

BAKING

Don't Bite the Hand that Might Feed You

One of my most vivid memories is of my first visit to Seattle in the late 1970s. My wife and I were driving into town with some friends and were greeted by a large billboard that asked "Will the last person leaving Seattle please turn off the lights?"



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These were not great years for Seattle. Extensive layoffs at Boeing and hard times for both the timber and commercial fishing industries meant that the city and surrounding communities were suffering. Unemployment was at an all-time high, and many families abandoned their houses to the bank, packed the car, and left town. As we toured several suburban communities, homes with boarded windows and 4-ft tall weeds for yards were common.

Almost everything has a cyclical nature. The airlines, automakers, and high-tech firms have all had their ups and downs. It seems that a year of record earnings is followed, not so many years later, by a request to the federal government for a bailout. And, if the government doesn't intervene, the economic downturn worsens for the rest of the country.

Even the food industry is prone to these cycles. You wouldn't think it's possible, since we all have to eat every day, but our industry does have its up and down years. Consider the changes in the grocery business: they have been gut-wrenching and monumental. Some stores are experiencing amazing growth, while others are struggling to keep up with social change. Is it a matter of marketing the latest consumer trends or having the right product at the right price? Is it store location or the lure of megastores where clothes, groceries, tires, and more can be purchased in the same trip? Is it a tailoring of the product mix to the demographics of each city? Perhaps all of these factors are important, or perhaps none of them are.

One thing is clear—change is inevitable, and perhaps we should embrace it rather than struggle against it. The baking business is not exempt from the changes facing grocers. Is the secret to success a matter of keeping the right product mix on the shelf? Is it keeping

up with high-fiber, low-carb, vitamin-enriched, whole-grain, or multi-grain health trends? Perhaps it is smart advertising that reaches the target audience that works well? I do not profess to have the answers.

I do know that a large number of bakeries (for whatever reason) are no longer around—Heilman, Metz, Bairds, Earth Grains, Campbell-Taggart, Continental, Cooper-Smith, and American come to mind. Think of all the job changes, desired or not, that accompany such changes in the industry. A friend of mine recently told me she has had the same desk and office for the last 25 years, but has worked for five separate companies. With corporate mergers, plant closings, and staff reductions, my friend's experience is becoming much more common.

This is a topic I know about personally. A few months ago, the company I work for was sold to a much larger company. Moving from a privately held company, flying under the radar, to a multi-national conglomerate is a bit of a change. And, it is a natural part of business.

I am writing this to express a personal concern. At any given time some companies are doing well, some are fairly static, and some are failing. I, as most readers do, have friends and colleagues in each of these situations. I cringe when I hear people talk disrespectfully about a struggling company—we've all had friends and colleagues caught in that scenario or been there ourselves. Competition is a wonderful thing. If a competitor produces a better product at a lower cost, there is tremendous incentive for me to improve. If I do not, I will lose business. If I am providing a better product, I still must strive to improve it, knowing full well that others will soon be trying to gain ground. Customers always benefit from fair competition, because quality and consistency improve while prices hold or increase only slightly.

The average person changes positions five times during their career. In some cases, one remains within a chosen field, and in others, the change is a bit more drastic. Personally, I have held about six separate positions, all within the cereals and baking industry, and that does not include graduate school. Some years were fun, and others were difficult. I have found that work is always better when I depend on others. I have had wonderful help from friends inside and outside the industry. Sometimes my friends are competitors, but integrity is always maintained.

So as we go about our business each day, we should respect both those who work with us and those who compete against us. In the end, we all work to make each other better. It's also pragmatic—we all know not to burn bridges. As business changes, a competitor may suddenly become a coworker. This is a relatively small fraternity and treating people poorly will not only reflect on us as people, but may affect our future in the industry as well.

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