

# Let's Connect

Industry networking opportunities can be a valuable resource

By Anneliese Doyle

**I**s there a technical question you haven't been able to find the answer to, although you're certain someone in food product development would be knowledgeable in this area? Are you tracking down an ingredient that others have used successfully in the past and need quick access to that source? Are you interested in what culinary and technical trends your colleagues are developing? Attending a Research Chefs Association (RCA) networking event could provide the answers you're looking for.

Research chefs compare notes at the RCA Southeastern Region event on the artisan foods movement, held this January in St. Petersburg, Fla.



## Why Network?

Writer Oscar Wilde was quoted as saying, "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." It's exactly this relationship of knowing and being known that can help you to harness the power of networking in the food product development industry.

Networking keeps people connected. It unites them with other professionals within their sector, and it helps them connect with other sectors in order to understand the food industry as a whole. Although a seasoned research chef or R&D professional has likely developed professional friendships through their various educational and work experiences, stepping outside of that circle can really

widen the networking influence. A well-networked professional has a base of contacts right at their fingertips, and has developed connections

– whether informal or well-established – with industry colleagues who can facilitate the exchange of valuable ideas and resources.

“The power of networking can help you do your job better, faster and more efficiently, which benefits both the individual and the company,” says Anne Druschitz, CRC, research chef for T. Hasegawa USA in Chicago. “An association such as the RCA facilitates networking by providing a wide variety of opportunities for it to take place: national conferences, regional meetings, e-mail, listserves, membership directories, publications, tradeshow, industry events, and more,” she says. “Personally, the connections I’ve made through networking have given me some great mentors and dear friends.”

The RCA, along with many culinary and food science industry organizations, offers professionals some of the best opportunities to network with like-minded colleagues through a variety of programs offered year-round. Professional associations may also offer opportunities to make connections with important industry partners, such as culinarians and food scientists in food product development.

### **Consider it an Investment**

Successful networking takes effort and initiative. Invest the time now to make those connections, and you will thank yourself months, even years, down the road when you can draw from your contacts to help resolve an issue, fill a position at your company, or even assist you in your own job hunt. In other words, expand your business horizons and educate yourself about your industry today, so that you can be a better R&D professional tomorrow.

“No one can survive the fast pace of new product development living in a vacuum,” says Kevin Anderson, director of Global Product Development for Burger King Corporation and co-chair of RCA’s Regional Events Committee. “Networking keeps a vast pool of resources close at hand...you never know when the person you bumped into yesterday may hold the answer to a question that you have tomorrow.”

The first step in building your network is to determine your goals. You may be seeking a career change, leadership roles in the industry, new markets for sales opportunities, or a specialized R&D professional to add to your team. Perhaps you just relocated and want to network with people in your area professionally and personally, or maybe you want to build your professional reputation by educating others about who you are and what you do.

For students and recent graduates, the goal can be more



Attendees discuss educational sessions during a break at the 2007 RCA Annual Conference in New Orleans this March.

obvious – to get your foot in the door and land a job. Recent Louisiana State University food science graduate Darryl Holliday, now a chef/product development formulator with Crowley, La.-based The Wright Group, joined the RCA as a student and found his investment of time and energy paid off tremendously as he transitioned into the industry. “I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know many other RCA members who are at places in their career that I aspire to reach,” says Holliday. “I have had the opportunity to meet several people who I would classify as mentors and they have been more than happy to take time out of their busy schedules.”

Whatever your goals, consider the resources you have available to you at each level within your company, and with professional associations that bring together people in your industry. Don’t only consider what you have to gain; consider what you can offer, through mentorships, scholarships, internships, or leadership positions. Additionally, never underestimate the power of e-networking, through e-mail, listserv capabilities, discussion forums, and the many communication tools available online today.

The next step after identifying your goals is to just get out there. If the thought of networking with strangers makes your knees weak, just remember these three pointers: listen, talk and trade. Listen to others and sincerely ask what their role is in the industry, share your own 30-second “elevator speech” and offer more if they’re interested, and trade business cards before a final handshake.

### **In Your Own Backyard**

Many industry organizations, including the RCA, offer regional events for R&D professionals. Druschitz spearheads one of the association’s most active regional groups, the RCA Chicagoland-Midwest region, where local mem-

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bers get together throughout the year for educational and social gatherings. The association supports 11 regions in all, including a Canadian region that recently held an event in Brampton, Ont.

Networking is often best done at educational events, and local gatherings like RCA regional meetings are designed as an informational tool. “Regional events provide a local opportunity to meet other neighbours and to learn about their interests as well as their strengths,” says Anderson. “It’s an opportunity for anyone in the organization to develop a program around a subject of interest. In the Southeast U.S. we created a regional event around ‘artisan products.’ Everyone had been using the term but no one could show me a true definition or provide a consistent message around what it meant. From that need we created a regional event with bakery, cheese and protein experts coming together to create a learning experience. It was a great cross-functional experience, with participants sharing their knowledge, from culinary to manufacturing to marketing. Anyone can do it.”

### **Make it Personal**

While networking can help your professional growth, perhaps its greatest reward is the personal relationships that you can develop. Enriching your personal life through new friends and colleagues will ground you in your profession and inspire you to meet success.

Bill “Pops” Hahne, current RCA treasurer, chef/culnologist for First Choice Ingredients, and a founding member of the organization, has observed the networking phenomenon through the years, as the organization has grown exponentially to over 2,500 members. “The RCA was started from the need for our then small group of R&D chefs to network,” he says. “As the RCA grew, so did the networking.” It just seems to work that way.