Taking Food Personally

By Karen Langhauser, Editor-in-Chief, Food Manufacturing

While barbecuing the other day with my sister (more accurately, while our significant others were barbecuing and we were watching) I was attempting to look busy by examining a package of Martin's potato rolls. I noticed that, in tiny red print, down the side of the bag it read, "Maxi MMMM flavor." Admittedly, it took me a few seconds to even catch the play on "maximum," but when I did, I found it somewhat funny…albeit a little odd.

I immediately pictured a large boardroom, teaming with marketing execs, engaged in a lively discussion about what to print down the side of the roll packaging. "I've got it!" exclaims one eager, suit-clad gentleman. "How about Maxi MMMM flavor?" Everyone screams with delight. The idea is passed on to the legal department, which carefully deliberates for six months and then approves the decision.

Likely scenario? Probably not. Martin's potato rolls are a product of family-owned Martin's Famous Pastry Shoppe, Inc., out of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Besides being the best gift you can bestow upon your hamburger, these little rolls have met sizeable market success in grocery stores and mega-retailers all over the east coast. They are a classic example of a family-owned, small business success story in the food industry.

The food industry has been widely criticized for being mechanized, faceless and impersonal. One recent documentary claimed the food industry is a "cool industrialized environment leaving little space for individualism." Numerous plant tours as an editor have led me to think otherwise. In fact, I've been in countless plants producing everything from beer to chocolate, run by plant managers who take things very personally. All share a passion for what they produce and a drive to make the best product possible. At the end of every tour, plant managers always insist I try their products. They stare at me intently and wait with anticipation for my reaction (which I've learned *always* has to be favorable, no matter what).

I'm not denying the existence of industry giants in food production. And of course, despite their niche market success, Martin's rolls are still, without a doubt, small potatoes when in the presence of companies like Kraft and Nestle. The famous 80/20 rule is alive and well in the food industry (the fact that 80 percent of the money/power/jobs in the food industry are held by only 20 percent of the companies). But even this does not convince me that the food industry lacks a personal touch.

Business is business no matter what industry you examine; companies need to be

profitable to survive. However, the food industry is in a unique position because it is one of the few industries where every single employee – from the CEO down to production line workers — is also a consumer. Critics can say what they want about the food industry lacking personalization, heart and even a sense of humor, but me and my “maxi MMMM flavor” potato rolls strongly disagree.

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