Stirring the Pot

New Approaches, Old Conundrums

As you probably know, there are more than a few startup food manufacturers whose stated goal is "to change the world's food system." Many are headquartered in the Silicon Valley area, and some are funded by high-profile investors who are better known as technology gurus than as "food guys." In fact, some of these businesses are classified as "food technology companies" instead of manufacturers, and one recently was named a "Technology Pioneer" by the Global Economic Forum.

I've had the opportunity to work with a couple of these companies recently and was both impressed and taken aback by their lack of interest in the traditional ways we do things in the foodservice business!

As we worked through issues around price structure, sales representation, distribution options, and marketing I found little appetite for learning what's usually done but a tremendous appetite for "doing something and moving on." And once I got over my instinct to take offense, I gained an appreciation for this totally fresh, start-from-scratch approach. And it is coupled with a very aggressive focus on rapid growth, which stands in contrast to the more modest expectations of established manufacturers.

Whether or not you feel that the world's food system is in need of changing, you've got to be impressed with the investment of effort and technology that these companies are making. One is building a database of the world's plants on a molecular level, in part to discover how plants can be used in place of animal products to manufacture virtually any well-known food item.

Another company has received press recently for replicating a beef hamburger without using any animal products. Their patty looks, feels, tastes, smells and behaves like ground beef in the raw state, as well as on the grill and on a hamburger bun. According to the article, this product is "the result of some pretty high-tech research." The researchers focused on "heme….an iron-containing molecule that makes meat look pink and taste slightly metallic."

The article continues, "By taking the soybean gene that encodes the heme protein and transferring it to yeast, the company has been able to produce vast quantities of the bloodlike compound." And "To replicate fat, researchers mix flecks of coconut oil into ground "plant meat" made from textured wheat protein and potato protein."

A Food Analyst adds "Millenials especially like to eat healthier" and "there is a real opportunity for *food alternatives* that taste, look and sound like the real thing." (italics mine)

Cool!

But hang on a second….

Didn't our appetite for natural, healthy, organic, sustainable, local, non-GMO, etc. foods start with a general distrust of "processed foods?" Weren't we supposed kick the food technologists out of the labs, stop tinkering with nature and get back to eating food in its natural state?

The author Michael Pollan (whose work I admire and respect) has written: "Avoid edible food-like substitutes" and "If it came from a plant, eat it; if it was made in a plant, don't."

But what if it comes from a plant but is made in a plant; what if it involves a little genetic modification but is animal-free; what if it uses science to imitate nature but is "healthier than the real thing;" what if ……

It's enough to make your head spin!

All of this is NOT to criticize these new companies, their philosophies or their approaches. I personally believe our food system should be better and am always fascinated by companies and products that go against the grain of common practices.

But this example provides a stark reminder of the complexity and uncertainty surrounding our food choices. It underscores the fact that the binary "good for you or bad for you" is exactly the wrong way to think about food.

And it makes me wonder how food companies can effectively choose among competing consumer demands, many of which are based more on emotion than science.

What do you think?

Tell Dave