

Inside TRENDS

F O R E C A S T I N G

A Conversation at a 2006 RCA Annual Conference Opening Reception
By Suzy Badaracco

"You do what?" a fellow Conference attendee said, looking as if she hadn't heard me correctly the first time.

"A trends forecaster," I repeated, trying to sound casual while balancing a small plate of food and a cup of wine. "I track and predict the birth and death of food, flavor, and health trends in the USA."

I looked for an empty table but all were surrounded by mingling Conference attendees either exchanging business cards, smiling, or just looking for someone. "I look for patterns in chaos. I'm like a meteorologist for the food industry." She took a sip of her drink and stared expectantly.

"Well, for example, you and I may look out the window and say 'boy it looks like rain,' but a meteorologist is looking from a satellite point of view. So he may say, 'not only is it going to rain, it will begin about 5pm, continue to early morning, and dump ¼ inch of rainfall so don't water your lawns today.' He isn't guessing - he just has a different vantage point."

There was a pause as she took a sip of her drink. "So...you deal with numbers and stats?" she guessed.

"No, that would be a trends analyst. I deal with the birth and death of trends. By the time numbers can be generated for a trend, I've already moved on."

She frowned. "But what do companies use the information for?"

I shifted from one leg to the other and took a sip of wine while trying to gauge whether her interest was idle or intent, since much of my job is to read people and situations. Intent, I decided.

"Understanding the birth of a trend helps companies decide on an entrance strategy or whether to participate at all. The longevity and death, if there is to be one, helps them determine an exit strategy." I continued, "For example, last year during the downfall of low-carb, one company who was at the top of the trend declared bankruptcy within a few months of the trend's death. Why? No clear exit strategy. Another company however, tagged onto another rising diet phenomenon, repackaged their low-carb products and went on to make \$170 million. Simple exit, perfectly timed - brilliant actually."

She smiled. I shifted focus from me to her and the evening continued as it does, mingling, staring at badges, looking for familiar faces, and hoping to learn from new ones.

I am at the RCA Conference looking for signs of new trend births and the deaths of those still having impact. But it's not always the case. With some groups I listen for fears and passions such as from medical professionals or university professors. With some I look for new research at poster sessions. And sometimes I just listen to what influential groups are thinking... especially useful when looking for government movement.

I track the movement of 23 groups to look for trend births and deaths, and food manufacturers are just one of them. There are lots of blips on the radar that may or may not pop as a trend. Focusing on various groups' activities around a potential trend can indicate which will grow and which won't. Every successful trend, no matter how long or short its life, has had a champion. Dr. Atkins was the champion of low-carb, for example. If a potential trend has

either influential allies or opponents, its birth and lifespan can be mapped. If a potential trend has no allies or champion, then it has nowhere to go. Both allies and opponents can come from the government, the world of celebrity chefs, the American Medical Association, Hollywood, book publishers, or any number of groups. So...who are you looking at? More importantly, who aren't you looking at?

Many times food, flavor, and health trends are born outside the food industry and also find their opponents and death there as well. So if you only look at restaurants, food magazines, casual dining, and manufacturers you can easily miss a trend's birth or worse, miscalculate its impact or time of death. Trends forecasting, if done well, is neither opinion nor guess work. Done correctly it is based on predictive analysis. No one has a crystal ball but the real question is - are you the type to look at the sky and hope for good weather or do you take a moment and see what your local meteorologist thinks?

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