

## **Tapping a New Market: University Dairies and Food Science Departments**

**By Troy Sawvel**

We in the food packaging equipment industry sometimes forget just how important a role is played by university food science and nutrition departments. Over the last several decades they have become a key link in the chain that brings consumers the inexpensive and safe food we so often take for granted.

The 60 or so American universities with food science departments enable consumers to choose from a wealth of frozen and canned foods, milk and other dairy foods that will keep, microwavable foods – the list goes on and on. The result is that we have far more variety in our diets than older generations enjoyed.

Just as important, university food science programs go a long way toward supplying the dairy managers, bacteriologists, chemists, engineers, and product development specialists needed by the food production, processing, and packaging industries.

And there's something else that companies like mine can't afford to ignore: these programs provide companies supplying goods and equipment for the food industry a great opportunity to influence future plant managers, scientists, and executives at a host of food companies.

Equipment manufacturers can only help themselves by building close ties with the university programs that are training the plant managers and executives of the future. That's why we at T.D. Sawvel – which is best known for frozen dessert-related packaging equipment, especially ice cream – value our equipment sales to universities like Penn State University, Utah State University, California Polytechnic State University, and Michigan State. Brigham-Young University, North Carolina State and Clemson are three others to which we have sold equipment.

It makes me happy when Tom Polchak, creamery manager at Penn State, tells us that our equipment has held up well since his first purchase more than ten years ago. Polchak says the reliability factor is a big one for him, in part because of the relatively small size of university creameries compared

to commercial units. Dairy products are tricky to handle, he says, because of how easily product can become contaminated. “Once you start the processing day, you need assurance that you’ll be able to complete the run,” he says.

While these sales don’t account for a huge percentage of our company’s total sales, we believe the fact that these schools choose to buy from us speaks to the quality of our equipment. Universities have strict purchasing standards, and they want to buy machines that are both a good investment and a good teaching tool.

In other words, the equipment must be reliable, safe and easy-to-operate by inexperienced, student workers. Tom Polchak of Penn State says he believes the exposure to a particular manufacturers’ equipment that students receive often results in their choosing the same maker when they reach a decision-making position at a food company.

Most university food science departments run small-scale production facilities – Utah State, for example, makes Famous Aggie Ice Cream and True Blue Aggie Cheese, both highly sought after items around Logan, Utah. Students get hands-on experience making real products – whether cheese or ice cream or milk – that may be invaluable once they enter the job market. While still in school, they often have the opportunity to work directly with food companies that partner with the university.

Steve Larson, research coordinator for dairy products at Utah State’s nutrition and food science department, says companies like Kraft Foods and Nestles partner with his school in part to try out new food concepts on a reduced scale. “Their own plants are far larger, and we can help them conduct a pilot program before they go into full scale production,” says Larson.

Polchak of Penn State adds that university food science departments also exercise influence in the industry through outreach programs to business, short courses for working professionals and continuing relationships with industry and government people who may participate in such programs.

Another avenue for an equipment maker to reach new customers is through an informal association of university dairy lab plant managers that meets in a group sponsored by the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The association

just started up last year, but has already proved its worth, according to Larson. “My plant manager attends, and he says it’s been highly useful,” he says. The participants use the sessions to exchange information about changing food safety regulations, equipment issues, and new technologies.

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