

Outside the BOX: Food wars

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Reality TV has little appeal for me with the exception of the Food Network, where shows such as *Man vs. Food*, *Throw Down with Bobby Flay* and *Diners, Dives and Drive-Ins* have special appeal to a middle-aged carnivore and amateur grill-boss. Each episode provides a look inside

food establishments and enterprises that represent some of the most creative culinary approaches that the United States has to offer.

These shows are successful because they introduce the viewer to a variety of foods, culinary techniques and tastes.

Given the success of these and other food-related shows, consumers have an intense interest in improving their dining experiences and expanding their food knowledge. As a result, food has become more than a combination of nutrients. Experiences, culture and integrating food into the fabric of our sense of self, community and humanity must now be considered.

Food negativity

Developing competitive advantage in the marketplace has generated an array of messages around food. Consider all the adjectives and descriptors used to position foods in the marketplace — natural, organic, convenient, value-added, local, fast, slow, low-cal, great taste, low-cost, premium, low-fat and the list goes on. Add the differentiators associated with the product's story — family farm, national brand, house brand, green, sustainable, small farm, big farm, high-tech and low-tech. What results is a wildly differentiated competitive arena in which companies and brands battle for market share.

Unfortunately, the contest for market share in this space has too many times devolved into an atmosphere of negativity, in which messaging creates a sense of confusion among consumers as each competitor spends their energy trying to improve their product's position by devaluing the merits of the other participants' products.

Imagine that our approach to selling seedstock followed the same model. Instead of merchandising cattle on the basis of their merits measured in objective terms through a national cattle evaluation (NCE) system, seedstock producers spent their time running down their competitors through disparaging advertising. Negative selling is not sustainable. Companies can't buy long-term consumer loyalty by framing their competitors in a negative light or by elevating their product offering by creating focus on the alleged shortcomings of the competitors. Railing against something is a tougher sell than advocating for a defined, clear set of attributes — just ask the Occupy Wall Street crowd.

Long term, we are told that global demand for food will increase significantly during the next several decades. Meeting that demand in an arena where consumers and producers continue to have choices requires recognition that it will take many players, a variety of production approaches, and a diverse set of healthy food supply chains to meet humanity's basic needs, as well as the vast number of unique market niches in both domestic and global markets.

Establishing excellence and the opportunity to create market share has been accomplished on hard work, appropriate risk-taking and bringing products to the market that met

consumer demand and then growing market share by consistently delivering value. In the case of food, attributes that have long-standing success in the marketplace are taste, quality and pricing aligned with value. The realm of food has remained an arena where new ideas, concepts, flavors, packaging and other innovations continuously invigorate the market because consumers want to have choices.

Blue ocean goals

In their groundbreaking work, *Blue Ocean Strategy*, W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne break the market into two spheres — red oceans and blue oceans. In the red ocean, companies fiercely compete to gain market share using incremental differentiation, low-cost pricing strategies, and an array of combative techniques that ultimately create “blood in the water” as competitors fight over a fixed, if not shrinking, profit pool. On the other hand, they describe the blue oceans as “uncontested market space” where rules are not yet established, competitors don’t exist and truly novel ideas take form. Blue ocean thinking has the potential to infuse a new vision into the food business.

In the red ocean realm, we are in a box defined by existing rules, business models and a more or less fixed market viewpoint. Once constrained to these boundaries, human beings seek to gain share by bringing others down and “all’s fair in love and war” tactics are brought to bear. The messages to consumers and potential clients become more negative and combative based on the mistaken notion that sustainable markets and brand equity can be built on fear and guilt.

How many times do consumers receive messages that cast doubt on the quality, safety and ethics of products and production systems? It’s not only the activists who prey on human fear and uncertainty, but increasingly producers and supply chains, as well. In the end, these red ocean strategies add cost, reduce margin and create a poisonous atmosphere that diminishes trust, increases regulation and inhibits innovation.

There are no fixed, “one-size-fits-all” approaches to feeding humanity either nutritionally or in terms of experiences, community and culture. Meeting future consumer demand requires a variety of supply chains, practices and product attributes. It’s time to move food production, marketing, distribution and branding toward blue waters. Take a look at *Blue Ocean Strategy*; it might just change your course for the better.

Unfurl the mainsail. Yo ho, and full speed ahead!

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