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FE&S'  
DSR of the Year  
2012

# MORGAN TUCKER

M. Tucker/Singer NY LLC

Getting ahead in New York's fast-paced restaurant scene requires more than just an ability to hit the ground running and stay running. As our editor learned while spending the day with one of the foodservice industry's youngest and most accomplished dealer sales reps, providing service and value on the customers' terms is a must.

The front door to Lexington Brass in midtown Manhattan opens, and Morgan Tucker swoops in, waving hello to the hostess, the floor manager and the bartender, and then pulling up a seat at our table by the window. She matches the black and white tiling of this modern take on an airy, casual French bistro, wearing a breezy black dress and white blazer with her extra-long black hair pulled back — perfect for a hot midweek day in June.

Tucker apologizes for being a few minutes late: The subway was slow, and cabs were hard to come by that morning. As a typically prompt person she seems bothered by the delay.

We should order, and fast, given that our next stop, a meeting originally scheduled for 4 p.m., was moved up to 1 p.m. It's nearly noon, and it will take a half hour to travel to our next destination, Tucker's assistant (and close friend) Katie McNamara reminds us.

Without hesitation Tucker orders the chicken paillard, and it's clear we should be quick to follow with our orders. French onion and chilled avocado soups, tuna tartare tacos, a delicate lettuce cup and a few special deliveries from the manager arrive soon after we place our orders. The tabletop is simple yet gorgeous, and yes, this is one of Tucker's accounts. We try to get down to business. Already, my slower speech and tendency to mumble seem to be confusing everyone.

At first I am taken aback by the speed of things, and Tucker's directness. Later I learn being direct or not has nothing to do with how kind, sensitive or caring she is because she is, in fact, all of those things and more. Sure, it's about a sense of urgency, but I can also chalk it up to efficiency too. A close friend of mine who now lives in Manhattan reminds me that 1.6 million people all try to live and work together on this one tiny island, which leaves no time for mumbling, shyness, indecision or pause.

This sense of urgency has carried Tucker throughout her work, both now at the dealership and in her previous role as an operator. Michael Posternak, president of Posternak Bauer Associates Inc. in Eastchester, N.Y., who has helped Tucker in recent months connect with the factories on heavy equipment sales, explains that her independent restaurant customers can operate as few as 1 or 2 locations, or as many as 15 to 25. And, each is unique, with its own special characteristics and needs. This differs greatly from serving chain

restaurant accounts, where you are rolling out similar locations with similar foodservice equipment and supply packages one after another. Every day a new restaurant in New York opens, while another one closes.

Powerful restaurant groups — with multiple unique concepts — like The One Group, EMM Group, and 13th Street Entertainment make up a strong part of Tucker's business. Other clients include independent restaurants with one, two or three units and independent and boutique hotels like The Standard and Trump SoHo. And then there's the occasional job for Todd English and sourcing smallwares and tabletop items for Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich's multiple restaurants, including Eataly, the 50,000-square-foot indoor Italian marketplace and emporium with three main restaurants and nine other restaurants.

"Morgan has that New Yorker sense of urgency and purpose, and that is one of the reasons she has been so successful," Posternak says, reminding me about the legendary New York minute, which Johnny Carson once described as "the interval between a Manhattan traffic light turning green and the guy behind you honking his horn."

But more than just urgency, drive and energy fuel Tucker's success. Tucker has a way with people. She looks at you when you're speaking and remains quiet until you've finished. Her steady green-eyed gaze and soft smile hint that she's genuinely curious and interested.

In this business of hospitality it's all about trust, honesty, reliability and, of course, relationships. Tucker knows this, and knows this well. In fact, she started nurturing those relationships during college at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.

"At Cornell, everyone intends to be in the hospitality business for the long run, and that applies to me, too," she says. For Tucker and her classmates, working in restaurants or management or hotels means something different to them than the starving artist or out-of-work actress looking to get by waiting tables before landing the next gig. Hospitality and service are Tucker's passion, focus and life's work.

After graduating in 2007, Tucker's strong connections from college helped her land a coveted job at Danny Meyer's Union Hospitality Group, which operates such renowned restaurants as Gramercy Tavern and Union Square Cafe. Working as a floor manager at The Modern, Meyer's



Multiconcept operator The One Group is one of Tucker's busiest clients, as the company looks to expand its STK (seen here), Asellina, and One brands nationally and internationally.

fine-dining restaurant at the Museum of Modern Art, helped her learn the ins and outs of daily operations. Many describe working for Danny Meyer as being like working for Donald Trump in the business world or for Thomas Keller in the culinary world. Once you work for Meyer, you can respectfully work anywhere else in the hospitality industry.

Tucker then moved over to Stephen Hanson's BR Guest Hospitality Group, another highly regarded multiconcept operator in New York. But the long days, the challenged pay, and the physical toll of restaurant work were beginning to wear her down. "I worked holidays and weekends and was never with my family," Tucker says. "And I was closing Blue Water Grill at 4 a.m., leaving out of a back alley with pepper spray."

## Morgan At-a-Glance

Age: 27

Years with M. Tucker: 4

First Year's Sales: 0

Current Sales: \$5 million

Education: Cornell University

School of Hotel Administration

First Foodservice Industry Job:

Krinkle Fries, Long Beach Island, age 13

Career-Changing Jobs:

Manager for Union Square Hospitality Group

Manager for BR Guest Restaurant Group

Most Proud Career-Related Moment:

Winning *FE&S'* DSR of the Year Award!

Favorite Foods: fresh, organic fare

Favorite Restaurants: 42 The Restaurant, ABC Kitchen, The Standard Grill, Bagatelle

Favorite Thing about NYC:

The hospitality!

One of those mornings, Tucker says, her dad Stephen called and asked, "Are you done with this yet?" And she finally said, "Yes, I'm done."

Even though Tucker left restaurant operations to get into foodservice equipment and supplies sales, her hard work and odd hours weren't necessarily done. But, no matter: she felt healthier, happier and passionate about her new career. An entrepreneurial spirit paired with an independent nature and a willingness to blaze her own trail were all Tucker needed. When Stephen Tucker gave her the reigns to stake out her territory in Manhattan, she grabbed them with gusto.

To say Tucker was instantly successful is an understatement. In just four years, Tucker has done the equivalent of going from zero to 60 in a matter of seconds. In that time she took M. Tucker's Manhattan-based tabletop and smallwares

business for independent restaurants and hotels from generating virtually zero dollars to one that generates \$5 million annually and continues to grow exponentially. And that multimillion dollar figure doesn't even include any heavy equipment, which Tucker supplies for many of her customers with the help of M. Tucker's engineering and design department and, occasionally, her father.

"I don't think I would work as hard as I do without having the operations background," Tucker says. "Every day that I work until 10 or 11 at night I think to myself, 'Well, I could be working at 4 in the morning.' And any Saturday I work I remember I used to work every weekend. So I think I have a real appreciation for how hard people work in this industry. I also work hard for my customers because I know they are entrepreneurs and they're giving up their lives for their passion."

In other words, she gets it. "I think people in this industry are really just looking for others to celebrate with them, and also to commiserate with them," Tucker says. "When they're hurting they want you to feel bad and hurt with them, and when they're celebrating they want you to be there with them." Think: therapy for restaurant owners.

After joining the family business, Tucker was instantly busy. So busy, in fact, that she had to hire some help. I laugh when McNamara tells me the story of how Tucker brought her on board: "Morgan and I have been close friends for years, and when she started this job, she got really busy really fast," McNamara says. "After there were cuts at my advertising job during the recession, I was looking for another opportunity, and Morgan turned to me one day saying she could use some help. I was like, 'OK, sure I'll help you.' She said, 'No. Serious help.'"

The fact that McNamara boasts a strong sales and marketing background from working at a major advertising agency in New York helped her learn quickly and become an important part of Tucker's team. But more importantly, Tucker says, McNamara has a work ethic and drive that are compatible with her own — and it has made them inseparable, both as colleagues and friends. "It's very hard to teach people how to work hard and be customer service oriented and entrepreneurial at the same time, but Katie has all those things naturally," Tucker says.

The duo spends the majority of their time on the streets together, meeting with customers, placing orders immediately through their iPads, making phone calls and sending emails to follow up, with Tucker taking a management lead and McNamara an execution position. They also travel together, to assist with major restaurant openings and installs. This summer, Tucker also recruited her cousin Samantha Tucker, home from college, to help out. Samantha is here with this group today, basically lending an extra pair of hands, as she puts it. Because after today, it's clear that's certainly needed.

Outside of work, Tucker and McNamara dine out together, often at their customers' restaurants. In that sense, they aren't just salespeople; they're also their customers' customers.

"I think another reason I've been successful in building relationships is just from going to the restaurants and the nightclubs a lot, and because I'm young and I spend time with my customers," explains Tucker. McNamara is the same way:

she eats at STK Midtown, one of their best customers, two or three times a week. In many cases, eating out at their customers' restaurants is cheaper than grocery shopping and cooking at home. "It's relaxing, and they take care of us," says Tucker.

Later in a cab on the way to our first stop after lunch I lean over to peer at the *Total Food Service* magazine Tucker is holding, which she says she often reads for New York restaurant opening news and other leads. There's an article in it about her receiving *FE&S'* DSR of the Year award, and I'm curious. Suddenly I forget to be polite and reach over to take it from her. She smiles and quickly hands it over. We seem to have made a connection. I vow to keep up with the pace from here on out.

### 1 p.m.: EMM Group Headquarters, Meatpacking District

We arrive at EMM Group's lofty office space nestled in between two warehouses in the heart of the Meatpacking District, the neighborhood where Morgan lives and from which she just came prior to lunch. Morgan steps — no, flies — out of the cab, with me in breathless pursuit. Perhaps the word "glide" is better: with long legs and a statuesque presence, it doesn't look like she's walking as fast as she is. It will be one of those more unusual days with a lot of back and forth through the city. Normally she structures meetings to cut down on travel time and logistics, but her client's needs come first.

Just on time for our appointment, we take the small elevator up to meet Adam Landsman, a close friend of Morgan's from when they worked together for Danny Meyer. Landsman is now the director of operations for an organization that operates a network that will total 10 restaurants and food-forward nightclubs by the end of 2012. They approach each other as friends, with a little small talk and some sarcastic jokes. But Morgan soon gets down to business. She wants the schedule for the Catch opening in Miami so she can make sure they have what they need in time. Adam grumbles a little about spending the past several mornings looking around the city for warehouse space. Morgan's response: Are you kidding me? "What did I tell you a long time ago? You call 1-800-Morgan, and I help solve your problems. That's my job."

Within minutes she's resolved Landsman's need for a modest 2,500 square feet within M. Tucker's 150,000-square-foot warehouse just 20 minutes away. "Can I get in at night? Overnight?" Landsman asks. Of course, Morgan responds.

Though Landsman is a friend, this isn't playtime. Restaurant organizations like EMM Group and The One Group churn out multimillion-dollar restaurants at a healthy pace, and it's because of people like Landsman. In fact, the time-



As part of her expanding network of clients, Tucker occasionally sources smallwares and tabletop items for Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich's multiple concepts like Eataly, which includes a rooftop restaurant and brewery called Birreria.

line for these types of restaurant openings can be as little as two months. Yes, two months. So when these guys need something, they need it fast — like in a New York minute.

"It takes so much out of you, these restaurant openings, but when they happen it's so rewarding," Morgan says. The work doesn't stop there, though, she notes. Sure, it was secretly exciting to watch her equipment delivery and installation for a recent restaurant opening by The One Group in Atlantic City run smoothly while other restaurants opening at the same time were floundering. But Morgan knew she would have to be there for her client in the days after to make sure everything was still running smoothly. Her hard work didn't go unnoticed: Those once-floundering restaurants have since brought Morgan on board.

Landsman later tells me he more than appreciates Morgan's strong restaurant background; it's basically a necessity to do business in this fast-paced industry. "The difference is typical salespeople often don't get our type of clients and what really goes on in restaurants," he says. "We choose vendors based on the idea that things go both ways — we take care of them, and they take care of us. I know Morgan understands how restaurants function and comes from a similar background, and that's important. Whatever it is we need, she turns it around that same day or the next day, and she can anticipate our needs but not in a typical salesperson, pushy way."

In other words, Morgan knows good service, and this comes from family values, dining out often, studying at one of the premier hospitality schools, her restaurant work and the fact that she lives in Manhattan.

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## DSR of the Year 2012: MORGAN TUCKER

"I think people in New York will pay more for good service," she says. Good service means answering the phone at 6 a.m. or 12:30 a.m., whenever your client needs something, Morgan explains. In fact, she even eschews mass transit for the most part in favor of walking or cabs because she can't get cell phone reception in the subway.

That said, technology is an important part of Morgan and McNamara's daily work. "I never leave home without my iPad," Morgan says. The two also use a Microsoft interface on their iPads to access the dealership's sales software program and place orders, monitor sales activity, track purchasing efficiencies and more. It provides a "bird's-eye view" into your sales program and goals, Morgan explains.

Later, I take a gander through the comprehensive system, noticing that the sophisticated program is pretty easy to use. "A lot of people in the industry just started using this program two or three years ago, but we've been running it for five years," Morgan says. "Most people don't run advanced software in this industry — many run very dated systems. In fact, a lot of people's invoices look like they are from the 1920s — that's just how the industry is. I use being young to my advantage."

### 2 p.m.: Willow/Bar Toro

Thanks to a Cornell friend, Will Malnati, and some strong recommendations, Morgan has been working with the owners of the popular Toro Restaurant in Boston to open a New York City outpost called Bar Toro and a neighborhood restaurant called Willow, which will open next door.

For now, the black and white, mod-styled office of JW Collective, a marketing firm, has become temporary office space for the restaurant group. We meet first with Chef Colby Wood, a former sous chef at Eric Ripert's acclaimed Le Bernardin, who dumps a heavy box of tabletop samples on the table in this tiny, glass-encased conference room, removing and discussing piece after piece, from white porcelain containers shaped like hardened french fry bags to mini iron baskets and heavy slate boards.

At one point Wood pulls out his iPad, pointing to different items; later he switches to a print catalog on which he's scratched some notes after visiting different NYC tabletop showrooms. Morgan uses her own iPad and some more print catalogs to show more pieces, while McNamara takes notes with a paper and pen, and then places orders using her iPad. The three of them use a blend of old and new technologies to create this order.

I think to myself, "How does she keep up with all the tabletop pieces on the market, especially with such particular clients?" And these clients — and pretty much everyone else Morgan works with — are specific. When a couple of interior designers enter the room, they describe the look that the people in Toro's Boston headquarters want as "vintage Americana, but still refined." Wood elaborates, noting that if there were no limitations, the chef out of the Boston restaurant wants to see things like 1950s beer cans crushed and made into butter plates.

Yeah. That specific.

Earlier at lunch, Morgan told me how her customers and other restaurateurs don't have the ability to look at other cities and places to discover new trends because as New Yorkers they look to set those trends. Keeping up with what's on the market and what's about to be on the market involves a lot of Internet scouring, factory visits, trade show tours, dining out and talking to the big wigs at those top tabletop brands.

"I am fortunate to have the opportunity to go to not only the local shows and the shows that salespeople go to but also the shows that management attend," Morgan says. "Being able to get in front of the manufacturers and develop relationships with their principals has helped a lot. If there is a real problem, I don't call the sales rep, even though they do have great reps working for them," she says. "I call the president of the company." This also comes in handy when her trendsetting, creative chefs want to get their hands on tabletop pieces that haven't hit the catalogs.

In the cab after the visit, there's some rumbling about the challenge of working with interior designers, many of whom "think they're also foodservice designers."

Case in point: “How about that comment about the height of the plate and about its ‘amorphous’ shape?” Huh?

Despite the chuckles, Morgan respects and works strongly with designers. Though M. Tucker has its own design department, often restaurants will contract independent designers. Regardless, Morgan will work with their direction, too. “Do I want them to hire one of our designers because they can get that service included as opposed to tens of thousand of dollars for an independent designer? Yes, but I don’t want to push.”

#### 4:30 p.m.: RSVP

We’re now at RSVP, Manhattan’s hottest resto-lounge/nightpub/resto-club (whichever term you prefer), in the heart of SoHo. The sexy, sleek restaurant-meets-nightclub represents one of the industry’s burgeoning trends: the intersection of bar vets and celebrity chefs. We meet with Chef Seth Levine, a former contestant who bore the brunt of Gordon Ramsay’s wrath on television’s “Hell’s Kitchen” and has since gone on to run the kitchens of and partner in several NYC restaurants, including his own trendy frozen yogurt chain POP YOGURT.

We sit on the wraparound black leather banquette, brightened by mirrored walls and subtle, neon purple lights that encase a sunken dance floor underneath a massive crystal chandelier. The rock shrimp tempura goes by. Levine points out the dish Morgan helped them source for the new menu item.

This is the type of high-energy spot where attention to detail is critical, and that includes tabletop. “Every time there is a new dish, a new menu, a new chef all my customers want all new pieces to go with that,” Morgan says.

Levine half jokes, “I am a painter, and I want the plates to be my palette.” Morgan knows he’s more serious than he seems and pulls out a catalog to revisit some of the pieces she’s already emailed to Levine’s overflowing inbox (proof that electronic is not always enough). Silence. Morgan: “No?” She flips a page and points to another piece. “Ooh . . .,” Levine says, grabbing the book. “I love that.” Morgan: “Yes!”

#### 7 p.m.: Dinner at STK Midtown

The site of the next morning’s photo shoot is The One Group’s latest splash: STK Midtown, the second outpost of the company’s original location in the Meatpacking District. A white retro-futuristic ceiling fixture (“The Jetsons” meets “2001: A Space Odyssey”) wraps around overhead, from the right side to the left all-glass wall overlooking the plaza of Midtown’s historic W. R. Grace building, which houses AOL Time Warner and HBO. Fitting, because the glamorous, see-and-be-seen interior with big, six-person booths all strategically turned toward each other looks like a scene out of “Sex and the City”. It’s girls’ night in New York City. And it’s on.

Even at dinner, Morgan’s work hasn’t really ended: she chats up the server, the floor manager, the general manager. She notes the way things are going in the restaurant, and how the food looks when it hits our table. We order the delicately cooked soft-shell crab, the endive salad, the supple halibut with poblano vinaigrette, the beef short ribs with carrot butterscotch and a smattering of sides — thick-cut truffle fries carefully stacked in a crisscross design, simple broccolini with cracked pepper, and mac and cheese still warm in a mini cast iron dish. “The food here is not overdone — very simple and straightforward,” Morgan says, and it’s an informed comment from someone who had to master several culinary classes at Cornell. I comment on how nice the tabletop looks. She’s not fond of the silverware, a departure from her recommendation.

Throughout the meal she takes the time to watch others, and not just because it’s a people-watching empire. “I love to watch people eat,” she says with a little chuckle. At the end of the meal, Morgan even notices the way the server pushes the dessert a little, so we order a few because we feel for him. It’s clearly the talk of not just a former restaurant manager, but of a true hospitality person who likes to see other people enjoying themselves while dining out. And then

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New York City's trendy Meatpacking District, home to Catch (seen here), is home to many of Tucker's clients. The restaurant operators in this part of town don't look to see the latest tabletop trends — they set them.

there's the vision of a successful tabletop dealer: a row of mini ice cream cones sits perfectly upright in an elevated silver holder — a cool piece and a nice way to create a lasting impression.

Right now, The One Group is the busiest of Morgan's restaurant clients, many of which are also structured as parent companies with multiple — and very different — concepts under their belts. The One Group is working on expanding its STK, Asellina, Bagatelle, and One brands nationally and internationally, and also introducing new restaurant concepts. Morgan also helped supply the group with tabletop and supplies for STK Out, an outdoor burger and shake concept sitting on that plaza mentioned earlier, and which also has plans for a nationwide rollout.

Later she discusses her method of ramping up existing business during the slowdown of summer. When many New Yorkers leave for the beach, Morgan spends weekends with her customers at Sunset Beach on Shelter Island, or at Revel, a new Atlantic City casino where both The One Group and LDV Hospitality have concepts.

"We get our leads from reading papers, blogs, getting mailings and then attacking those customers," Morgan says. "If we just contacted people once, we were finding that there wasn't a good response; you have to follow up and follow up. We found the best thing to do over the summer when people are slow is to send our existing customers a lot of new products. We'll focus on ramping up our existing sales by blasting our customers with these new pieces in the next couple weeks as they make a move to open more restaurants in the fall."

With that kind of insight and thinking, it's clear to me Morgan was born to be a businesswoman. Later I realize she gets it from both parents: Morgan's father, who took over her grandfather's nearly 60-year-old company, and her mother, a former media buyer who started her own Internet solutions business with a roster of Fortune 500 clients. Morgan says, "Pleasure," when shaking hands with someone new. She says "please," "thank you," and "of course" on a regular basis. She dots her i's and crosses her t's. Clearly, she was raised well.

Michael Grossbard, director of purchasing for The One Group sees this in Morgan. "When I first met Morgan I have to admit I thought she was just a young kid, but I was rapidly surprised and impressed," he says. "She's proven to be better than any other salesperson I have ever dealt with." This comes from a veteran of the industry, most recently with a six-year tenure at Smith & Wollensky.

When asked what he likes best about working with Morgan, Grossbard points out her level of service. "In the modern day, that level of service is as close to 24 hours as you can imagine," he says. "She's responding to questions and needs from 5 a.m. to 2 a.m. and always on our schedule, not on hers, and she does it all with a smile. Despite how ridiculous and absurd our requests, she finds a way to make it happen. Her experience helps in that she gets what I'm looking for faster, but really, it's about her work ethic. That's something you can't teach in this industry."

### Picture Perfect

At the photo shoot the next day I forget I'm there for a trade magazine as the whole thing seems more like a cover shoot for *Vogue*, or perhaps *InStyle*. Morgan, a natural beauty, doesn't need a lot of direction from the photographer. She smiles widely and enjoys herself, in between chatting up the chefs and sending a few business emails, of course.

Sure, looks will get you places in life, and sure, that hasn't hurt Morgan. But that's not the point. With the beauty come the brains, business savvy and boldness that make her a modern woman: a portrait of what a twentysomething in today's day and age and in this food industry can achieve. Many people strive their whole lives to be this or that. Morgan Tucker is too busy to strive to be successful: she just is. In just a few years, she has already shown what you can accomplish in just a New York minute.

And she's only just begun. **FE&S**

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