

# Anthony Rapanotti

## AR Repairs Baker's Kneads Inc. — Service Agent

**L**ike so many others in this industry, Anthony Rapanotti, *FE&S* 2005 Top Achiever-Service Agent, grew up around a family-owned foodservice equipment business. Unlike most, though, he later struck out on his own, founding Detroit-based AR Repairs Baker's Kneads Inc.

In the early 1970s, when Rapanotti was around 10 years old, his father co-founded a service agency in Detroit. Rapanotti worked as a service technician in the late 1970s and early 1980s for his father. Wanting to take his career in a different direction, however, Rapanotti left that company on good terms in 1981, going to work as an electrician in the music industry for the next two years.

Then, in 1983, his cousin put him in touch with a local restaurant chain executive who was having electrical problems at his home. Rapanotti went to the man's house and quickly fixed the problem.

When the executive asked how much he owed for the repair, Rapanotti paused to think for a moment and then said he was considering starting his own service agency and would like a short preventative maintenance contract with his chain, just to get his company off the ground. After discussions with the executive, Rapanotti landed the contract. (He first, though, obtained the blessing of his parents, who sold their interest in their own service agency a couple of years later and joined AR. His father worked with AR until his death earlier this year, and his mother continues to serve as the company's comptroller.)

"I took \$900 in cash, my brand new Camaro Z28, which I sold, and a credit card and started my company," Rapanotti says.

Since this humble, almost spur-of-the-moment founding, AR has grown into one of the premier service agencies in Michigan. The firm now employs 24 individuals, has a fleet of 12 service vehicles and is on pace to exceed \$4 million in revenue this year.

Of course, to reach this level of success, AR has had to differentiate itself from the competition. When seeking out customers or discussing deals with channel partners, then, the company stresses two main attributes, Rapanotti says.

First, he emphasizes the agency's willingness to take on practically any responsibility the operator asks. AR will do everything from receiving and warehousing equipment to acting as a general contractor for kitchen renovations by



hiring subcontractors to handle the plumbing and electrical work. Second, the company emphasizes the levels of training and certification its technicians possess.

Every AR technician must earn at least one CFESA certification within 90 days of joining the firm. Before they earn certification, techs do not go out in the field full-time, do not take a truck home and do not get benefits.

This does not mean, however, that Rapanotti hires only those with deep technical backgrounds. Rather, in a new employee, he will sacrifice technical know-how for the ability to communicate well with co-workers and, especially, customers.

"I'll take a person with marginal technical skills if that individual has the ability to communicate with people.

I'll spend the money to train that person on the technical end ... because it's too hard to take someone who doesn't know how to deal with people and teach them how."

This hiring philosophy has obviously succeeded for Rapanotti. For it is his employees, he says, who make the firm succeed. He also credits the company's executives, singling out his sister, Lisa, the company's vice president, for their skill and dedication.

"I used to be a micromanager, a control freak who worried about everything," he says. "Now that I have these people I just get out of their way. They take care of everything."

They take care of so much of the firm's work, in fact, that Rapanotti has been able to allocate much of his time in recent years to working for the betterment of the industry, he says. A member of CFESA's board of directors, he served as co-chair of its installation committee and is presently co-chair of its business technology committee.

This time that he dedicates to industry service has led Rapanotti to grow in appreciation for cooperation among dealers, reps, manufacturers and service agents.

"I've always believed there's one customer: the end-user, and we're all vying for his approval," he says. "Since we're dealing with such a small niche, we rely on repeat business, so why sit there and argue that a problem is someone else's fault? It's counter-productive. Instead, I'll discount my bill and the company we're working with will take a little bit off and we'll make the customer happy."

Rapanotti, 43, lives in Commerce Township, Mich., with his wife, Lisa, and his two children: Matthew, 13; and Gabriella, seven. —Toby Weber, Associate Editor