurants for the past 11 years. "I've worked with Lilit as the owner and the go-to person," he said. "She is personable and has excellent communication skills."

Milojevich said Marzbetuny has established a corporate culture that is friendly and highly professional. "The information they provide us on changes in regulations, inspectors' biases and other trends in municipalities is very helpful in the way we conduct our business."

Ask Marzbetuny where her business acumen comes from, and she'll tell you a story about her paternal grandmother that goes back about a century. The parallels between her life and her grandmother's are remarkable. "My grandmother had nine children and was widowed early in life," she said. "She ran several small factories in Armenia making food and home goods. She was a businesswoman, and she had to put food on the table for her children."

So as Marzbetuny sees it, she's a self-made businesswoman just like her grandmother. Pride has a dedicated staff of 10 longtime employees, and the company even offers a full benefits plan.

"One of the keys to my company's success is surrounding myself with good people and treating them the way I would want to be treated," Marzbetuny said.

George Khalil, President of Pride Fire Systems, has been with Pride since 1987. Marzbetuny's son Vahe Marzbetuny is the Operations Manager of Pride Cleaning Co., and her other son, Zareh Marzbetuny, is in charge of marketing and graphics.

As the company expanded, so did Marzbetuny's activities. Brought up in a culture where giving to one's community is an inherent facet of life, she joined the Los Feliz Village Beautification Association and spearheaded the planting of 74 jacaranda trees along the sidewalks of Hillhurst Avenue.

Her pride in her Armenian heritage is reflected in her charitable work as well. In the 1980s, Marzbetuny joined the board of the Armenian Film Foundation and helped organize film festivals about Armenian culture and history. And following the devastating 1988 earthquake in the small republic, she helped raise funds for orphans, young handicapped victims and an entire village of 600 displaced families.

She attributes her triumph over adversity to her positive and goal-oriented nature. Even in the worst of times, Marzbetuny says she has always thought and planned for the future. For many years, her goal was to move Pride into its own facility, and to that end, she bought a building in Burbank in 2000. Her objective now is for Pride to go national.

While she is progressive in her business, she has also held onto certain wisdoms that she has acquired along the way in life. "With perseverance and determination, you can do anything," she said. "Combining that with honesty and integrity is a winning formula."

Always be willing to keep learning and be the best you can be. This philosophy has been the secret to Maria Johnson's success throughout her career. As the current Director of Facilities Management for Pei Wei Asian Diner (a concept of P.F. Chang's China Bistro Inc.), Johnson and her team are responsible for supporting all the restaurants' repair and maintenance needs. Her team manages a combined capital and repair/maintenance budget of more than \$5.5 million, which includes remodels. In Johnson's almost eight years with the company, she has grown her department from an initial responsibility of 33 locations to the current 173 locations.

Establishing a facilities department from the ground up is not a new task for Johnson. She started her restaurant facilities career in 1994 when she took an administrative position in the construction department with Main Street and Main, a previous franchisee of TGI Friday's restaurants and other concepts. While she originally thought she wanted to work in human resources, she decided to give construction a try and invested herself 100 percent into learning the business.

As the company constructed new restaurants, Johnson found great interest in how restaurants were built, putting all the many dissimilar pieces together to make it work. While working as an administrative professional, she helped to create procedures and processes for the chain and its use of vendors.

When the time came for Main Street to hire a facilities manager, Johnson's track record of success was not enough. They decided to hire an engineer instead. Johnson's boss at the time, and one of her most pivotal mentors, continued to encourage and believe in her. He knew that she could do anything she set her mind to; there was no obstacle she couldn't overcome.

Six months later, when the hired engineer did not work out, Johnson got the chance to prove herself. She was given the opportunity to become a Facility/Projects Manager, but was soon confronted with some challenges. She did not dwell on any of it. Instead she pushed on, focusing solely on learning everything she possibly could to ensure the success of her region and to grow her career as a restaurant facility professional.

Instilled with the belief of her boss, she learned everything it took to be a restaurant facilities manager. She received on-the-job education from her boss, vendors, other professional mentors and anyone willing to share their expertise. Over time her accomplishments became self evident and she helped create the facilities department with another manager.

Johnson believes the ultimate key to success is consistent education. During her career at Main Street, she decided to pursue one of her goals and further strengthen her skills by earning her MBA. She considers this a big accomplishment because it was a challenge to complete her MBA while working full time in facilities.

While she did leave her facilities responsibilities for a year to try the recruiting field again, she quickly returned to Main Street, but this time as the leader of the facilities department.

Education, coupled with her natural affinity for learning in the field and from others, has been the key to her continuous growth, both personally and professionally. Johnson is quick to encourage others to pursue and further their education with a degree, through mentors and RFMA sessions, and by simply working with peers, vendors and all others who wish to expand their knowledge base. She challenges people to ask others "how can I be better at what I am doing?"

In her role today, Johnson is constantly looking at how the restaurants can run more efficiently with fewer R&M interruptions and seeking opportunities to reduce costs. While the answers sometimes create more work for Johnson and her department, the extra work just feeds her passion for solving R&M issues.

Johnson is serving her second year on the Board of Directors for RFMA. She is also one of the first women to receive the esteemed Certified Restaurant Facility Professional designation for her participation as a subject matter expert, during which she dedicated significant hours in developing questions for the CRFP exam. Based on her passion for excellence, commitment to growth and her wherewithal as a leader, coupled with her drive to succeed, she leaves you with this quote:

"Certification is important to me, because working in the restaurant facilities management field, you have to be an expert in every subject. Yet, you are usually only an expert in the moment you are dealing with the specific repair and/or maintenance issue. Going through the process of certification will make sure you are up to date with the current codes, open your mind to other ways of solving repair and maintenance issues and will expose you to subject matters which you may not currently be familiar with and thereby prepare you for future growth in the facilities management field."

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