

Anatomy of...

Getting an Idea to Market

To Market, To Market Creating – and Introducing – New Products is Vital to Your Success (and Your Customers' Happiness)

By Mike Pehanich

If you're having trouble getting your new product launch off the ground, try these boosters on for size.

Few thoughts thrill like the dream of a breakthrough idea morphing into marketplace reality. Beyond the beauty of healthy profits, successful new products boost brand image and company morale. Sometimes a single new product catapults a company into the industry limelight and gathers green stamps for future projects.

But, as the sage once uttered, "All great ideas eventually degenerate into work." Those all-important steps and checkpoints that lie between concept and market penetration usually spell the difference between a good idea and a truly successful product.

Bringing a new product to the foodservice market is "a tall order," notes Dipak Negandhi, P.E., CFSP, senior engineer Unified Brands, Jackson, Miss. "Most foodservice equipment has to meet basic requirements," he says. "The performance has to be impeccable and meet the expectations of the customer – plus it has to be safe and in accordance with safety regulations."

Get Approvals

Not much glamour here, but the step is absolutely critical. "The most important thing in introducing a new product to the marketplace is securing all the necessary approvals," says David Zabrowski, Fisher-Nickel Food Service Technology Center, San Ramon, Calif. Safety is the first and last consideration in foodservice equipment, and, with-



out the necessary electrical, sanitation, gas and other relevant certification (UL, NSF, ETL, CSA) to your product, you've limited a product's chance of succeeding. In fact, often health or safety inspectors won't even approve the product's installation."

Verify Performance Claims through a Third Party

For some odd reason, potential buyers trust the conclusions of independent testing organizations more than the superlatives that describe your product's performance capability in your ad message.

"If you have a new product and are trying to position your product as energy efficient or as an advanced performance piece of equipment, it's best to get independent third-party support," says Zabrowski. When AccuTemp first launched a griddle with the claim that it was more uniform than any other product on the market, it came to Fisher-Nickel for evaluation. The Eco-Tech Plus Gas Atmospheric Steamer from Market Forge also used test data to secure an ENERGY STAR claim, he notes. So did Alto Shaam to support its claims about the ASF-75G as the industry's most efficient gas fryer.



“Our reports helped validate their claims,” says Zabrowski.

Third-party testing also paves the way for industry citations such as the Gas Food Equipment Network’s Blue Flame Award, the National Restaurant Association’s Kitchen Innovation Awards, and the Electric Foodservice Council’s Award of Excellence – which can also get products off to a fast start.

“Third-party validation also helps when applying for utilities rebates or proof that equipment is meeting the requirements of local codes,” adds Zabrowski.

Bonus Points

Additional Considerations to Bringing Products to Market

Don’t you be Magoo. Short-sightedness is the plague of American industry. Don’t let an expectation of instantaneous return on investment strangle ambition and smother the willingness to take risks.

Take time to look down the road and see the opportunities that current circumstances are creating.

Get out of the traffic. Find product categories where you are not butting heads with large numbers of competitors.

Let your customers enhance your vision. “There aren’t enough companies talking to the foodservice chains today,” says Mike Colburn of Ideas Well Done, developers of prototype foodservice equipment based in Winooski, Vt. Ask customers what they would really like to have today. Then get them to extend their vision a step or two beyond the immediate and practical.

Dare to be bold. Big ideas are all relative. If your organization has spent the last 10 years tweaking old concepts and refining decades-old equipment, even an arm-length stretch into new concepts or product ideas may seem a leap into the stratosphere. “Do you have the

strength to go out there and lead in technology and product development instead of incrementally developing the products you have?” asks Colburn. Create a culture that is open to innovation and willing to accept risk.

Prepare to be bold. Feed your organization’s creative minds. Have brainstorming sessions. Force yourself and others to look ahead until it becomes habit. Have regular sessions to encourage visionary thinking.

Follow up, measure up. Let those great ideas float into the blue sky like helium-filled balloons, put plans and schedules into place to maintain the energy and momentum generated during the idea phase. Insist on follow up. Establish metrics to measure progress, and set a timetable for completion.

Partner with a customer. Team up with a customer who has faith in your products and experience and who is equally committed to change and market leadership.

Pay yourself first. Expand your R&D budget to take on the cost of additional research for high-risk/high-reward projects. Earmark that money for specific research – and toe the line!

Maximize Exposure and Awareness

No product jumps off the shelf and into your customer's establishment on its own. It depends on your ability to generate industry excitement.

Reaching a broad-based audience, from consultants and dealers to manufacturers reps, independent institutions and multi-unit foodservice chains, begins with exposure and awareness building.

"First, you need exposure among reps," says Negandhi. "They in turn work at the local level, showing the product and demonstrating its benefits."

The only way to impact a broad base of dealers with cooking and mechanical or dishwashing equipment is by demonstrating the equipment, he emphasizes. Demos at The NAFEM Show or NRA show are a good starting point. So are product CDs or DVDs demonstrating product performance and benefits. Local gatherings at rep agencies expand awareness and help "train the dealer community" regarding the value of your product.

"Keeping a product top of mind is not a one-shot thing," stresses Negandhi. "You have to repeat that exposure to customers two or three times until they are familiar with it." He also suggests follow-up within six months.

Study the special requirements of institutional markets such as schools and prisons to see that your product has addressed those unique needs as well.

Show the Product in Action – Awareness is Not Enough

You also have to convince a prospective customer that your new piece of equipment will really work. "If you can take a customer to where

the equipment is operating and being used regularly, it will generate more excitement," says Negandhi. Big markets like Chicago or New York where a customer can often see multiple units in action can work to your advantage.

When possible, get your products into the marketplace before your general rollout and marketing campaign commence. "Marketing costs can be huge with new products. Typically, they can exceed the cost of technological development," says Negandhi. United Brands prefers to have multiple units in operation at a number of locations for a period of time before the general rollout. "We call those our 'beta tests.'"

Tim Kramer, Henny Penny, Eaton, Ohio, concurs. "It's not enough to have the equipment in your booth at the show. You need it in their hands – the customers."

It took a long time to convince the industry that the Groen Eco Arch – featuring a new design in ventilation systems – really worked, Negandhi points out. "(Customers) saw it at the shows, but until they saw it in action, they were skeptical."

Work with Customer Operations

Operations plays a far bigger role in the equipment purchase decision-making process today, notes Henny Penny's Kramer. "So many foodservice operations are efficiency driven," he notes. "Operations plays a big role in how a QSR makes french fries and manages consistency with minimal labor. Work with key operations folks to make sure your new equipment fills the bill."

Think Green!

Is your equipment more environmentally friendly than the generation of equipment it succeeds? Does it enhance the efficiency of the establishment? It better.

"The green movement is going strong, and everyone is trying to do more with less," explains Kramer. "If you can't show that your equipment is green or demonstrate its efficiency, don't bother bringing it to market! A boiler that uses less water and energy is a big deal in Phoenix or Los Angeles." ☞

