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Food Problem Solvers Thrive On Opportunities



Marilyn Raybin (left) and Valerie Lovell, leaders of Marvell Foods

BY MIKE BERGER

She used to be known as the “diced-chicken queen,” but is now known as a U.S. and international food problem solver. A second generation family member in the food industry, **Marilyn Raybin**, mother of three, entrepreneur, and president of Marvell Foods of Boca Raton, Fla., thrives on opportunity.

Marvell Foods takes products that other companies do not want

or use from major national manufacturers, suppliers and distributors. Marvell Foods, buys these products at a discount and sells them to a host of end users, from prisons and food banks to schools, military institutions, exporters, supermarkets, convenience stores, colleges and universities, cruise lines, cash-and-carry stores and other odd-lot buyers.

Valerie Lovell is the other major partner in Marvell Foods. She has a background in architecture and interior design. She has also purchased a Wise Potato Chip route, sold used cars, and later became a food broker and a trader. For the past two years, they have worked together to form Marvell Foods.

The company can effectively be called food problem solvers or opportunity converters. “We are in the business of solving other people’s food problems,” said Ms. Raybin. “New opportunities literally crop up every day. You need to understand the food market, be nimble, and be ready to act immediately when something comes your way.” She added that companies are eager to sell unwanted goods to free up cash and others are willing to buy from a secondary market to save money.

The company buys and sells first and second quality food and non-food products from chicken and beef to pork and fish, even detergent, cheesecake, pet food,

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olives, mayonnaise, lasagna and spinach to baseball caps. One of Ms. Raybin's mottos is "If we see a good opportunity, we take it." Ten million pounds of product were sold this year and it is expected that they sell 20 million pounds of product.

Some examples of opportunities for Marvell Foods:

- A truck load of food headed for delivery gets into an accident. If the packaging is damaged, that becomes an insurance or salvage claim.
- A distributor was going out of business and needed to sell 80,000 pounds of Cheesecake Factory items.
- Manufacturers produce too much of an item; mislabel a product or decide to change the size or ingredients of an item.
- One million frozen burritos or 25 truckloads of product were purchased after a convenience store cancelled its contract with the manufacturer. They were sold to C-Stores and universities.
- Marvell recently sold 40,000 pounds of laundry detergent left over from manufacturing.
- Marvell recently acquired a half million assorted colors and sizes of baseball caps and turned them around to a national retail chain.

Ms. Lovell received a business degree from CW Post, but her real interest was in interior design, and she also studied architecture. After her husband died, she bought a Wise Potato Chip route and later she entered

the food brokerage business. In 2008, Ms. Lovell teamed with Ms. Raybin to form Marvell Foods.

Ms. Raybin was born and raised in Bayside, N.Y. Her father was a polish immigrant and Holocaust survivor who established a successful business in meat processing and packing. "I guess you could say the beef business was in my blood," said Ms. Raybin, who fondly recalls at a younger age working in the factory among the huge slabs of hanging meat. Coming from a family which founded the Stahl Meyer Hot Dog, Ms. Raybin also worked in a food brokerage company but decided to open her own company.

Some of Ms. Raybin's contacts include some of the bigger food manufacturers in the poultry business, such as Tyson, Perdue, and Pilgrim. These are companies whose surplus or overrun food products provide Marvell with their own product offerings. "First thing we do when we get into the office is hit the phones and find out what someone's new food problem is for the day and what they want to move....We stand behind everything we sell and make sure it's wholesome," said Ms. Raybin.

The business is now international and both partners said they will go anywhere to buy or sell products. Ms. Lovell and Ms. Raybin said they have contacts literally around the world, from both a buyer's and a seller's perspective.

As for future products and categories, both partners said they are exploring private labeling in the name of Marvell Foods of various products so that they can develop a steady supply source of superior secondary products.

Ms. Lovell was asked about product quality assurances. She said, "Our products come from manufacturers, suppliers, co-packers, and other providers as the originating producer of the food; naturally, they are producing the product according to all appropriate government (USDA) standards for food production, and consumption. However, from time to time, where necessary and appropriate, we obtain written confirmations from a supplier that a particular product is wholesome and fit for human consumption."

When asked what surprised her about the business, Ms. Lovell said, "The extreme quirkiness and tremendous oddities of where products come from continue to astound us - from food to dry goods, from insurance and salvage claims, to literally the most bizarre circumstances, people have product they want to move and we have the buyers for almost anything, it really is like a real live reality television show; we couldn't really make this stuff up. The more people we know, the more contacts we have, the more relationships we develop expose us to people, products and offerings that are truly fascinating."