Mcllhenny family aims to keep Tabasco on world’s culinary map

Company president shares challenges with One Acadiana

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Running the family-owned enterprise that makes Tabasco Sauce remains a challenge, even after nearly 150 years of using the tried-and-true ingredients and processes that have made the iconic brand the No. 1 hot sauce in the world.

The challenges include coming up with innovative strategies to promote the Louisiana-made sauce and other Tabasco products in today’s market, said Tony Simmons, president and CEO of McIlhenny Company and a descendent of company founder Edmund McIlhenny.

Another challenge in the quest for sustained growth is how to appeal to 18-to-34 year olds around the world.

“Make a 148-year-old product relevant to those folks, it’s a challenge,” Simmons said Thursday to a room of business people in Lafayette.

Simmons spoke about the McIlhenny Company for over an hour to members of the nine-parish economic development agency, One Acadiana. He was the first guest speaker for One Acadiana’s “Lessons from the Corner Office” series this summer.

McIlhenny Company each day produces Tabasco Sauce in Avery Island, where the plant has 240 employees. It remains privately owned by 130 family members who are shareholders. Its finances, including sales figures, are not made public.

The company didn’t start big. Edmund McIlhenny had been wiped out financially by the Civil War. But he found a market in New Orleans for the peculiar sauce he made at home in Avery Island, located south of New Iberia.

“The diet of the Reconstruction South was bland and monotonous, especially by Louisiana standards,” the McIlhenny website reads in a brief history.

“So Edmund McIlhenny decided to create a pepper sauce to give the food some spice and flavor—some excitement,” Simmons said.

The company was founded in 1868 and will celebrate its 150th birthday in two years.

Simmons stressed to the One Acadiana crowd that although the company sticks to tried-and-true practices, such as continuing to age the sauce’s mash in oak barrels for three years, the company has to keep evolving.

Five-year plans are drawn up but are refocused every three years, and one-year plans also are crafted every January.

And marketing strategies are customized for each targeted country or region. For instance: After World War II, Japan offered up huge potential for sales of Tabasco. But McIlhenny executives didn’t market the sauce as a condiment for the traditional Japanese dishes. Instead, the company stressed how good Tabasco tastes on pizza and pasta, which the island population devours.

Vehicles to market the McIlhenny products too have evolved. The internet, including social media sites, offers a way to reach targeted customers with videos and also ways to measure whether the marketing campaign is working, Simmons said.

Simmons, who is several generational lines removed from founder, said the top job at McIlhenny Company is reserved for family members. However, being in the family does not guarantee a job; there have been several family members over the years who have been fired.

“We can’t fill up the ranks of the company with ne’er-do-wells,” he said.

Simmons, 65, said he will give up day-to-day oversight of the company by the time he’s 68. And in 2021, he said, he’ll hand over the reins of CEO to his second-in-charge and cousin, Harold Osborn.

One Acadiana grew out of the former Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. It now leads economic development efforts in Iberia, Lafayette, Vermilion, Acadia, Jefferson Davis, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary and Evangeline parishes.