

Suma Foods - a story of co-operation with 36 years of strong growth. Olivo portable insulated containers help frozen food deliveries across the UK

In 1975, Reg Taylor and some friends started a wholefoods wholesaling operation in the back kitchen of a house in Leeds. This grew so quickly that they moved on to using a nearby lock-up garage. The business expanded further and in 1976 they moved into a small two storey warehouse, still in Leeds, and they dealt with strange problems like the ceiling threatening to collapse under the weight of several tonnes of fruit! Reg sold the business in 1977 to the seven employees, who became the founder members of Triangle Wholefoods Collective, trading as Suma. Moving again in 1978 to a larger warehouse in Leeds this soon became too small and, in 1986, they moved again - this time to a 70,000 sq ft warehouse in Halifax. Expansion continued apace and the move to the current purpose-built premises in Elland was in 2001.



Suma is a workers' co-operative consisting of 120 members (who own the business jointly) plus a further 20-30 contracted workers. Everyone is paid the same basic hourly rate, with all members having an equal say in what happens at Suma. There is no unwieldy management structure or a board of directors - no chief executive, no managing director and no chairman. An elected management committee implements decisions and business plans, the decisions being made at regular general meetings with the consent of every co-operative member. A further unusual aspect of Suma is the large amount of multi-skilling that takes place in which all workers are encouraged to get involved in more than one area of the business and thus able to work in differing roles. Judging by the cheerful demeanour and enthusiasm of the team at Suma this system works extremely well in respect of job satisfaction and staff morale.

Suma stock and distribute only vegetarian food, having a zero tolerance policy in respect of any goods containing animal products or derivatives. Their premises are a meat-free zone and they have a superb vegetarian canteen which produces nutritional and tasty food for everyone on a daily basis. You do not have to be a vegetarian to work at Suma but most people do in fact avoid meat at home as well.

To deliver their 6,000 plus lines of products, Suma own two 23 tonne trucks (which can have drawbar trailers), eleven 18 tonne trucks (both weights having unusual bodies with part curtainsider and part

insulated refrigerated box) and two 7.5 dry-freight trucks. Their customers range from small independent wholefood shops through restaurants, hotels, bakers, food producers, food groups and they have a growing export trade to countries as diverse as Norway, South Africa, Lithuania, the Middle East and even the Falklands. Following the demise of one of their competitors, they have started to supply a range of frozen foods (such lines as vegetables, vegetarian burgers and sausages, fruit, ready meals, ready desserts, and vegan ice-cream) in addition to chilled produce. A new coldstore has been constructed to handle this produce with Olivo portable insulated containers (both roll and chest type) being used for deliveries, with eutectic plate refrigeration. Suma's Neil Bennett is enthusiastic about the Olivo containers, which they started using eighteen months ago, as they provide a reliable and safe transport method for temperature sensitive products. Neil said: "Some of the runs are out for three days but the combination of the thermal efficiency of the Olivo containers and the eutectic plates keeps the produce frozen throughout the journeys".



Suma is a fascinating example of how a workers' co-operative can work successfully. Co-operatives are far more common in many advanced European countries as well as in developing world economies but not well known in this country. This organisation's growth to a turnover of over £30 million per year is impressive by any standard and as Neil Bennett said: "We're about service rather than cheapness".

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