

From Vendor to Valued Partner (example of feature/profile writing)

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When Joe Lucas joined Imperial Sugar Company in September 2009, he was asked to transition the industrial sales group from a transactional sales approach to a consultative one – a change that promises to make Imperial a top competitor in the overall sweetener market.

“We want to move beyond vendor to valued partner,” said Lucas, national sales director, industrial channel, at Imperial. “That means establishing deeper, multi-tier customer relationships from a marketing and R&D perspective.”

For Lucas, being a valued partner will require Imperial to position itself as a comprehensive sweetener solutions company – one that not only provides sugar, but also works closely with its customers to develop a variety of innovative sweetener products.

Lucas said that when introducing a new product to customers, Imperial will take extra steps to help them determine how to best use and market the product and ensure its success.

“We will be working hand-in-hand with the Imperial product development team and our customers,” said Lucas. “The team will not only talk to our customers’ R&D people, but also to their marketing groups to discuss at length the features, benefits and applications of our sweeteners at a more technical level.”

Growing the company’s presence throughout North America and maximizing value creation from its joint ventures and alliances – an Imperial core business strategy – will be integral to Lucas’ consultative sales approach. Those joint ventures include Comercializadora Santos Imperial, a sugar producer based in Monterrey, Mexico, and Natural Sweet Ventures, which is developing Stevia-based sweetening products.



**Joe Lucas, national sales director,
industrial channel, Imperial Sugar**

Sugar production in Mexico will play a bigger role when Imperial’s domestic production for industrial customers shifts solely to its Port Wentworth, Ga., refinery next year. Also, new stevia-based products will help establish a broader base for Imperial’s sweetening solutions.

Lucas pointed to a meeting with a major food manufacturer at the 2010 International Sweetener Colloquium to show how Imperial can use these ventures to the customer’s advantage.

There, he and Imperial CEO and President John Sheptor shared with the customer how stevia/cane sugar blended sweeteners could be used in its products to leverage the benefits of sugar as well as

caloric reduction. They also discussed Imperial's ability to supply sugar in Mexico, which is very important to this company because it has a large manufacturing operation in Monterrey.

"Prior to that meeting, we'd be looked at only as a supplier who shipped the customer sugar out of our two U.S. plants," said Lucas. "By the time we were finished, they saw us as a sweetener solutions provider – not only in the U.S., but also in Mexico. In other words, we were no longer perceived as just a cane sugar provider."

Discussing the challenges and opportunities ahead, Lucas said Imperial is focused on service in anticipation of its move to a single, U.S. plant operation for industrial customers. This change will occur once Louisiana Sugar Refining – a joint venture in which Imperial is one-third owner – opens its large new plant in Gramercy, La.



Mounds of raw sugar at Imperial Sugar's Gramercy refinery

Imperial plans to place a bulk transfer station in Monterrey as early as the fall to expedite the shipping of sugar across the border and help fill the gap.

"We're fully anticipating that our operations in Mexico and the increased capacity of our Port Wentworth refinery will fill the Southwest market with the industrial volume we have in Gramercy," said Lucas. "We are not abandoning this market at all."

According to Lucas, service is already improving and customers are highly impressed with the newly modernized Port Wentworth facility.

Recently, about 20 customers got a first-hand look at the rebuilt plant during an Imperial combustible dust seminar. One customer said: "For six years, I've been responsible for combustible dust and safety at our company's facility. I came in thinking I knew everything and was prepared to be bored for two days. After the first five minutes of a presentation before the actual tour, I knew I was wrong."

Lucas believes the seminar and tour positioned Imperial as a strong partner for its customers. He said customers walked away with a new appreciation for Imperial's dedication to safety and operational excellence, as well as for its openness in sharing all it had learned from the explosion that occurred there in early 2008.

“We’re really excited about the opportunity in front of us. It’s all driving toward the idea that we’re not just a sugar company, we’re a sweetener solutions company,” said Lucas. “When customers think of sweeteners, we believe they’ll think of Imperial first.”

Before joining Imperial, Lucas worked for Barry Callebaut, the world’s leading manufacturer of high-quality cocoa, chocolate and confectionery products.