

FROM THE EDITOR

AUGUST 2019

Coffee Break with Rod Sowders

President & CEO of Synergy Flavors, Inc., Wauconda, IL

Q: Describe your company.

A: Synergy Flavors is a leading global manufacturer and supplier of flavorings, extracts and essences, with a truly global footprint. With extensive experience across food, beverage and nutritional products industries, we develop high quality taste solutions which inspire innovation and can help you stay one step ahead of the competition.

Q: What will your company's main challenges be in the next year?

A: One of our largest challenges over the past couple of years has been finding talented employees for our expanding business. In the current labor market, that remains a continuing challenge. We are also in the first year of implementing a new five-year strategy which includes further investments in people and capabilities.

Q: What's the hottest trend in your industry?

A: There are several trends driving our industry, but the most significant is a continued move to cleaner labels in food, coupled with the consumer's desire to know where the key ingredients came from. We have made major investments in capabilities for natural flavor development and have developed a range of essences and extracts that utilize only the original botanical source and water. One example is our new range of hop essences, which are derived from hops and water.

Q: What is one interesting fact about you or your company that most people may not know?

A: Synergy Flavors has funded the construction of six schools in the SAVA region of Madagascar. This region grows more than 80% of the world's vanilla beans and yet remains one of the most impoverished areas in the world. Synergy Flavors has been producing vanilla extracts for more than 100 years, and this initiative is part of our efforts to give back to the people in the region and promote education (and thereby sustainability of the future of this important crop).

Q: Do you plan to hire any additional staff or make any significant capital investments in your company in the next year?

A: Yes, we continue to hire for new positions in Wauconda and our site in Hamilton, Ohio

as we speak. We also continue to invest in our headquarters site in Wauconda, and in September, we will finish the next phase of our expansion. The final phase, an expansion of our research and innovation center, will be completed in 2020. In addition, we are currently in the planning phase of an expansion for our Ohio facility.

Q: From a business outlook, whom do you look up to?

A: I am showing my age, but I always looked up to Jack Welch, the former Chairman and CEO of GE. He and his team at General Electric were phenomenally successful, and much of what he put into practice there is still taught in leadership programs around the world.

Q: If you had one tip to give to a rookie CEO, what would it be?

A: Build trust with the organization. That comes from listening, but also from being candid about your expectations -- of the organization and of the team members.

Q: Do you have a business mantra?

A: Never ask someone to do something that you wouldn't do yourself.

Q: What do you like to do in your free time?

A: Spending time with my family, hiking, shooting sports and car racing

Q: What book is on your nightstand?

A: At the moment it is Melinda Gates' "The Moment of Lift."

Q: What keeps you up at night?

A: If anything keeps me up, it is the challenge of resourcing for our continued rapid growth. We have always been a nimble, customer responsive organization, and as we continue to grow, we need new people, processes and systems; however, those must be focused on the same goal of satisfying current and future customer needs without adding levels of bureaucracy.

Q: If you were not doing this job, what do you think you would be doing?

A: I would be leading a charitable organization. There are so many needs locally and globally, and I admire people who are taking the time to give back to society in meaningful ways.



Rod Sowders, 57, President & CEO
Synergy Flavors Inc., Number of employees: 325
Family information: Raised in western Nebraska
Current hometown: North Barrington

Q: What was your first paying job?

A: My first paying job was working as a disc jockey at a local radio station in western Nebraska, where I was working my way through college.

Q: If you could put your company name on a sports venue, which one would you choose?

A: Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Nebraska for HUSKERS football!

Q: What is one funny thing that has happened to you in your career?

A: During an interview for my first job in sales, I was offered a Coke to drink. I accepted it, and sometime during the interview proceeded to dump most of it on my tie. I gained great respect early on for my new boss when he laughed it off and pulled a tie from his drawer to offer it to me, saying, "That's why I keep this here." He offered me the job, fortunately!

Q: Name two people to follow on Twitter and why? (besides your company)

A: Melinda Gates. I was impressed with how she has taken an active role in the Gates Foundation, including traveling to poverty stricken areas and living there anonymously to understand people's life challenges.

Jerry Seinfeld. I need more humor in my daily routine and always liked Seinfeld. His "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee" combines humor with cars. How could it be any better?!