

CHEESE MARKET NEWS®

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Plant tours, visitor centers can be boon for dairy industry

By Aaron Martin

MADISON, Wis. — More than 15,000 students and countless bus loads of retirees flock to Hilmar Cheese Co.'s facility in central California each year to learn about cheese production and the dairy industry as a whole.

Hilmar Cheese constructed an extensive visitor center in 1998 and hosted community visitors well before that. Advocating for the dairy industry has always been a centerpiece of the business.

"The owners have always believed in education," says Denise Skidmore, director of education and public relations at Hilmar Cheese. "Basically, our theme is tour, taste, shop and eat. We want you to come and learn things, sample dairy products and learn about how nutritious they are."

That philosophy has proven to be a big draw. Those who visit Hilmar Cheese leave with a unique perspective on the inner-workings of the producer of cheese and whey products, and the dairy industry as a whole.

"People who come to visit us want to learn how cheese is made," Skidmore says. "We want them to know dairy products are healthy and nutritious, that we're good stewards of the land and that our cows are cared for well."

Hilmar Cheese has successfully harnessed the public's curiosity about cheese production to promote the industry. While public tours of the cheese plant aren't allowed, Hilmar has used its extensive visitor center to build consumer awareness and to promote the nutritional benefits of dairy products and sustainability measures industrywide. Other companies and cooperatives may be able to implement educational components or dairy plant tours that bring similar results.

For companies that opt to provide cheese plant tours, Marianne

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Smukowski, a quality and safety coordinator for the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research (CDR), says attention to detail can be the first step in conveying a positive company image and assuring safety and sanitation standards are upheld.

"It's good for people to hear about the history and learn about how products are made, but companies need to be very cautious in how they bring visitors into a facility," she says.

The smallest details can help foster a positive or negative image of an organization — and guests start formulating opinions before they even enter the plant.

The first thing Smukowski notices upon approaching a cheese facility is the outside of the building and perimeter of the property. If the building is well-kept and the grounds are groomed and manicured, that's a good indication for what awaits inside.

"The two areas I like to look at first once I'm inside are the maintenance shop and restroom," Smukowski says. "That gives me a good idea of what the rest of the plant will look like. If I see

a tidy maintenance shop that means they're taking pride in the plant. If the restroom or maintenance shops aren't clean, they don't have pride in that and won't make an effort to keep things clean in a plant if they can't keep restrooms clean."

While it's important to make a good first impression, it's just as important for plant operators to make sure the facility remains safe and sanitary as groups of visitors travel through. Safety and sanitation issues must be mitigated from the start, and the best place for that to begin is a dedicated visitor center where guests can be received, greeted and debriefed.

"I think tours can be done without a visitor center, but it's easier if you handle all these things in one place," Smukowski says.

Having a dedicated visitor center ensures that visitors will park cars and buses in the correct places and not disrupt plant traffic patterns. It also allows the plant operators to register guests to outline comprehensive visitor policies, as well as wardrobe, safety and sanitation standards.

"You have to gear up to walk through a plant — hair nets, safety goggles, lab coats and appropriate footwear," Smukowski says. "It's nice to have small

tour groups so you can monitor what's going on. Some people like to digress and move elsewhere and there are confidentiality issues, safety issues and the possibility of cross contamination when that happens."

Dean Sommer, a CDR cheese and food technologist, says it can be helpful to provide two tour guides, one to lead the group and the other to walk behind and ensure nobody wanders off.

"The first thing, and probably the most critical thing, is to choose the route of your tour very carefully. You want to start off in your cleaner areas and end in the dirtier areas," Sommer adds.

Most cheese plants are pressurized, Sommer says, and it's best to lead tour groups on paths that follow airflow patterns from areas of high concentration to areas of lower concentration.

"Air flows like water through the plant and sweeps micro-organisms up with it. It usually begins in the starter room or the vat room, then goes down to the cheese tables and normally ends up in the warehouse," Sommer says.

The worst place to start a tour is the milk intake area because it's the least sanitary, he says.

However, concern for visitor safety, the possibility of contamination and confidentiality issues have led a number of cheese producers to eliminate plant tours altogether.

"Tours are really important from a promotional and educational standpoint," Sommer says. "I would hate to see tours go away."

One solution for cheese producers is to opt for viewing windows that provide visitors a partitioned glance at certain areas of the production process without risking contamination.

The Cabot Creamery Cooperative has implemented this system at its cheese plant in Cabot, Vt. Lauren Callahan, senior manager of retail and tours for Cabot, says visitors are greeted in a visitor center with cheese samples and a brief informational video before being led on a guided tour of the plant through a hallway with windows on each side that runs through the center of the cheese plant.

"Way back, over 40 years ago, folks would just show up and knock on the door and whoever was there would open the door and say, 'sure, come in,' and walk them down the hall," Callahan says. "We're more organized than that now."

A similar observation window setup can be found in Babcock Hall on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus where the CDR and a dairy plant are located.

"We have a tremendous amount of people coming here for tours," Smukowski says. "We have a big observation window and somebody to explain what's going on in the viewing area."

Plans for \$32 million in renovations to Babcock Hall are in the works. Smukowski says it would be nice to retain, or even expand, the observation

window concept as renovations move forward.

Hilmar Cheese also has taken advantage of this concept. Tour groups aren't allowed to travel through the actual production facility, however, observation windows provide visitors a glimpse of what's inside.

"We have viewing windows where they can watch our employees cutting and packaging 640-pound blocks of cheese," Skidmore says. "People absolutely love it."

In addition to viewing windows, companies also can incorporate hands-on activities and educational components into visitor centers to bring the cheesemaking process to life for visitors.

Hilmar Cheese animates the cheese production process by welcoming guests into a "Cheese Theater" where a nine-minute video explains the production process.

"Behind (the screen) we have cut-away models of the equipment we use in cheese manufacturing that light up as they're explained in the movie. They're smaller-scale models, about 12 feet tall," Skidmore says.

Hilmar Cheese also has used resources from Dairy Management Inc. to enhance its visitor center, which is a tool all cheese producers can utilize.

"They can learn about what dairy farmers are doing for the cows, nutrient value that comes from cheese and dairy products," Skidmore says.

Jennifer Wing of DMI says dairy checkoff funding has been used to provide dairy producers and processors with resources to implement educational and promotional exhibits at their facilities.

"It's a great way for us to try to bring the farm to customers and consumers who we know are increasingly removed from the production process," Wings says. "We try to bring a unified voice so the dairy industry is speaking together."

DMI's promotional resources include blueprints, artwork templates, video narratives and schematics for standalone models.

While providing visitor attractions or plant tours afford promotional opportunities — marketing opportunities are prevalent as well.

"They always want to taste your products," Smukowski says. "You'll want to share that and let people know you do make great products. Never let them leave hungry."

Ending the visitor experience in a small gift shop where people can sample the product can lead to some immediate sales — and future online sales from visitors.

Skidmore says that Hilmar has taken advantage of marketing opportunities afforded by its thousands of visitors a year — but its gift shop is not brand exclusive.

"We don't have a consumer-branded product so in our visitor center not only do we sell our cheeses, we sell everyone else's cheeses as well. It promotes the entire dairy industry," she says. **CMN**