Practical expertise in product development

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Abstract

The London Food Centre was launched in February 1999 by the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food to help small and medium-sized food businesses expand and improve their profitability. The London Food Centre gives food businesses an enhanced knowledge of the technology and science that lies behind their products and processes. This knowledge enables them to raise the efficiency, reliability and safety of their operations as well as increasing the quality and diversity of their product range.

How does the London Food Centre work?

The London Food Centre provides an extremely practical approach. The staff at the LFC assess the needs of each business individually.

The Centre aims to improve quality and profitability by providing appropriate technology, management systems and best practice. The expertise available will be used to improve the efficiency of food businesses, whilst increasing the quality and diversity of their products. Long-term working relationships will be established to provide a single point of contact for technical and business advice on all food matters.

The Centre provides consultancy and support to food businesses to enable them to develop. The staff at the LFC assess the needs of each business individually. Project work is carried out over one or two days to give businesses a fault finding, diagnosis and cure facility to assist in solving particular problems. The LFC also assess raw materials, equipment, systems and finished products, confirming rapidly acceptable practices and highlighting where improvement is necessary.

Where appropriate, products can be created using novel ingredients to generate new markets. Production is analysed leading to more efficient use of equipment, less waste
and lower costs. Shelf life can be extended and quality sustained throughout the supply chain by introducing new packaging technologies and ensuring the optimal balance of ingredients.

Quality assurance and management practices can be introduced to improve consistency and make production conform to customer requirements. Food hygiene and safety systems can be developed to enable companies to meet legislative requirements, assess risk, identify and control hazards at critical points in production.

**Why do businesses need the London Food Centre?**

Most small and medium-sized businesses want to grow. But most times they do not have the trained and qualified technical staff capable of addressing many of the issues that they face. It is when food businesses are at a crucial stage in their development, when they need to grow further, that they need to find practical help.

Often the LFC works with food businesses that are at a crucial stage in their development, when, in order to grow further, they will have to start trading with the major supermarkets, the major food service companies or start exporting. In order to satisfy these new customer and market requirements businesses may need help with the following:

- Increase efficiency, reduce waste and lower the cost base of their existing operations.
- Introduce specifications, monitoring and control systems to improve their understanding of their products, processes and the key factors determining product quality.
- Introduce or upgrade food hygiene and food safety systems incorporating HACCP, which then result in accreditation from recognised third-party certification bodies such as EFSIS.
- Develop a flexible and responsive new product development programme that can create a continuous stream of new products to satisfy their customers’ requirements.
- Develop bespoke training courses which can be delivered on-site.

**What services can the London Food Centre provide?**

The Centre offers a wide range of services, for business start-ups, small established operations and fast growing, medium-sized companies. Below are just some of the services on offer:

**Services for manufacturers**

- Implementing quality control specifications and product development programmes.
- Advising on customer and legislative requirements, novel ingredients and new technologies.
- Devising and installing bespoke quality assurance, food hygiene and HACCP systems supported by all necessary documentation and training.
- Studying waste, yield, downtime, through-put and profitability of production.

**Services for wholesalers**

- Advice on the composition of foods, ingredient declarations and labelling.
- Appropriate food hygiene and food safety systems.
- Supplier auditing, supplier warranties and product specifications.
- Traceability, product recall, independent testing procedures and due diligence.

**Services for retailers**

- Advice on composition, ingredient declarations, nutritional values and labelling.
- Advice on storage, kitchen based manufacturing protocols and packaging requirements.
- Evaluating scientifically the shelf life of foods both on display and in the home.
- Establishing domestic cooking times and temperatures and optimal storage conditions.

**Product development services**

- Formulating products based on minimal ingredient costs and optimal shelf life.
- Sensory evaluation of finished products.
- Validation by either taste or expert panels.
- Post-purchase storage conditions.
- Nutritional analysis, ingredient declaration and labelling.
• Written report including detailed product costing.

**Label design service to meet UK legislation requirements**

• Quantitative declaration of ingredients (QUID).
• Nutritional analysis.
• Barcodes.
• Storage conditions.
• Cooking instructions.
• Shelf-life information.
• Advice on dietary requirements, GM ingredients, allergies and intolerance.
• Description of foods and claims.

**A consultancy based on high quality**

**General business services for small food companies**

• Sales and marketing strategies.
• Business plans including profit and loss, cashflow, and balance sheet statements.
• Detailed product costings and sales forecasts.
• Sourcing new raw materials, packaging and equipment suppliers.
• Finding new business through contacts with key wholesale and retail companies.
• Direct mail and e-commerce strategies.
• Branded and/or private label production.
• Investment decisions involving new plant and machinery, factory design and layout.
• Advice on business acquisitions and business sales.

**Help at an affordable cost**

The LFC is a non-profit organisation which aims to keep costs to a minimum. While initial advice and quotes are free, the Centre is self-supporting, so charges have to be made for most of its services.

There are a number of grants and schemes available to small and medium-sized businesses where appropriate. Training and small project work is often supported with grant funding through Business Links and Training and Enterprise Councils. Long-term strategic work is often supported by substantial grant funding, such as the Department of Trade and Industry’s Teaching Company Scheme (TCS). This scheme allows companies to undertake a strategically important two- or three-year project by covering some of the costs involved in employing a graduate to work with supervision provided by university academics. It ensures that participants act as partners and will benefit all parties involved. The TCS has assisted several thousand companies since it came into operation in 1975.

**Into the future**

The Centre’s Web site (www.sbu.ac.uk/lfc/) has had numerous enquiries, further emphasising the need for these services amongst small and medium-sized food businesses. It contains a wealth of information about the centre and provides links to other useful sites. The site will be updated frequently with the latest news and events.

A number of training courses such as Product Development and Beginners’ Guide to HACCP have been scheduled to run in the year 2000. The Centre also plans to host seminars and launch the first issue of their newsletter.