

Edeker Bullish on FMI Connect

WEST DES MOINES, Iowa — Randy Edeker has high hopes for FMI Connect, the Food Marketing Institute's annual exposition, where the factors driving change in the grocery sector are examined. As the

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association's vice chairman of member services, Edeker has been instrumental in reshaping and reenergizing an event that in recent years had seemed, in the eyes of many industry observers, to lose impetus.

Edeker is also chairman, chief executive officer and president of Hy-Vee Inc., a leading practitioner of food/drug combination store retailing, who will join 140 of his colleagues at FMI Connect. Only someone with a high level of confidence in the event's ability to produce tangible benefits would make such a major commitment of time and talent.

"I went into this with two hats on and the determination that it had to make sense from both perspectives," he says. "We don't need busy work; we don't need to have an event just to have an event. FMI Connect needs to be productive.

"What's productive for Hy-Vee? For every single show we attend, we set a goal that we're going to walk away with X million dollars in potential sales. That's what we hope to find. Our buyers will attack FMI Connect with that mentality."

Some of that work will take



This year's edition of FMI Connect will include many new features

place on the show floor in the South Hall at McCormick Place in Chicago, where the event will run from June 8 through June 11. Some will occur during interactions between existing business partners, and some will happen at business exchange sessions, which for the first time will bring together retailers and suppliers for scheduled one-on-one meetings at open tables on the floor and in exhibitors' booths.

"FMI Connect is designed to give suppliers access to retailers," Edeker explains. "That's especially important for smaller companies that might not otherwise get the chance to introduce chains to their products. It's also a way for retailers to find new items that can help differentiate their stores."

Those core features are just the beginning. Edeker and his FMI committee, association president and CEO Leslie Sarasin, and Margaret Core, who was hired as vice president of industry events last October with an eye toward transforming FMI Connect, added elements to the event in response to member needs.

"We recognized the show had to change because the business has changed," says Edeker. "We understood that the show had to be efficient and productive, and we have a great model to make it exactly that. We listened to the manufacturers and found out what they wanted, we listened to the retailers and found out what they wanted, and then worked to put those things in place. We want the opportunity for real collaboration and planning to happen at the show. And we want to have a sense of discovery out on the show floor."

The process of discovery can take many forms at FMI Connect. The event will feature a broad

range of educational components that cut across the supermarket industry. One focal point will be health and wellness. Attendees can benefit from education sessions each morning, visit the Health & Wellness Retail Zone to see what other chains are doing in the field, and gain insights through meetings with health care product and service providers.

The richness and diversity of FMI Connect will be augmented by the co-location of five related events — United Fresh, Inter-Bev, U.S. Food Showcase, International Floriculture Expo and Sabor Latino.

"Co-location has always been a key part of FMI's approach," Edeker notes. "The idea is to bring many aspects of our business together to make our events even stronger. The produce show [United Fresh] has been part of what we do for a number of years. Now we're trying to expand that into more fresh and specialty foods."

Another drawing card is Future Leaders, which was formerly known as Future Connect. The program is designed to help build supermarket-specific management skills for up-and-comers in the industry. About half of the Hy-Vee contingent at FMI Connect will fall into that category.

"The mix of people includes individuals who are often the second- or third-highest ranking person in the store — he or she might be a department head, a meat manager or a bakery manager," says Edeker, "but they are all people that we believe have the potential to move up and do more. Future Leaders and FMI Connect are a great way to give them some good exposure to how various aspects of the grocery business really work."