

NEW thinking at GFTC

Food in Canada caught up with Gary Fread, the new president and CEO of the Guelph Food Technology Centre (GFTC). Born in southern Minnesota, he obtained a BA and MA in history, and then promptly joined Procter & Gamble as a sales representative. He transferred from sales to logistics and worked in various positions there for 11 years before moving to Campbell Soup Canada as director of logistics. He left Campbells as vice-president and chief technical officer to start his own consulting business in 1993. A stint at Morrison Lamothe from 1997 to 2002 as vice-president and general manager of its prepared meals division rounds out his food industry experience.

What are your goals for GFTC?

There are a number of things we need to do. We have to build our business around our current strengths: training, product development and food safety auditing.

We're already Canada's largest trainer of food industry employees, but if we're going to hang onto that position we have to get into web-based training in addition to the kind of seminar-based training that we do. We're continuing to grow our business by working mostly with small- to medium-size companies that don't have the internal resources to do the kind of technical work that needs to be done. We're focusing on new key market segments like functional foods and we're developing a close working relationship with the human health and nutrition department here at the university, trying to find ways to bring those functional food ideas into greater market presence.

What do you think are the strengths of the food industry?

Our greatest strength is our diversity. We've got an excellent crop-based food industry that covers grains, oilseeds, fruits and vegetables. But at the same time we've also got a really excellent livestock-based food industry. And we've got the corresponding processing industries to go along with that.



If you could change something, what would it be?

I think we need a revolutionary change in our thinking. Even though we have the capability to do more, we're still grounded too much in producing commodities and exporting them. We don't have a strong sense that we're all part of the same value chain. Secondly, I think we're still not focused enough on emerging non-food sectors that are rapidly becoming major markets or potential major markets, like nutraceuticals, biomaterials and bioenergy.

What opportunities exist for food manufacturers?

We hear all the time about our healthcare costs and the industry has come to realize that healthcare is going to be a major issue over the next several decades. We need to use every opportunity we have to offer preventative approaches to control those costs and not just work through the traditional healthcare system, but pay better attention to food and nutrition and the use of functional foods and nutritional supplements.

What could Canadian food companies be doing better?

We need a cohesive creative revolutionary new attitude in this sector or quite frankly we could be at risk of losing this sector as a major part of our economy. Commodities will be produced more inexpensively in the next decades by developing countries, processing will evolve and develop in those countries as well. I think we really need to work together and focus on high value-added specialty products wherever we can and that's the way we're going to keep our sector healthy.

Deanna.rosolen@food.rogers.com