



Legacy & Leadership

Edward Zimmerman is the founder of *The Food Connector*, a sales and marketing company serving the wholesale food industry. *The Food Connector* works with food manufacturers, distributors, restaurant operators and grocery retailers to plan and execute marketing and sales services.

Born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, Zimmerman's career in the food industry spans nearly 50 years. He began his career in 1974 and spent four years in restaurant operations and management. He then worked in the retail deli/bakery business, where he set up and managed in-store operations for a 14-store chain. He had a 13-year career in the wholesale bakery industry and then did consulting work for foodservice distributors and manufacturers for five years.

In 1996, Zimmerman helped to begin a foodservice marketing group that became the largest pizzeria distribution network in the United States. Since the late 1990s, he has been deeply involved in the sales and marketing of dairy products. Other clients include meat companies, bakery companies, sugar and honey, foodservice packaging, frozen fruit, non-foods, group purchasing programs and technology for restaurants.

A dynamic speaker, Zimmerman captures audiences with a mixture of fun, facts and personal challenges for improvement. A well-known and respected sales trainer, he has developed several programs for food sales representatives designed to increase sales and improve customer relationships. He holds a B.S. in Economics and an M.S. in Administrative Management. He enjoys the outdoors, reading, playing the bass guitar and volunteering on behalf of organizations that feed the hungry.

Q How does *The Food Connector* serve as a common thread among retailers, distributors and manufacturers in the supply chain to form meaningful and successful partnerships?

A Communication is the key. Supply chain partners have to allow the other guy to make a profit. I see too many companies stand toe-to-toe fighting over the last 2%, rather than stand shoulder-to-shoulder serving the end customer. If there's bad news, deliver it before someone asks you to explain. Once you are in explaining mode, you have already lost.

Q What are some of the trends you're seeing and recommending today for dairy businesses to market their products?

A The price of every protein category — beef, pork, chicken, etc. — is way up because of inflation and supply chain challenges. Cheese remains an exceptional value. Processors should partner with customers to innovate new uses for cheese and dairy products that appeal to buyers who are struggling to manage costs. The incursion into dairy categories by plant-based alternatives

grows. Dairy processors have to tell a better story about nutrition, flavor and clean label.

Q How has the rise in e-commerce impacted the way your customers do business and market products?

A The Food Connector enables digital marketing and e-commerce. The pandemic quickened the pace of adoption by consumers. Amazon has been around a long time, and many in the supply chain ignored e-commerce because they thought, "My customers are different!" Many learned that was a false assumption and are scrambling to find new solutions and processes.

Q How are you helping your customers to navigate the supply chain disruptions in the market today?

A First with knowledge and information. Secondly, we are helping with alternative sources of supply, demand forecasting and e-commerce solutions. Our lead generation and request-a-quote software allow direct connections to buyers. We are also working on a few direct-to-consumer models to shorten the number of steps to a purchase.

Q What are some ways you have worked to help your companies stand out from competitors in their offerings and services to customers?

A We are storytellers and keep our clients' websites, social media and videos up to date with custom content and aggressive ad buy recommendations. We also see Google AdWords generating an excellent number of leads in targeted channels.

Q What is a valuable business insight you feel is necessary to pass on to the next generation?

A The food business is the most important business in the world. It is the baseline, most fundamental purchase for humans. The quickening pace of career and technological challenges continues to wipe away many fields and careers — not so in our industry. Younger people can confidently enter the business knowing that if they pay attention and work to find creative solutions to customers' problems, they can have a lifelong career in the business.

Q Please comment on the importance of product quality, consistency and reputation to the longevity of a cheesemaker and their brand?

A The notion of quality is individual and based on disposable income. Consistency is a much better attribute for focus. Consumers select the level of quality, but if a cheese is consistent and delivers the same taste, texture and relative price value, chefs, consumers and ingredient buyers will continue to purchase the product. Reputation is critical in any business and easily achieved if companies just do what they promise.

Q How have you developed creative thinking within yourself and encouraged it in others?

A I start from the premise that everything I "know" is probably outdated. I tell our content team that they are the most important people in our group. When I started doing creative work, I was 30 and everyone I was trying to influence was 30. Today, I'm over 60 and the target customer is still 30. My younger teammates are closer in age to them. I lay out the vision and then listen to others before deciding; this blends wisdom with today's thinking.

Q What has been your favorite thing about working in this industry?

A Cheese is so fundamental to life. It's delicious, nutritious and comes in thousands of varieties. It's so interesting to see all the creativity in products. Cheese can be consumed in many ways and at all times of the day. It's an affordable protein that can be produced in a sustainable way. I really like and admire the people in the dairy industry — from the dairy farmers on up through the supply chain, these are down-to-earth people that work hard every day to feed others.

Q What advice do you have for adapting in an ever-evolving marketplace?

A Recognize that if you are reading this, you aren't the customer. Seeing the world through your own eyes embodies bias. We have been given two ears and one mouth; listen more than you talk, and the marketplace will tell you everything.

Q How have communications methods evolved over the years, and what have you done to adapt?

A The term omnichannel is so cliché, but it really exists. There are thousands of ways to reach customers and prospects. Companies must understand WHO they want to reach before determining HOW to reach them. People who say they know how are fooling themselves. Marketing initiatives must include testing multiple messages and multiple distribution methods. The Food Connector creates and distributes content: We test, we measure, we challenge our assumptions. **CMN**