

flying fish

The secret to shipping live lobsters, mussels or littlenecks isn't high-tech refrigeration equipment, says Legal Sea Foods. It's speed.

BACK IN 1950, GEORGE BERKOWITZ opened a fish market in Inman Square in Cambridge, Mass. Called Legal Fish Market after the adjacent Legal Cash Market, owned by Berkowitz's father, it soon became known in the neighborhood as the place to go when you wanted good fresh fish.

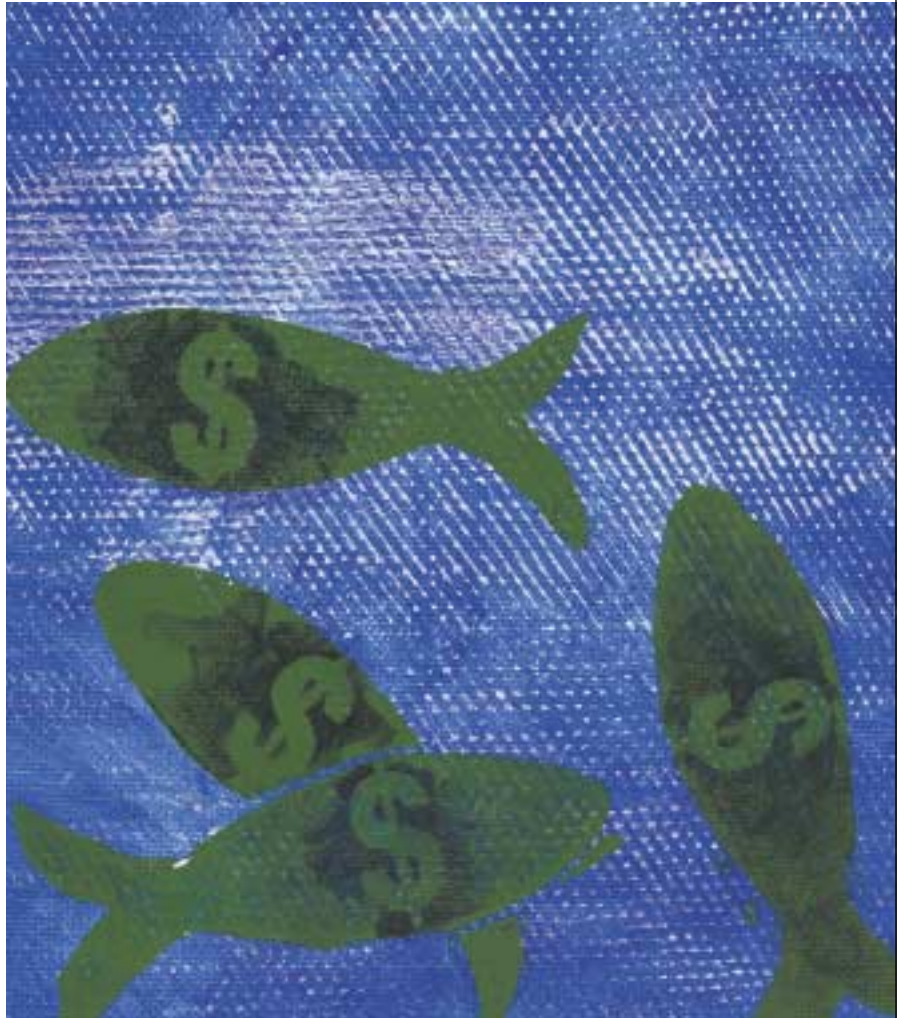
Eighteen years later, Berkowitz opened the first of what has grown into a chain of 30 restaurants. Today, the Legal Sea Foods restaurants are noted for offering some of the freshest seafood in the business. In its early days, in fact, the restaurant eschewed the traditional practice of holding orders in the kitchen until the whole table could be served. At Legal, plates were whisked to the table as soon as they were ready. The focus was on the food. And though that practice gave way to conventional service some years ago, the attention to food quality has not changed.

The company's business proposition is to sell the freshest fish in the seafood industry. That means it sources its own fish, handles the fish itself and prepares and serves the fish. It also ships it. Though it's hard to imagine a more perishable product than fish, Legal Sea Foods is most assuredly in the mail order business too. In 1975, it opened a catalog sales division that ships fresh seafood—including live lobsters—to any address in the continental United States.

Lobsters and mussels, alive, alive-o

Business is booming for the mail order division. Weekly shipments are now measured not in the hundreds, but in the thousands, although volumes are subject to wide seasonal variations. Because most shipments are gift orders, business peaks in December, when the company does 35 percent of its mail order business. "I've been known to pack a few fish in December," jokes Lisa Landry, an 18-year veteran of the company who manages the Legal Sea Foods mail order gourmet gift division.

The most popular item in the company's mail-order catalog is the Maine Event, a dinner for two that



features a quart of the restaurateur's famous New England Clam Chowder (served at several presidential inaugurations), a pound of littleneck clams and two live lobsters with cooking instructions. But it's hardly the only choice. The catalog carries more 50 items, ranging from

bluefish pate, shrimp cocktail, scrod, haddock and lobster ravioli to sirloin steak and Boston Cream Pie.

Orders from that broad-based catalog run the gamut of sizes: "It can be anything from a gift certificate to a clam bake for 10," Landry says. Some, like gift certificates, are easy to ship:

They're sent through the U.S. mail. Others are much more challenging, like the live lobsters, oysters, mussels and littlenecks. With those packages, there's no room for error. They must arrive fast. They must arrive fresh. And they must arrive cold.

Cold fish

Landry says the key to shipping highly perishable goods is not high-tech refrigerated equipment, but speed. Although Legal offers a two-day delivery option for orders of prepared foods, live shellfish must be delivered overnight. For those shipments, Landry uses time-critical service. If that seems an odd choice, it's not. Once considered an emergency service of last resort, time-critical service has evolved into a full-service expedited offering. Today, time-critical specialists offer a wide array of special handling options, including temperature-controlled transport, weekend delivery and time-specific pickups.

All shipments originate out of Legal Sea Foods' two-year-old fish processing facility on the Boston waterfront. Orders are packed in specialized corrugated boxes lined with three-quarter-inch-thick Styrofoam panels and an additional plastic liner. The boxes are made for Legal by Cold Chain Technologies (formerly FDC Packaging), a Holliston, Mass.-based company that specializes in containers for temperature-sensitive products. Landry reports that the boxes were subjected to rigorous testing as part of the selection process.

Landry relies on two trusted carriers to haul the shipments. Eastern Connection, a specialist in overnight trucking services in the Northeast, delivers orders throughout an area stretching roughly from Maine to Virginia. FedEx Express delivers to the rest of the country.

As for her choice of carriers, Landry says she sticks with the two established carriers because of their record of success as well as an important intangible that might be called company culture. "I want to work with a company that has the same high level of brand awareness that we do," she says. "I can always switch for a better price, but I won't always get the same service. Our average order is over \$100: It's important that it's delivered on time." □