



sisterhood in Snacking

The pipeline to female leadership in the snack industry demands awareness and support.

◆ by Charlotte Atchley

In 2018, SNAC International launched the Women in Snacks (WinS) network as a way to drive progress to champion the professional development of female leaders in the snack industry. There is a strong female presence in the snack industry, from R&D teams to manufacturing to sales to the corporate office.

“What I’m seeing is more women in leadership and managerial roles, and it’s becoming more and more balanced,” said Tina Hacker, specialty powder sales manager, Land O’Lakes, and Associate Executive Council president for SNAC International, talking about how she’s seen the snack industry change over her 20-plus-year career.

Yet barriers have always existed for women to move up the ladder, especially past middle management, and even in some sectors of the industry more than others, such as sales or production. Greater awareness today about those barriers and the value diversity brings to a business has resulted in progress.

“The thing I’ve seen change the most is that there’s more communication and conversation around diversity and inclusion,” said Cindy Kuester,

vice president of sales, Snak King, City of Industry, Calif. “I’ve seen more women in higher levels of the business, and I think that’s because the industry is becoming more accessible, but also people have become more aware of the issues and are broadening the way they think about recruiting.”

From major cultural shifts in society and growing awareness, the snack industry has taken some major leaps in becoming more inclusive to the female workforce. That’s not to say it doesn’t have room to grow.

“Unfortunately, there are still people who make assumptions about why people might be getting promoted,” Hacker said. “As we become more sophisticated in diversity, equity and inclusion and the changes being made, we need to acknowledge that everyone does good work and ensure that women at all points in their career can shine.”

BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY

Becoming more inclusive toward women (or any minority) doesn’t boil down to checking a box by hiring and promoting them for the sake of having

The snack industry has a strong contingent of female workers, but it still has room to grow in supporting this workforce.

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SNAC International's Women in Snacks network aims to provide professional development for women looking to advance their careers in the snack industry.
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female managers. It's more about not letting assumptions around a particular identity negate an individual's hard work, qualifications and talent and block that person's career progress and company contributions.

"Women shouldn't advance because they're women, and they shouldn't be denied advancement because they're women," Kuester said. "They should advance because they're the right person, but they need to be seen."

Having more diversity in the workforce, and especially in leadership, has several benefits. Dina Reagan, associate vice president, R&D, salty snacks, Campbell's Snacks, Camden, NJ, and co-chair of SNAC International's WinS committee, pointed out that as snack companies try to reach a rapidly diversifying consumer base, it's important to have leadership and teams that represent that. This way, a company can speak to their target consumers in the most authentic way possible.

It all comes down to the main benefit diverse teams bring: diversity of thought, experience and perspectives. By having people from different backgrounds, teams avoid becoming monolithic and stacked with yes men. New questions get asked and new ideas get pitched when not everyone on the team looks the same or comes from the same place.

"The diversity of ideas, perspectives and backgrounds does create better, more productive teams, especially at the leadership level," said Julie Calef, chief financial officer, Old Dutch Foods, Roseville, Minn. "I think that can be a strong power."

“I don't need to be the smartest person in the room about every topic. But I know where to get the answers; I know who to talk to.”

Cindy Kuester, Snak King Corp.

It also yields better business results. Studies regularly show that companies with diverse teams, especially in leadership, perform better than those with less diverse teams. And this is critical to the future health of a company.

"If everyone thinks and feels the same way, then you may drive some business results, but you won't remain relevant," Reagan said. "The more experiences and backgrounds mean you'll just be more equipped with a broad set of data to drive better outcomes and decisions."

Becoming more inclusive and removing some of the barriers women face also can be a boon to companies struggling to retain workers in a tight labor market. Creating a culture where people feel welcome to bring their whole, authentic selves to the workplace invites employees to feel valued for their unique perspective.

"Talent is really critical to the success of any company, and we need to bring out the best in the talent that we have," Reagan said. "Part of that is being open to people's experiences. I remember

being in a place where I didn't feel like I could share my opinion, but once I freed myself from what I thought people wanted from me and started seeing my identity as a gift, Campbell's got so much more from me as an employee. I know what it's like to not come to work as your full self, and I value the difference of opinion that I bring to the table now."

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEADERSHIP

As women continue to gain ground in the snack industry, and the labor market in general, awareness has been a major help in changing attitudes but so have some significant societal shifts.

Firstly, more women have consistently worked outside of the home for decades, further normalizing women in the workplace both for their colleagues and for their families.

"We're seeing a global shift of women concentrating on their careers more with millennials and Generation Z putting off having kids until their careers are really established," said Stephanie Aanenson, director of special projects, Old Dutch Foods. "And there are more men wanting to be involved in family life at home, which helps women be able to do that."

It cannot be discounted how much these societal moves can contribute to destigmatizing the idea of female leadership, something SNAC International has continuously done over the past few years through its programming.

"SNAC frequently puts women in keynote speaking roles as the expert in their particular field and not talking at all about the fact that they are a woman because that shouldn't be relevant," Aanenson

said. "Commenting on it less makes it more authentic, normal and chips away at the stigma. They've also chosen women for a variety of leadership roles, so SNAC has done a great job of showing that women are excelling in multiple areas of the snack industry without calling direct attention to the fact that they are women."

The other major cultural shift came about in 2020 with the accelerated adoption of working from home with the COVID-19 pandemic. With most industries seeing that some work can be done remotely with flexibility and still yield results, many of

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Tina Hacker, Land O’ Lakes

the pressures that disproportionately impact women, like child care, eased.

"With the flexibility we've gained since COVID, we've seen women be able to stay in the workforce longer," Calef explained.

When women reach that middle management level in their careers, they are often dealing with a demanding home life that in the past would prompt many of them to exit the workforce. But with flexibility proven out by COVID, more women are finding it easier to stay.

"The flexibility has been so empowering," Calef said. "Even though I'm in the office today more than I'm working from home, the acceptance and freedom to work flexibly when needed has relieved that tension. I am actually able to dedicate more of myself to this job because of the flexibility. It's a win-win."

As the snack industry looks to create a pipeline of female leadership, whether through WinS, university programs or even internally within one company, acknowledging the barriers women face is critical.

"Life changes like having children or aging parents disproportionately affect women and stagnate their careers, and it's important for managers to be aware of that," Hacker said. "It should be acknowledged, and it shouldn't play into ratings or opportunities for promotion. And hybrid work environments can be incredibly beneficial in those instances."

In addition to easing or eliminating barriers, men-

When women feel comfortable to bring their authentic selves to work, they are more likely to feel valued.
SNAC International



torship, working groups and sharing women's stories are other ways companies can help shore up a pipeline of female leadership.

"We have to keep working at it because once we rest on our laurels, we will have more work to do," Reagan said. "Having KPIs around removing barriers and having the right coaching programs can help women get to higher levels in an organization. We need more women advocating for other women.

"We need more women who have succeeded sharing their stories about the things they had to overcome and the things that weren't so great. When you share your hurdles, you become much more relevant to other women that you can inspire."

GETTING AHEAD

When it comes to the success of the individual, these snack industry leaders had many of their own lessons to share from their decades of experience. Finding and owning your voice was a major theme.

"No one ever got promoted by being polite and demure," Hacker said. "It's OK for you to take your rightful place at the table. It might not be at the head of the table, but you have a seat, and you should be confident about your seat at that table. Be vocal and make sure you're heard."

Reagan noted that a major switch for finding her own voice came when she saw her identity as a female scientist of color was a gift, not a liability.

"I had to switch my mindset from 'will my perspective be judged,' to 'I have a gift to offer, and people need to hear it,'" she said. "It didn't happen overnight, but I became confident in my ability as a scientist and a leader and became proud of my point of view. My perspective can shift the entire conversation."

Reagan also pointed out that because of the cross-section of her ethnic and gender identities, she has become very skilled at connecting with many different types of people.

"I never saw anyone who looked like me in leadership in R&D," she said. "I have to think in any given situation, 'How can I connect to people so they can hear what I need to say?' I have to be very intentional to make sure the connection lands and so does my perspective."

Kuester encouraged women to have vision, integrity and passion. She also pointed out the importance of collaboration.

"I don't need to be the smartest person in the room about every topic," she said. "But I know where to get the answers; I know who to talk to. I



am a great decision-maker, but I can't know everything, so it's important to have those relationships and be open-minded."

Mentorship and finding people to advocate for you can also be a game-changer in a career, but Calef urged women not to limit themselves to only female mentors.

"You need someone who believes in you and watches out for you," she said. "Women are more at risk for leaving the workforce, and they need someone who can say 'I see a place for you in this company, and I see a future for you.' That was huge for me, and my strongest mentor was a man."

Aanenson encouraged women to be the best that they can be in their role and pursue opportunities for professional development and education. But she also stressed that if people aren't finding room to grow their careers at one company, leave.

"If your goal is to move up the ladder and your company won't let you and you think it's because you're a woman, then get out because it's not the '80s anymore," she said. "I think companies like that are fading, and there are more companies today who would be glad to hire you for your skillset without your gender coming into consideration." ♦

Mentorship is valuable for women as they are more at risk for leaving the workforce.

SNAC International

WOMEN IN SNACKS IN-PERSON EVENT

June 12-13; Washington, DC

This in-person event will provide resources for female professionals to tackle the greatest barriers for advancement in the snack industry through interactive workshops, education sessions, networking and more.