Making Connections

I remember him clearly. Just as I was ready to depart the academic world for the challenges of industry, he came into our department and introduced himself. A post-graduate student, hired as an expert in thin-layer chromatography for a specific project need. Fact was, TLC experts were a dwindling number in those days. The art and science of chromatography was rapidly expanding into new and exciting areas, such as advanced liquid and gas chromatography. So, many opted to become “general” chromatography specialists. The age of the specialist was giving way to the age of the generalist. Yet, there he was: a young 20-something, married with a baby. Would his specialty outlive him and his family’s needs and, if not, would he adapt?

It’s a cliché that progress is a process of creative destruction. Our profession has probably suffered through more creative destruction in the last 30 years than during the preceding 100 years. The good news: we are getting better at it. Silo your expertise today and you will experience the meaning of obsolescence, for “expertise” has become ephemeral. So, in self-defense, we learn to become generalists, experts at continually connecting and adapting to the many disparate pieces of information that bubble up from the stew of creation.

This is exactly why professional meetings, such as the recently concluded World Grain Summit in San Francisco, are so important. Sure, there are many other ways to network in our electronic age. None, however, provide so much information ready at hand for tasting, touching, massaging, and challenging the facts and assumptions that gird our professional worldviews. The truly valuable information cannot be Googled. Rather, it is exchanged through looks, casual remarks, impromptu conversations in between meeting sessions, at airports, in restaurants and bars…or over beer, a lot of beer, as was consumed…er, exchanged at this joint meeting of AACC International and the Master Brewers Association of the Americas. It is meetings like these that lead us to those “ah-hah” moments at the nexuses of the creative process.

The student product development competition provided a case in point. Teams of students from competing universities presented new cereal-based product concepts before a panel of world-savvy judges, drawn from industry giants. These students weren’t just about food science—packaging, graphics, consumer testing, and financial analysis all factored into their presentations. If their “facts” at times betrayed inexperience, their strengths lay in their ability to connect multiple, disparate dots into finished product concepts. Time will take care of the facts and inexperience, their ability to connect dots is priceless. In the end, an engaging fellow from Purdue, Orane Blake, walked away with the prize for having created a new, puffed-cereal snack by combining broad vision with a careful attention to detail. These students provided me with my own “ah-hah” moments.

I do not worry about the future of Mr. Blake and his fellow contestants: their ability to connect dots and think in big, broad perspectives will never render them obsolete.

So too, it is with the AACC International, which lived up to its newly evolved “international” suffix in San Francisco. We, at CEREAL FOODS WORLD, too, will continue to evolve and adapt to our changing professional worldview. Thus far, we have just signed three international correspondents from our profession to help us connect information on developments in Japan, Latin America, and Canada, beginning in this coming new year. We are looking for others. If interested, please let me know.

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