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Vintage Voice

Explore, embrace your AHRMMpreneurial spirit in Columbus

Supply chain can learn a lot from the fast-food industry in mid-Ohio hub

By Rick Dana Barlow

SCHAUMBURG, IL (September 6, 2024) – When the Association for Health Care Resource & Materials Management (AHRMM) announced last year that its 2024 convention would take place nearly two months later than the typical timeframe and in Columbus, OH, some likely responded with “The People’s Eyebrow,” the iconic facial arch popularized by professional wrestler-turned-actor-turned-entrepreneur Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.



After all, Columbus didn’t resemble those other popular destinations where enough distractions exist to lure you away from the business-at-hand common to a convention/trade show – learning strategies and tactics to do your job better and meeting with others to share experiences and expertise. Fellow BLF columnist Fred Crans (“Famed Flashbacks”), Bellwether Class of 2020, calls such events as classic places where you “see old friends and get new pens.”

Three months ago, *MEET Magazines* listed its “Top 25 U.S. Cities for Conventions” (<https://meetmags.com/top-25-u-s-cities-for-conventions/>), with some assistance based on data from the Northstar Meetings Group’s “Convention Cities Index”

https://www.northstarmeedingsgroup.com/Content/GenericPage.aspx?ptgpk=59597992&requrl=/Planner-Guides/Convention-Cities-Index-2024&utm_source=eNewsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=eltrMtgNews&oly_enc_id=1237H6674390J3F). Not surprisingly, the usual suspects landed in the first 10, topped by Chicago (Denver, the site of AHRMM2025 is No. 8!), but alas, Columbus did not make the cut. Nor did its siblings Cleveland and Cincinnati.

Believe it or not, there's plenty to see and do in Columbus outside of your AHRMM commitments – just check out AHRMM's website for details or your email inbox for AHRMM suggestions – but it's also known as the home of a prominent Big 10 university and an emerging financial and technological business hub.

Yet it's less known for something else: Entrepreneurial spirit. No, it's not because the city's named after the Italian explorer who "discovered" the New World under contract for Spain. Columbus is home to two businesses that revolutionized the fast-food industry in the 20th century. In fact, one created the fast-food industry; the other developed some modern conveniences to improve efficiency.

You likely may not know who they are – and that's okay. Most entrepreneurs create, develop, ideate under the radar until their business success motivates them to pursue notoriety through shameless self-promotion to complete the desired trifecta of power, money and fame, which breeds influence.

So, who is the pioneer and the innovator in the fast-food industry? White Castle System and Wendy's, respectively.

That's right, the inventor of the "slider," and the "hot-and-juicy" burger with those iconic "Where's the beef?" commercials during the 1990s. Each shaped how we get food quickly and safely through entrepreneurial ideation, innovation and invention, three elements that foster and fuel ingenuity.

These are traits that healthcare supply chain professionals at AHRMM should ignite and nurture during the few days of education and information that take place a few weeks from now.

Fast food jungle

Prior to White Castle System's official founding in 1921, the concept of "fast food" represented barely digestible organic material on short order that was cheap to prepare in what were generally known as "greasy spoons." In fact, "hamburger stands" were regarded as "fly-by-night" operations catering to a clientele of questionable repute. Food safety in terms of meat quality and environmental hygiene didn't really exist because all these places wanted to do was feed the working class and impoverished citizens in poorer neighborhoods with cheap food.

Upton Sinclair's famous and groundbreaking 1906 novel, "The Jungle," exposed the harsh conditions and reality within the meat processing industry that revealed numerous health violations and unsanitary practices and processes that motivated the much-needed establishment of codes. In short, if you ate at greasy spoons, you either were desperately hungry, fundamentally poor or both. And you placed your health, if not mortality, at risk.

Entrepreneur Walt Anderson, a Wichita, KS-based cook, was motivated to do something differently. He saw hungry factory workers who toiled long hours for low pay that needed cheap food fast during lunch hour or once a shift ended. At his hamburger stand in 1916, Anderson invested in higher quality meat that he ground himself and cooked in ball form on an open grill in full sight of the customers so he could show customers quality. He also used a spatula to ensure the meat balls were cooked thoroughly and safely. Over time, he figured out that if he flattened the meat balls into flat patties that they would grill faster, saving prep time for hungry customers with little time to spare. He also switched out a crusty dinner roll for a soft hamburger bun.

Anderson soon attracted the interest of a salesman and entrepreneur named E.W. "Billy" Ingram who would propel Anderson's principles and standards to a new level and usher in a familiar brand we know today. Together, their efforts would launch the regimented fast-food industry.

Ingram and Anderson adopted and implemented Henry Ford's assembly line philosophy as well as the concept of product, process and environmental standardization so that their business venture would exude the same ambience, consistency and experience at each of their locations as they grew in number. They wanted to erase the sleazy reputation of greasy spoons with crisp, clean white countertops, floors, walls and uniforms to project the image of cleanliness,

purity and quality. What other color easily shows bacteria, dirty and grime? They called their process the “White Castle System of Eating,” a mouthful that Ingram subsequently shortened to “White Castle” for branding, marketing and growth. Each restaurant was constructed as a small white castle to project a permanent, secure and stable fortress of cleanliness, cost efficiency and quality.

The White Castle System (WCS) involved strict adherence to cleanliness, hygiene and safety – from the training of carefully coifed and uniformed workers to the controlled mass production technique of cooking to the interior of the building itself. The WCS also spawned the idea of “takeout” as customers could order “sliders” on the go, packaged in little boxes and neatly stacked within paper bags so they could “buy ’em by the sack.” WCS was the first restaurant to place discount coupons in the newspaper in the early 1930s, which generated boffo business during the cash-strapped Great Depression. By the late 1940s, WCS introduced the concept of poking five holes in each burger patty to cook them even faster on a layer of onions to add flavor.

Within two decades, Ingram and Anderson transformed a national mindset of negativity that originally regarded hamburgers as putrefying and reviled “peasant” food into a welcomed staple of wholesome American culinary pop culture before Ingram relocated White Castle to Columbus, OH.

Striving forward

As the fast-food industry exploded in the 1950s and 1960s with White Castle “spawning” the likes of such familiar names as In-N-Out Burger, McDonald’s, InstaBurger King (later dropping the “Insta” for branding) and Kentucky Fried Chicken as hot dog stands, pizza joints and taco stands emerged and expanded across the country, another entrepreneur was gearing up to accelerate even further improvements.

Dave Thomas originally served as a protégé of Col. Harland Sanders (can you say, mentoring?) who helped the iconic poultry purveyor expand his business from the back of a gas station into packaged products for established “sit-down” restaurants where you could order chicken fried with the Colonel’s “secret recipe” and finally to its own branded restaurant. Thomas, based in Columbus, represented a flourishing sales territory for Sanders in mid-Ohio.

When Sanders eventually sold his company to salesman John Brown Jr. and financier Jack Massey (keep reading for his name and relevance), and retired, Thomas remained to help Brown and Massey grow the KFC brand even more. To wit, Thomas was responsible for the red-and-white KFC stripes and the familiar bucket of chicken option that remain a mainstay today. Unfortunately, due to a “dust up” between Thomas and the new owners, he left the company to embark on his own venture in the burger business that became known as Wendy’s in 1969.

What innovations did Thomas contribute to the fast-growing fast-food industry? WCS may have started with burger balls that evolved into the small, square five-holed patties on square buns we enjoy now, but Thomas launched Wendy’s by serving larger and thicker square patties on round buns. He preferred square patties for two primary reasons: Square patties could be spaced more efficiently on the grill and a square patty between two round buns made it seem like you were getting more burger for your buck as the four corners spilled out from the bun. While Thomas used fresh meat just like WCS’ Anderson and Ingram, he alternately chose to charge more for the burger because he felt customers should and would pay for quality.

Thomas also brought patty stacks to the industry – the double and triple burger. Why? His half-pound double patty burgers weren’t selling as much as he thought they should, so he introduced the triple burger (yes, three-quarters of a pound of meat) to encourage customers to feel more comfortable buying a double burger. Curiously, the gamble worked!

Thomas also reduced food waste by churning unsold burger patties into chili, added the concept of a salad bar and pre-packaged salads to a fast-food restaurant and even improved something that WCS had invented decades earlier – the “takeout” opportunity so you didn’t have to dine inside a customer-packed restaurant. Like White Castle, Wendy’s customers could get “takeout” at the counter, but they also could enjoy another option by never leaving their vehicle: The pickup window.

Sure, drive-ins with carhops were a big trend in the 1950s (having debuted several decades earlier), but ordering food to go generally meant you had to park and enter the restaurant to order at the counter. Banks had offered drive-through or

drive-up windows since the 1930s. But restaurant historians generally trace the concept of the drive-through/drive-up window with a speaker system at the window to a small restaurant in Missouri and to the In-N-Out Burger chain in California in the late 1940s.

Wendy's rolled out its drive-through/pickup window format in late 1970. McDonald's wouldn't debut its own version until five years later. But Thomas discovered a challenge with the contemporary design of the pickup window. Customers would order through the speaker at the window and then wait for their food to be prepared and handed to them. During peak times – lunch and dinner, for example – cars would start to line up, clogging the drive-through lane.

Thomas figured out a way to unclog the process and keep people moving as well as give the perception of accelerating food preparation. Thomas separated the order and delivery process by several hundred feet. A customer would order at a kiosk that displayed a full menu and was equipped with a speaker. Once the customer finished ordering, then they would drive to the pick-up window, thereby giving the food preparers a little extra time to prepare the order and giving the customer the impression that the order was being delivered more quickly. That multi-step process became the standard we appreciate today.

Fostering the healthcare supply chain connection

Naturally, the fast-food industry couldn't exist, let alone succeed, without supply chain – not unlike any enterprise. But what is the deeper connection to the healthcare space? If you're looking for something direct, here: Nashville-based pharmacist-turned-businessman-and-venture-capitalist Jack Massey invested in and became co-owner of Kentucky Fried Chicken, working with Dave Thomas. Massey later sold his KFC shares and exited the company later to invest in and help Thomas grow and expand Wendy's. Oh, and Massey also worked with the Frist family to launch Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) in 1968, the year before Thomas unveiled Wendy's.

Entrepreneurial thinking isn't limited to the realm in which Massey, Thomas, Sanders, Ingram and Anderson operated. It can – and should be – entrenched in healthcare supply chain, too.

The concept of “supply chain” can be traced back to the American Red Cross’ innovative Clara Barton (1821-1912), Bellwether Class of 2019; the concept of cooperative buying or group purchasing can be traced back to railroad entrepreneur, Hospital Bureau founder and New York Presbyterian Hospital executive William V. S. Thorne, Bellwether Class of 2017. Both Barton and Thorne were entrepreneurial innovators in their own rights.

But entrepreneurial thinking, ideation and innovation remains innate in all of us – inside each of us – no matter who you are or where you are – even at a national convention in Columbus. We learn from others; we learn on the job. We learn from listening; we learn from reading; we learn from speaking.

Each of us needs to nurture our inherent entrepreneurial spirit to ideate, innovate and operate our organizations, departments and selves in an effective and efficient manner, providing high-quality care and service to the customers who rely on us for health and well-being. That’s not only a mission, but a necessity and a priority to fortify society.

Research sources: History Channel’s “The Food That Built America,” Biography.com, Ohio Business Magazine’s “Building White Castle, BurgerBeast.com’s “A Visit to White Castle Headquarters in Ohio,” BurgerBeast.com’s “A Visit to Wendy’s Headquarters in Ohio,” WhiteCastle.com, Wendys.com.

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