

Lab makes its mark on food industry

- **Dublin company performs experiments, offers advice to clients to make products successful**

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DUBLIN -- The company's name is rarely written on a package of food or given public kudos by one its clients, such as Starbucks, Subway or Kraft.

But for those who work at The National Food Laboratory Inc. in Dublin, it doesn't matter.

"We might not get the public recognition for what we do, but it's all right because our clients know how important we are," said Jena Roberts, a vice president with the company, an independent subsidiary of the Grocery Manufacturers of America/Food Products Association. "If you fill a cart of groceries, there's a good chance a lot of those products in there we've helped in some way become successful."

In the food industry, new products are thought up every year. But the majority of them are shot down long before they make it to a grocery store shelf.

That's where The National Food Laboratory comes in. The company's role is to utilize its familiarity and expertise in the industry to help companies successfully commercialize their products.

Every once in a while, the company will get individuals who come through the door wanting help selling "their mother's salsa," said Kevin Buck, president of the laboratory.

"We would sit down with them and say: 'This is what you have to expect, this is what it will cost, and if you're prepared to do that, we can help you,'" said Buck. "But most people don't realize that the number of hurdles you need to make it over to try and commercialize a product are enormous."

The company was founded in Berkeley as the Technical Service Corp. before it changed its name and relocated to Dublin in 1985. Early on it struggled, but by putting equal importance to all areas of the company, it has seen its revenues flourish more than 10 percent annually during the past eight years, Buck said.

In the halls leading from the company's main lobby, display cases are filled with dozens of products from brands that most people are familiar with. But further into the five-acre facility, it has the look and feel of a commercial kitchen to find the next big

cancer rather than determining how a food will taste.

The nearly 90 full-time employees include about 60 scientists, Buck said. Many of them work with beakers and test tubes and wear lab coats.

From a simple chemistry test on a product that might cost \$100 to a comprehensive product development project that can cost more than \$100,000, the company has a wide range of services it can offer to clients.

Most of the company's business starts when a client comes to them with a concern they need addressed.

"The reason larger companies come to us is that we can offer them a large collection of different services under one roof," Buck said. "Not only can we test the products how they were intended to be produced, but we have a chef that can saute shallots to mix into the product and have them tested that way."

For example, the company Boz Spirits Inc. manufactures a line of vodka called 267 Infusions. One of the characteristics of the drink is that large pieces of fruit, such as orange slices, lemon slices and pineapple rings, are inside the bottle. The laboratory was given the challenge of keeping the pristine look of the fruits without compromising the taste and shelf life of the product.

Previously it would have been difficult to determine whether a box of food would last two years on a shelf, but today the company can offer calculated tests that predict how long the product will last without having to test it in real time.

In the afternoon, the site is often visited by people from the general public who perform taste tests on the products. If it's something like the "Harry Potter Iced Pumpkin Drink Maker" from Mattel, all the testers might be children.

In addition, the company has its own group of specialized taste testers who have trained palate.

"A regular taste tester can say what they like and don't like about a product, but a taste expert can eat three bowls of rice and tell exactly why one is different from the other," Buck said.

Last year, the company introduced a new consumer testing methodology called "Product Landscape."

The test looks at what product properties drive a consumer's liking by combining a variety of data. Not only will it look at the product of interest, but it will also look at others within the same industry. For example, if a pizza company hypothesized that it would make more money if it had a pizza crust that was extra thick, the methodology could show that the crust size would have no influence on the bottom line.

"With a lot of products, it might be a wild and wacky idea that seems real interesting

ever make it," Buck said. "And at the end, that could save them a lot of money and give them a better chance of succeeding."

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