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UK food industry praises Appetite for Engineering

01 October 2013

Appetite for Engineering 2013 has received praise from top food industry stakeholders, many of whom cite it as the best event yet.

A4E took place on 25 September at Chesford Grange Hotel, Kenilworth and attracted hundreds of delegates from all levels of the supply chain. Key note speaker, Groceries Code Adjudicator, Christine Tacon, said that she was pleased to be invited: "At first, I wasn't sure how relevant the topic was to the audience," she told Food Processing, "but it's clear from a number of conversations after my talk, that it is."



"The delegates didn't just consist of direct suppliers but also businesses who felt that the food chain isn't innovating and adopting new technology as retailers demand a share of the savings. It would be against GSCOP for this to be done retrospectively or mid-agreement. If I can remove some of this concern there is hope that such innovations will be adopted as we have to remain competitive against overseas manufacturers."

Edd Brunner, group leader, Industrial and Scientific Group, Cambridge Consultants, echoed these sentiments following his talk on technology transfer. "What struck me was how difficult it is for the suppliers of supermarkets to invest in new equipment, even if it will save money long term, because of the uncertainty of their commercial relationships. People were describing situations where a few months into a two year contract to supply a supermarket, the supplier could be told it's over because the supermarket had struck up a new deal with someone else. I even heard of stories of suppliers making an investment and upon the supermarket hearing about this would instantly demand a discount based on the savings the supplier is now making! So it is easy to understand the resistance to make significant investments with paybacks of anything over one year. It would appear to only be the really big players that can afford this long term vision, such as a talk from Nestle about their improvements to their Fawdon site, including an anaerobic digestion system. This is a bad situation for everyone: clearly these suppliers, but also the consumer, as it ultimately means that products are not as low cost or as high quality as they could be."

"However, there was some good news. We heard from Christine Tacon CBE who has been appointed as the first Groceries Code Adjudicator to oversee the implementation of the Groceries Supply Code of Practice between retailers and their direct suppliers. Her role is to sort out the fundamental problems between the UK's top ten supermarkets and the suppliers, making it a much fairer system. I feel this should lead to improvements, although it will take some time. With that, and the appetite I sensed there is from the industry to learn from other markets (just as we do with all of our projects) I think significant improvements can be made."

Mark Smith, project manager at Heineken, said: "I felt that the Appetite for Engineering day is an excellent opportunity to listen to the various speakers and pick up on the impact of legislation and their individual experiences associated with the projects they are undertaking - as well as understanding the human resource challenges. Beyond that it is a fantastic forum to build contacts and further share ideas to support each other throughout the industry. A worthwhile day."

Simon Taylor, sales & marketing director, Endoline Machinery Limited, added: "This was my 4th A4E, and it is fair to say, by far the best in terms of content. It has always been good networking event, but the absence of a really heavy weight conference agenda has probably limited its appeal - certainly to the community of end users. This year was different - with Nestle and Coca-Cola Enterprises headlining a list of heavyweight contributors, the presentations were both stimulating and relevant. I am optimistic that if this standard can be maintained, a greater number of food manufacturers will send delegates which will only add to the value of the event."

"The quality of programme content was excellent, but I would single out the presentation by Britvic Food apprentice, Sam Richards, which was a glimpse of what the future can look like - British industry spearheaded by well trained, highly skilled, motivated and ambitious engineers."

Many delegates, speakers and exhibitors noted Sam Richards' talk as one of the highlights of the day. Sam's mentor, Mandy Reader, West Regional Engineering Apprenticeship Mentor at Britvic Soft Drinks, noted: "I very much enjoyed the day and was very proud of young Sam for such an outstanding performance."

Graham Thomas, site engineering manager at Greencore, stated: "I enjoyed the event tremendously with such a varied selection of presentations," while Patrick Mroczak, operations director at Aimia Foods, added: "The Appetite for Engineering venue was a well organised and well attended conference. The quality of the speakers and presentations were of the highest standards and very useful and relevant. I also found the exhibition interesting, informative and relevant. I made some good contacts on the day."

Jeremy Shinton, product manager - Business Solutions & Software at Mitsubishi Electric, asserted: "Appetite for Engineering yet again provided a topical and practical event for end users and suppliers to the industry enabling participants to share ideas and experiences in the ever challenging food and beverage manufacturing sector. The combined range of topics from legislative discussion to manufacturing technology efficiencies and development of skills covered a diverse and valuable variety of discussion and networking."

Ian Sterritt, managing director at Martec of Whitwell Ltd, enthused: "The whole team at Food Processing really grabbed the initiative to deliver a terrific Appetite for Engineering event. The quality of presenters and the depth of knowledge and expertise demonstrated that Appetite for Engineering has to be a permanent date in Martec's calendar."

"The reality of the complex world of food manufacturing and the increasing pressures of scarce resources will drive technology adoption even faster. Professional technical capabilities are set to become limiting factors holding back the food industry's ability to respond; Martec already experience this reality. This conference has only one way to go, looking forward to even better debates next year."

Stephen Parry, technical advisor, Young's Seafood and chair, Food Sector Biosciences KTN, said: "The Appetite for Engineering conference was well organised, informative and interactive. I found the last session on talent recruitment particularly relevant. Many initiatives are underway some of which were described at the conference emphasising the ongoing need to communicate the diversity, complexity and challenge the food industry has to offer."