Training: the challenges of the food industry moving into the classroom

by Milagros Jurado

The food industry is one of the main engines of growth, second only to tourism. It is not surprising, therefore, that quality training, specifically oriented towards the main issues and challenges of the market (such as innovation and internationalization) and the needs of their companies, is emerging as an essential tool to help it keep on being a reference in our economy. Thus, the direction in recent years seems to be taking training, when offering specialized courses in this area, bet on a more practical and connected with business reality, by means of skilled professionals working, a direct response to what the food industry has been demanding.

There are several reasons behind this widespread shift towards a more professional orientation:

On the one hand, *the dynamism typical of the sector*, marked by the need to continually adapt to a changing environment and a market with greater demands on issues such as quality, food safety and environmental respect that mainly translate into a demand of more healthy and natural foods. To meet the growing global demand for food, while healthier and safer, and markets like the Community, with an increasingly rigid and demanding standards in security and food safety,

innovation and R & D are emerging as one of the main ways for the sector companies to differentiate their products from those of its competitors and stay in the market.

Another, and as noted by Jorge Jordana, coordinator of the Master Executive in Management of Agrifood Companies (MGEA), created in 2010 by the LAFER Foundation and Global Marketing Business Advisers Foundation), *the large export capacity of companies in the Spanish food sector*, motivated, largely, to operate in a free market that leads to bet on the internationalization of its production to reach new segments and become more competitive. "The need to operate in a truly open market (25% of our food is imported) and serve an increasingly concentrated modern distribution have driven the sector to be very competitive. Proof of this is that processed foods account and 20.5% of net sales for the entire industry in Spain, placing us, as a sector, the 4th of EU and 8th worldwide, "says Jordana.

"Yet despite this positive outlook -clarifies- *if the food industry wants to remain a benchmark of our economy will continue to increase its international presence, gain in size, compared to the current fragmentation, increase the intensity in innovation and strengthen more corporate finance rationally.*" To Jorge Jordana, *achieving those goals happens to incorporate the sector the best talent, developing training that will help to change the mentality and orientation of the activity of the food industry*. To that end, the MGEA has a faculty that combines recognized working professionals who bring their experience on current events and trends, giving guidelines of where it is headed, along with professors from the University Nebrija, with a wide career prior to training.

In that continuous process of adaptation to respond to the needs and demands of consumers in food *is crucial how that effort is communicated and transferred to society, given that the agrifood field in general, and agriculture in particular, remains largely unknown to the society that sees it as traditional and conservative, far from its commitment to innovation and R & D, and quality, to produce more and better, according to the* first survey on Perception and image of Spanish Agriculture*, commissioned by the* Business Association for the Protection of Plants (AEPLA)*.*

It is clear that something is not being done well, both by the departments of communication and image of agrifood companies, such as by the media... Precisely, and to supplement the lack of professionals specialized in Agrifood in the media, the Journalists Association Agrifood Spain (APAE) plans to organize soon a Masters in Agricultural Information.

Internationalization as a competitive factor

Internationalization has become one of the areas of greatest strategic interest to the food business sector and therefore on which has been demanding more specific training, as evidenced by the fact that increasingly exported more from the Spanish food industry, whose sales abroad have grown in the last year in volume and value. Specifically, in 2015 a record was reached in the value of agricultural exports, with more than 44,000 million euros, almost 30% more than in 2011, and a surplus of 10,000 million euro. That difference between our exports and imports clearly

demonstrates the exporter character of our agribusiness

In this line, one of the most important modules of MGEA is the internationalization of 37.5 hours, which has as its main objective, on the one hand, provide a complete picture of the current situation in the food trade and instruments external promotion, analyzing, among other issues, new segments and emerging markets. On the other, see the tools for a successful business process in this area, analyzing success stories and inviting for it professionals involved in its development.

Training eminently practical and backed by the experience of renowned entrepreneurs, which has resulted in work to master as the project developed by Ismael Hernandez, Manager of the Association of Producers of beef cattle (Asoprovac) of Castilla-La Mancha who has implemented a successful export platform beef to countries in the Middle East. Today, this cooperative called Exporvacun has managed to concentrate the offer then dispersed, facilitating a stronger negotiating position in the market. In fact it brings together more than 30 farms, with a higher number to 15.000 animals, and proven quality in the final product. Exporvacun works in the international market having reached agreements with several Mediterranean countries.

Comprehensive Food Security

The fact that companies and institutions related to the agri-food sector come engaging increasingly, in a more direct way, in the formation of their future professionals is due to a greater need for qualification issues highly demanded by the consumer and the current regulatory framework European, such as the Food Quality and Safety. A clear example of this, we have in the qualification certification company AENOR which offers as a plus in the new edition of MGEA, which begins in October 2016, the degree "Manager Quality Standards and Protocols and Food Safety, BRC, IFS and ISO 22000 ".

Another clear reference, constitutes the official master's degree in Food Safety offered by the University CEU Cardenal Herrera, in which, on the side of the private sector, collaborates the Business Federation of Food Valencia (FEDACOVA), along with a wide institutional representation, the hand of the Valencian Generalitat, the Valencian Health Agency, Valencia School of health studies (EVES), the illustrious College of Veterinarians of Valencia and the Regional University of Blumenau (Brazil).

A degree whose uniqueness is to be the first in Spain that accredits security experts, at all stages of the food chain, including primary production and which is supported by the fact that over 40% of students find employment in where companies develop practices, a plus to take into account when investing in a master of these characteristics. *A high level of recruitment which undoubtedly has been promoted by the growth experienced by the job in the field of food security as a result of the increased demands imposed by the European Union in this area.*

When we speak of an agricultural training with a more professional guidance, it should be explained that the involvement of companies in the sector not only is evident in the faculty or the design of the contents of the courses or master's degrees, but also in practices offer. Thus, in the case of Master of the University CEU Cardenal Herrera, one of the strong points to consider is that it has agreements with more than 100 companies throughout Spain for their students to perform 200 hours of stipulated practices, and a Practices program to the letter. "The student selects other companies of interest, and from the University contacted them and facilitate students practical work in different sectors and places selected by them," says its coordinator, Dr. Maria Carmen Lopez Mendoza.

Innovation and brand differentiation

To understand the importance of innovation and R & D as a factor of competitiveness and brand differentiation in the food sector, must take into account the current context, marked by the change that has been experiencing the consumer profile, more raised awareness about the importance of healthy eating, a demand that the market tries to meet with new differentiated quality products and high added value, such as functional food, gourmet, more natural or with minimal processing and additives, such as V range productas -homemade high quality dishes- artisans or typical, traditional flavors.

In that area of training, that companies in the sector consider of high strategic value, by all previously explained, is focused the university master's degree organized by the University of Castilla La Mancha, "Innovation and Development of Food Quality", whose term targets registration will be open until the end of August. Also participate the School of Chemical Sciences and Technologies, the Department of Analytical Chemistry and Food Technology and the Regional Institute for Applied Scientific Research (IRICA).

With this type of degree, it is intended, therefore, help diversify the current training offer in agrifood where proliferate masters and courses related to "management and quality assurance" and "food security" taught today from other centers. Its purpose is to train professionals with highly specialized knowledge and skills, prepared to develop or improve food products of high quality and high added value, responding to the challenges posed by current trends and consumers.

The long tradition and history of the agrifood sector of the Autonomous Community of Castilla la Mancha, with numerous denominations quality make it one of the most important engine socio-economic development, and explains the desirability of addressing a course with this approach, which has already attracted the interest of many companies and Regulatory Boards of Appellations of Origin, who have offered to support and participate in activities of this master.

This postgraduate course will primarily focus on the competencies and skills that profesionals of food businesses need but also, and equally, knowledge of consumer behavior and food consumption, crucial to meet the needs identified . It also seeks to respond to the demands of major food sectors of the community of Castilla la Mancha: meat, dairy, olive oil, wine, among others, and to consolidate development activities and industrial innovation by groups Department research and IRICA, part of the University of Castilla la Mancha (UCLM), in collaboration with companies.

Professionalisation in the different links

One of the most interesting initiatives in the field of training for the agri-food sector has been carried out recently by one of the institutions with more background in this type of activity, Cajamar. Previously and to adapt their training to the actual situation of the productive fabric and their prospects for future supply, this entity and the School of Industrial Organization (EOI) carried out in 2015, the study 'Analysis of the training needs in the sector agricultural'.

Among the main conclusions of the outcome document, the opinion of the farmers surveyed pointed to the need for continuous training in areas such as design and economic analysis of the operation, efficient use of natural resources, digital management of purchases and sales, the use of computer applications, human resource management, strategies for reducing costs and legal and tax obligations of the agricultural enterprise. The full document is available for viewing on the Internet.

Taking advantage of these findings, Cajamar held between June 9 and July 13, a course aimed at professionalizing the food company, under the heading 'Looking competitiveness in the agricultural enterprise'. After more than 30 years training to agrifood engineers in the most advanced and focusing on the training of rectors of marketing cooperatives agricultural techniques, now it is the turn of small and medium entrepreneurs in production. The main objective of this training is to increase the efficiency and profitability of SMEs in the sector, according to the new market

demands.

An initiative with a significant representation of the business sector in its faculty, professionals and managers particularly prominent companies such as Mercadona, Única Group, Rijk Zwaan and La Gergaleña, with Cajamar professionals and academics in agro-food marketing.

Pending issues

This growing trend of promoting quality training and increasingly professionalized shows that there are still significant challenges that the Spanish food sector must overcome to continue growing. *While such challenges, uncover unfinished and weaknesses of the agricultural business fabric.*

Translating this statement to the policies that the Spanish Government is doing in training, it highlights the recent approval of 1,8 million euros in aid for training activities in the field of agri-food cooperatives which, among other objectives, *aim to encourage concentration business in the sector, a path in which there is still a long way to go, if is wanted to achieve a balance of power with regard to large retailers.*

And, the need to achieve greater dimension by the Spanish food companies to strengthen their negotiating position in the chain, is even greater in the case of cooperatives, a sector which, despite its progress, it is still very fragmented. As an illustration, the following: no Spanish cooperative is among the 50 largest in Europe in terms of turnover.

The idea is, therefore, support the training of managerial staff of companies in the Social Economy to change the current agrifood associative configuration, adapting to new challenges and promoting competitiveness, sustainability, energy efficiency and innovation. In short, these companies provide tools and measures that give them a greater role in our food system and more effective structures that achieve business excellence and let them, in turn, be a catalyst for rural fabric.