
Food partnership powers growth for Maine products

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The election is behind us and another chapter is written in the debate over Maine's business climate. For business owners, the debate again focused on a host of negatives that involves government decisions and actions that lie largely beyond our control after we cast our votes. The election and debate tend to overshadow the reality that business remains the single greatest force for change in society. We still hold important cards to play in determining our own success.

Gary Hirshberg, founder of Stonyfield Farm, makes the case in his book "Stirring It Up" that business has the greatest capacity to bring about social change. Marry that point with the economic potential of well-directed business clusters and you have an inspiring message. These notions are at the core of the joint actions of the Maine Grocers Association and the Maine Food Producers Alliance.

Mainebiz recently reported on the emergence of the MFPA as one of Maine's up and coming business trade associations. There is more to this story that we want to share with your readers.

In 2008, it was determined through a business survey that valued-added food product companies in Maine sought to form a business association that had as its primary function the development of markets, with grocery wholesalers and retailers of paramount interest. In hearing the results of the survey, the Maine Grocers Association realized that its membership could take action to build the reach of Maine's food product businesses in Maine and beyond. In so doing, the MGA could also make a contribution that benefited MGA members and lent fundamental support toward strengthening Maine's food cluster.

With tremendous aid and encouragement from the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership that continues to this

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day and critical financial assistance provided by the Maine Technology Institute through a cluster grant award, a unique business development model was implemented. MGA hosted the project to enable the MFPA to form and contributed over \$75,000 in services to the effort. All the while, the MGA has worked to help MFPA members open and expand markets with Maine grocery wholesalers and retailers.

Maine's wholesalers and largest retailers happen to operate well beyond the borders of Maine. If a Maine value-added producer could, with MGA's support, gain entry to these businesses in Maine, the thought was that they could build upon this relationship to launch their products beyond our borders. Today, the whole idea is coming together and is growing stronger as evidenced by the recent Maine Food Means Business Summit cosponsored by the two organizations with more than 200 registered attendees.

There remains much work for the MGA and MFPA to do, but for those of us who recognize the power of business to be a force of social change, there is excitement in the air. The negatives of Maine's business climate take on lesser proportions as we learn that there remain positive things we can do to chart our own path to success. ■