



Stirring the Pot

Naturally Unnatural Foodservice

I had a great opportunity last month to attend the Natural Foods Expo in Baltimore. I had some idea what to expect, but confess to being blown away by what I experienced!

Upon entering the Conference Hall, my initial gut reaction was to be taken aback by:

- The appearance of many of the attendees and exhibitors (hairstyles: unusual; tats: numerous; jeans: skinny)
- Exhibits of foods I had never seen or heard of
- Bold health claims, many of which I'll politely categorize as "dubious"



The Natural Foods Expo is young, energetic, positive, innovative, enthusiastic, passionate, and disruptive of the status quo. You know, everything the NRA Show is NOT!

Some of the booths looked like NASCAR racers, plastered with placards proclaiming:

- Non GMO
- Gluten free
- Vegan
- Paleo
- Local
- Sustainable
- Antibiotic free
- Probiotic
- Natural
- Organic

....and of course my favorite, “Superfood”

BUT HERE’S THE THING:

There were 1500 exhibitors here (I’m told the West Expo has 3,000), and as I became immersed in the experience of the show floor I had a serious change of heart. The Natural Foods Expo is young, energetic, positive, innovative, enthusiastic, passionate, and disruptive of the status quo. *You know, everything the NRA Show is NOT!*

The focus is clearly on the “food” side of the “food business,” not the “business” side. And there’s an open recognition that the “story” behind the product is nearly as important as the product itself.

I quickly understood that it doesn't matter whether I believe the health claims or even whether they're backed by science. The fact is, a LOT of consumers want these products, they feel good about buying and eating them, and there's a significant and rapidly-growing business here.

And a fair portion of the exhibitors I spoke with confirmed that they are either already in foodservice or have near-term plans to enter the marketplace.

What's intriguing is that most of these manufacturers are operating in an "alternative foodservice universe!" Many don't own manufacturing plants, preferring to utilize copackers. The CEO is in many cases the sales person. Those who have a foothold in foodservice have started by penetrating one or more key accounts, pulling the products into distribution. They're also utilizing alternative channels to get products from plants to operators, including UPS and Amazon.

The mindset of these entrepreneurs is to "hack the system" and while their unnatural approach to our traditional foodservice practices can be disconcerting, it's also encouraging to see people finding a better way.

There were precious few of us graying, middle-aged guys and women that dominate traditional foodservice events. It's possible that all of the traditional manufacturers, distributors and brokers were on the show floor, but in two days I didn't see them.

Look, it's easy to dismiss the natural foods movement as a passing fad, or at best a niche market with limited appeal.

It's also easy to imagine these folks achieving their goals of revolutionizing the food system. Just as "alternative rock" music eventually became "mainstream rock" (remember how strange Pearl Jam sounded in 1991?) we've already seen the influence on cleaner ingredient statements and supply chain transparency among the huge corporate manufacturers.

It will be fascinating to see if these folks can help make over the foodservice business as well!

What do you think? [Tell Dave](#)

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