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## FRESH COAST MARKET: HOW ONE BUSINESS AVOIDS A WORKER SHORTAGE

By AMY LANE



Sears outside Fresh Coast Market in Traverse City, Michigan

At a time when help wanted signs dot much of northern Michigan, Dave Sears, owner of Fresh Coast Market, is among the fortunate.

He is nearly fully staffed at 55 employees even with the seasonal August exodus of college and high school students. And among his team at the Traverse City specialty foods store, minimal turnover and low absenteeism are a norm.

It isn't by happenstance.

Sears takes an approach to employment that he says is grounded in valuing employees and a positive workplace culture – leading in a style shown to him 30 years ago by a manager who made a lasting impression on Sears, then in his early 20s. “That leadership style was around that people mattered,” Sears said. “He really helped me see the value in people, and we had fun.”

Talk to some of Sears' employees, and hear the vision is reality. Take 59-year-old Tracy Meyer, who as a deli clerk makes pizza,

salads and sandwiches and says Fresh Coast is “unlike any place I've ever worked,” in a good way. Or 18-year-old team leader Caroline Clark, who has a host of responsibilities in a “great environment” where “almost everybody always has a smile on their face.”

And 63-year-old retired banking executive Nancy Haller, who handles financial matters like payroll and many other things – even when it's not her day to work. “You can't keep me away from the store,” Haller said. “If I know they're going to be really busy on a Saturday, I'll go in, just to help them out. Because that's my team, my crew.

“Sometimes I'll just take orders from customers, for sandwiches, pizza, answer phones, stock things...a lot of different things, just to make somebody else's job there easier, so they can concentrate on the customer.”

Not one thing, but many, have helped Sears build a trusted and cohesive staff. And it starts with hiring.

### PICKY ABOUT PEOPLE

“I am super picky about hiring people. I probably interview about one in every 20 people that apply,” he said. “You get one person that's toxic on a team, and it can wreak havoc on the entire team. We hire first and foremost for chemistry and to make sure that they're a good fit for our team. Chemistry and character are the two things I'm looking for.”

And, a bit of loyalty. Held six jobs in the last year? You probably won't get one at Fresh Coast. In addition, “if they can't fill out an application properly, they're not going to get a call. If you can't follow basic directions in an application process, you're not going to follow basic instructions in an employment process, either,” Sears said.

He does all employment interviews and decides who is hired, and in interviews asks open-ended questions that help establish the applicant, like their goals for the next three to five years of their life. And of their previous jobs, he asks, “what job did you love the most and why, and what job did you like the least and why.”

Meyer, who marks her one-year anniversary with Fresh Coast this month (in September), sought out a job after retiring as a 20-year special education aide at Traverse City Area Public Schools. In her interview, Sears impressed.

## PEOPLE ORIENTED

“He was just so people-oriented. He asked me everything about myself and my situation, and I remember him saying that everybody has a story, and every story is important,” said Meyer. “He just emphasized that people are number one, so I immediately felt...like he really cared, even in the short amount of time I talked to him.”

Things unfolded from there, with Meyer taking the deli job and doing “everything else that needs to be done behind the scenes. I wash dishes. I’m happy to do it; I do anything.”

She said team members are supportive of each other and have good work ethics, and Sears puts trust in employees to help him in his business and gives them space. “Dave is not breathing down our backs. He lets everybody do their thing,” she said. “It’s



A love for food and drinks and their ability to “really bring people together” to share conversation and stories – whether at a kitchen table or in the Fresh Coast café – called the new owners to the venture, Sears said. They have since rebranded the store and made close to \$500,000 in improvements, including a new coffee shop, renovated café and transition to a full grocery store with a gourmet deli.

The store boasts at least 170 Michigan brands and a focus on local companies, food purveyors and farms. Grocery products number some 10,000, more than quadruple what the store sold when Sears acquired it. Sales have climbed 48 percent and expansion plans are on the horizon: A new building that might replace the current store and almost double, to 12,000, the

store’s square footage. The project would accommodate increased catering, expanded bakery and other offerings, as well as growth in the human capital that’s integral to Fresh Coast’s past and future.

## ATTRACTING PEOPLE WORD OF MOUTH

Sears said the expansion could add 10 to 20 full-time equivalent positions, the latest uptick in an employee count

that was 12 when he purchased the store. Customer Service Manager Haller, who joined Fresh Coast in 2018 about three months after Sears’ purchase, said that as business picked up the employee ranks grew, many times by word of mouth. “As the employees came in, and they saw the job satisfaction, they invited their friends” or a classmate; sometimes, it was even customers that sought a job, she said.

What would Haller tell someone else about working there? “I would tell them that it’s a very comfortable place to work, and they won’t be dealing with drama. We don’t have drama in the workplace. Customers love it, they love the staff, and you’re going to get a good feeling, and you’re going to want to come to work.”

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Nancy Haller,  
Fresh Coast Market Customer Service Manager



like a well-oiled machine, everybody knows what needs to be done.”

It’s Sears’ fourth year owning the store, after he and his wife Jen purchased the then-Fieldstone Market in 2017, aided by a \$70,000 loan from Venture North Funding & Development. It was Sears’ latest stop over years in the food business, beginning with bagging groceries when he was 16. He’s moved into multiple positions, including being a regional trainer for Starbucks and operations director for several supermarkets, and he’s also coordinated corporate technology training and been a pastor at three churches – all combining for a varied background that plays into Fresh Coast Market and what it’s become.

Sears takes a couple different routes to find employees. About 60 percent to 70 percent of his hires have come from using Homebase, an online platform that helps businesses manage a variety of worker activities and post to top job boards – like Indeed and Monster -- and track applicants. “I can post a job...and they post it on all the job platforms out there for us,” Sears said.

He said Homebase’s pricing structure “is very low-cost for small businesses” and besides recruiting he uses it for employee scheduling, time clocks, communication and other services. “It’s a really fantastic tool and I would highly recommend companies take a good look at it,” Sears said.

Most of Fresh Coast’s other hiring comes through employee referrals, and a small amount of walk-ins.

To prospects, Sears pitches Fresh Coast with intention and a dose of creativity. That includes targeting, in part, people who already have jobs. And he offers up job love, as in one recent posting for a deli clerk: “If you don’t LOVE your job, we should talk.” And another: “Love your job again!”

## TARGETING PEOPLE WHO WORK

“We are intentionally targeting employed people,” said Sears, “because if they are employed, the chances are, they have good work ethics. Right now, some of the people who are employed don’t really love their job. We have had people say, I’m responding because of the job description. I want to love my job again.”

Other postings have reached out to additional populations, like stay-at-home moms and retired adults. “I have 14-year-olds that work for us, I have people in their 60s and 70s that work for us. I love intergenerational teams,” Sears said.

He also uses Glassdoor, an online job site where employees can post anonymous reviews and ratings.

Sears said many employees 18 and older are making \$16.50 an hour and while he would like to offer health care or retirement benefits but doesn’t yet, he does offer other perks like free meals and drinks while working, free pizza every month to take home, and YMCA gym memberships that for most employees are free. He also partners and barter with local businesses, swapping discounts for his employees to shop at or frequent their establishment, with discounts at Fresh Coast.

But “the biggest thing that I tout,” Sears said, “is our atmosphere, our culture.”

Rob Dickinson, regional director of business services for Northwest Michigan Works!, said he sees employers promoting workplace cultures both on an ongoing basis and in recruiting events – whether it’s to show employees they can be part of a family, or to highlight flexible shifts and wellness programs.

“You can raise wages...but the reason you’re a destination employer is your company culture these days,” Dickinson said. “They want to see those creative things that you’re doing to attract them. It’s all about the culture.”



Shoppers inside Fresh Coast Market in Traverse City

## NORTHWEST MICHIGAN WORKS! Workforce Assistance Opportunities

Throughout northwest Michigan, there’s no shortage of tactics employers have tried to entice workers to their doors.

Employers have raised wages, given referral bonuses to employees who help bring a new worker on board, and given sign-on bonuses – the latter not so effective when a new recruit starts and gets a partial sign-on bonus, stays a couple of weeks and then leaves.

Referral bonuses seem to work better, said Rob Dickinson, regional director of business services for workforce development agency Northwest Michigan Works! “I’ve heard \$1,000 for a referral bonus if a person stays six months.”

There’s also money some businesses periodically add to paychecks for new employees who stay, and attendance bonuses for showing up to work every day and on time. Some fast-food employers are offering same-day pay, “so you work your shift and you get paid the next day when you come in,” Dickinson said. “Some are doing every three days, every week...you get that instant gratification.”

And then there are those who have had to adjust when no new employees are forthcoming. For some there’s been in-house shuffle – shifting personnel to different



At Fresh Coast, employees have latitude to make things right for a customer -- like expediting another sandwich or pizza or offering a discount -- without calling a manager. "The customer's happy, and they feel like they have some control over making the customer happy," Haller said. "When you give them that empowerment to do that, it just puts a pride in themselves."

Clark, whose responsibilities include closing on Saturday nights and counting the till, started at Fresh Coast when she was 15 and worked her way up from deli clerk to managerial duties. Fresh Coast was Clark's first job and the recent graduate of Kingsley High School plans to continue working there as she moves on to Northwestern Michigan College.

"We all work together, and I love it. I really do," Clark said. She said Sears always asks the morning and evening shifts how things are going and how they are doing that day, and "he tells us, like every night, thank you for being there, and we really appreciate you."

"I think he really values us, because he understands all the hard work we put in making this a really good business."



Reflecting in part on its employees, Fresh Coast has won recognition from a signature product line: Boar's Head Brand, a provider of premium meats, cheeses and other foods. In June, Boar's Head awarded Fresh Coast its Market of Distinction national award, honoring and acknowledging both its local Boar's Head purveyor and the store owners as the "best of the best," showcasing their commitment to the Boar's Head brand.

In a news release, Jeff Schwartz, the Boar's Head local purveyor who services Fresh Coast Market, said Dave and Jen Sears and their store team "have been a valued partner" that has exceeded expectations, noting among other things "a passion for quality and exceptional customer service."

The Boar's Head recognition plays into one of two new positions, called ambassadors, at Fresh Coast. The new Boar's Head ambassador and the coffee shop ambassador roles essentially create employee ownership of those business areas and come with additional training, greater responsibility, and financial incentive for growth.

"An ambassador is like a cheerleader, they own that area of the business," Sears said. "As they grow it, we're going to pay them more."

## MICHIGAN WORKS!, continued

departments -- as well as overtime and expanded job responsibilities. At other businesses, reduction in days and hours of operation, Dickinson said.

But there's also workforce assistance that Northwest Michigan Works! and others can provide.

One is virtual job fairs, which employers like because they can recruit from all areas of the state, Dickinson said. Northwest Michigan Works! also offers an "Employer of the Day" event -- a private job fair at one of the agency's centers. "We will line them up for a day, the employer advertises about getting to the center and will have access to anybody that comes through our doors. It's had success in the past, and I know it will when we see more foot traffic," he said.

Another avenue puts an employer in a spotlight, with a member of the Michigan Works! team interviewing them on camera about the company culture, wages, and "why people should come work for you," Dickinson said. It might be a two to five-minute interview that results in an employer spotlight video that Michigan Works! posts on its website and also gives to the employer to use as a recruiting tool.

Employers can foster a talent pipeline by creating U.S. Department of Labor-registered apprenticeships with the help of Michigan Works! And they shouldn't bypass opportunities to connect with the younger population, through career exploration events and classroom participation, Dickinson said, "to engage with the youth of the area."

Assistance and information is available to employers through the Northwest Michigan Works! website: **[www.nwmiworks.org](http://www.nwmiworks.org)** or by calling Networks Northwest's main number: **231-929-5000** to be directed to the appropriate party.

In a busy setting with continual needs, whether it's doing dishes, cleaning floors and bathrooms or expediting a line of sandwiches, Sears expects employees to pitch in wherever needed and employees say he does the same. He's not

above making mistakes, like dropping a pizza on the floor when working the line during a swamped holiday shift. And if an employee is struggling to accomplish a task, Sears said he will ask how he can help them achieve the goal.

"They know the expectation is not going to change for them, but they know that we care about them," Sears said. "Letting people know that you care about them, that's really what it boils down to."

## PEOPLE LOVE WORKING HERE

Haller, who after 43 years in the banking industry started as a cashier at Fresh Coast, said it's a workplace setting that's been "a great way to land a retirement career." And she's there to stay.

"He'll have to bury me," Haller said. "In the back lot, with my cat."

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Amy Lane is a veteran Michigan business reporter whose background includes work with Crain Communications Inc., Crain's Detroit Business and serving as Capitol correspondent for nearly 25 years. Now a freelance reporter and journalist, Lane's work has appeared in many publications including Traverse City Business News.

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Special thanks to:



## HIRING WISDOM FROM DAVE SEARS:

Hire with *team chemistry and compatibility* in mind first and foremost.

Be open to using multiple avenues for hiring – *go beyond the standard Want Ad.*

Target those already employed – *implies good work ethic!*

Demonstrate your own ability to help out wherever needed – *everyone's on the team!*

Consider cultivating an intergenerational mix of employees. *Life experience is priceless!*

Get creative with benefits and perks and *always share appreciation.*



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