

The Last Word: “Innovation as Undoing” A FEMA Fall Meeting Preview

Food science is under attack, says Marc Brush, editor in chief at *Nutrition Business Journal*, pointing to recent consumer and media backlash against genetically modified organisms (GMO) and so-called “pink slime.” Brush, who will speak as part of the Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association’s fall meeting, “Horizon Watch: Ensuring the Business of Flavors,” notes such controversies “boil down to a nature-science” dichotomy that pits scientific progress against consumer anxiety.

“Food science is becoming a greater and greater obstacle,” he says, and as a result innovation is being re-imagined.

Even as genetically engineered food faces mandatory labeling under California’s Proposition 37 legislation, Brush notes that the issue is “fraught with need to feed the world.” The issue is huge, he says, with “entrenched players.”

The origins of this dynamic, says Brush, lie in the natural products industry, which has long operated in its own bubble. “It was about preaching to the consumer,” he says. “Consumers now care about what the bubble cares about. It’s gone mainstream.” While once critics of the natural/organic/anti-GMO movements could claim average people were unconcerned with such matters, Brush notes that the movement now extends to poor and working class communities such as those depicted in the recent film *Edible City* (<http://ediblecitythemovie.com/about/>). “It’s the cutting edge, but it’s not the fringe,” he says. “It’s where it’s headed at a more and more rapid pace.” Brush believes that conventional manufacturers, while still comprising the vast majority of the food and beverage industry, should take notice of the increasing amount of organic and natural products showing up in shopping carts, while virtually every segment of the food and beverage industry skewing toward natural-positioned, whole-food offerings. Even among supplements, he says, naturals are outpacing market growth for engineered and synthetic products. “If you’re in the artificial business you should have a plan to move to natural alternatives,” Brush concludes.



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In conjunction with these trends, industry is pushing toward transparency, Brush explains. Today’s consumers have access to apps for scanning bar codes and personalizing filters that empower them to choose their preferred product parameters. Brush highlights the ingredient tracker offered by One Degree Organics (<http://onedegreeorganics.com/>), which offers visitors the chance to track the sources of ingredients.

In this context, he says, the traditional enemies of innovation, bad economies and uncertain regulatory environments, are being supplanted by a larger movement. Companies are looking at what they can do to behave more sustainably. For example, companies are controlling more and more of their supply chains in order to drive change throughout, rather than focusing solely on new products. Supply chain industries have traditionally been driven by innovation, Brush explains—What’s the next new ingredient or technology? Given consumers’ desire for natural, today’s innovation is, as Brush puts it, “as much undoing as ‘newdoing.’”

“It’s a process, not product, thing,” Brush adds.

Amid the unrelenting trend toward natural, Brush concludes, industry will be compelled to rethink innovation.

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