

A sustainable future for the HFMA

As he settles into his new role as Director General at the Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA), Martin Last talks to *HFB* Editor, Rachel Symonds, about his plans to build on the organisation's rich history with an eye on the future needs of its members.

In the more than 35 years that Martin Last has been immersed in this special industry, he has seen firsthand many changes, both in the businesses operating in the sector, the product ranges, and also around the issues affecting the trade.

Now, as he steps into the newly created role of Director General of the HFMA, taking on the top job from Graham Keen, who has just retired from his post as Executive Director, Martin explains that he wants to look forward and evolve the organisation so that it meets the needs – current and future – of its members. This will entail the development of a five-year strategic plan, with early work currently taking place and Martin identifying areas that he believes need development. The plan will then go to the HFMA team and Council before being finalised.

Sitting down with *Health Food Business*, Martin commented: "I love the industry, I have always been driven and for me, it is a vocation. But I don't work alone, I have a great team and my role is bringing together all the expertise we have at the HFMA. The HFMA is about its members and what we want to do is work on how we can make it even better.

"I'm feeling great about the new role, it's really exciting. There are challenges, of course, but I think if you do a job without challenges, you would lose interest, and the job really plays to where a lot of my skills are. I'm very excited for the opportunity to use my skills most purposefully. I think it's important to have an open mind going into this. Working with the team has been great and seeing what's involved and what we need to change. I see it as a collaborative approach."

In terms of developing the strategy, Martin added: "There are all sorts of things I would like to do so we are looking to create a strategic plan for the next five years, and within that, I would really like



to bring the HFMA up to date – I don't mean that in a derogatory way, however, rather than a nostalgic look at where we have been, I want to take us into where we are going, steering the ship for where we are sailing to, and that involves looking at everything."

A rich heritage

Martin brings with him vast experience, having been in the industry for 34 years, and for many of those as the founder of MPL Marketing Services. He is a leading international marketing consultant, focussing on food supplements and health related products. As part of his work over the years, Martin has a successful track record assisting companies in building businesses in the UK and EU for their branded ingredients and finished products. Martin has worked with both small and large companies, enabling launch and support strategies integrating product development, in line with new legislation. As such, he has a strong reputation for making things happen, identifying opportunities and achieving agreed objectives.

For many of his years in the industry, Martin has been involved in various guises with the HFMA, both as a member company and also a long standing and committed member of the HFMA Council. He has served as HFMA Chair and Vice-Chair, and he is an active member on various HFMA sub-committees, such as the Technical Committee, Political Engagement Committee and PR



Committee.

"When I was running my own business, I would not have thought of anything but being a member of the HFMA, to have the support of a member trade association in this way. There are so many things to gain from being a member," Martin explained.

Martin also represents the HFMA at its European federation, EHPM, and is currently the EHPM Vice President. Martin also sits on the board of the EHPM and is the Chair of the Quality, Technical and Regulatory Work Group, and also is part of EHPM's Probiotic and Novel Foods Task Forces.

He explained: "I have been involved with EHPM for 15 years, and back then, it went through a period where I could see it disappearing and I didn't want that. So, I got involved in getting it back to where it was. There are now 14 countries represented across Europe. That is sort of what I did in my day job in terms of problem solving so I felt I knew what was needed."

Moving onto the new job at the HFMA, it came about following a lunch Martin had with Graham, when Graham expressed his desire to move into retirement and Martin found himself interested in taking on the role.

"There are challenges ahead, but I am really looking forward to it," he commented. "I officially started on April 3, and had a three-month learning period and that was really just to get to grips with the role. It is very different to what I have been doing in the sense that I was a consultant before so I have been self-employed for a long time.

"I am now looking at how resources are best used and how we can be the most

efficient. I'm looking at the operating system already in terms of upgrading the system we have in the office, and our modes of communication."

In terms of the HFMA membership, one of the big benefits to being a member is the CLEAR CHECK service, which was created to help and inform people towards labelling and marketing copy compliance for natural health products. Hundreds of companies each year receive specialist and cost-effective advice from CLEAR CHECK, and HFMA members are entitled to a reduced hourly rate.

Then there is the benefit of the Primary Authority Partnership the HFMA has established with Surrey and Buckinghamshire Trading Standards.

Martin explained: "If a member has a problem with their local Trading Standards Officer (TSO), they can come to us because we have an assured advice agreement with Surrey and Buckinghamshire Trading Standards. This means that they will speak to the local TSO, so it is a bit like an insurance policy for our members. And we make sure we

"One particular area I think is really important is sustainability. The HFMA should be at the forefront of this because of the industry we are in."

nurture that relationship. It is an example of where we can work with authorities going forward to support our members."

When asked how Martin thinks the HFMA is seen by members, he added: "Influential, effective, and listening to members. These are the most important for us."

And questioning where he would like to see the association in five years' time, Martin responded: "Better, and stronger, and set to be even stronger when I am no longer in the role – I want to get it to a place to hand it over to the next person to take it even further forward."

Evolving the association

The HFMA has enjoyed continual growth in terms of its membership, and the internal team has also grown. The association is clearly in a good place, with a strong standing in the industry, and Martin is keen to build on this.

"I want to get to grips with what's needed first. The developments will be based on there being a need and a benefit to the membership. There are a

few things in my mind, and they will be coming through – most of the stuff initially is getting internal systems working right, making sure we have the right resources in the right place, and recruiting where we need to. And it's important to work with the team to make sure it is going to benefit things going forward. This for me is about leading from the front, and about looking forward," Martin commented.

"One particular area I think is really important is sustainability. The HFMA should be at the forefront of this because of the industry we are in. There are so many factors to it, so it is going to take time to get into place, but we have a great team here at the HFMA and my job is to pull the team together on something like this. Sustainability is a big topic, and it involves the team and the membership. And so, we have set up a Special Interest Group.

"We already have members who want to be involved in the sustainability group and we have a brief in terms of resource. From there, this group will start co-ordinating a plan, looking at what to consider, the goal



and scope, and putting the resources in place. These groups are open to all members – it is an opportunity for member companies to sit around the table and talk about the issues.”

And there is more Martin would like to consider too as part of the strategy.

“In terms of the five-year plan, it will look at the resources we have and need and where we want to be in five years’ time. Our reach is big in food supplements, but there is more we can do in food too but to do that, we need to get the right expertise in place. We saw a lot of young and vibrant companies at NOPE and the HFMA needs to appeal to them,” he advised.

“We are going to have to take it in chunks in terms of the strategy. Introducing big change too quickly is too much for it to be effective. We need time to see how it will look. The only way we can effectively manage change is to take it in stages and we will be setting a timetable for when things will be done. It will then go back to our team and get their input because we have to go on this road together – it is a team effort.”

It’s also important to note that the way people work has also changed since Covid-19 and Martin adds that it is important the association stays ahead of this shift.

He explained: “What Covid has done is changed working patterns and we now know that we can do things by electronic means. There will be other platforms as technology develops and we need to be up to date with all of those – but while there is a place for that, for me, there is nothing like meeting someone face to face, to be able to talk to people, get feedback, talk ideas through.”

And he wants to ensure that the team continues to evolve over time.

“Something else we need to do regularly is review things, to ascertain if things are working, rather than just keep doing them because it is something we have always done,” he added.

The organisation is always looking to develop its membership, with Martin commenting: “We are at about 145 members now, and maintaining our membership is a job in itself. On the whole, it is increasing. The HFMA is the voice of the industry, having such broad expertise, from the scientific, political and communications perspective, as well as the technical side. Bringing that together means companies are stronger with us than without us. We also have our working group meetings, and this helps companies to stay ahead of the game

rather than playing catch up. We have a target list of about 30 companies that we would like to become members and that continued engagement with those companies is important. We will continue to work to attract new members.”

And he added: “I would like to find more ways to interact with our membership. This may be as simple as introducing new technology for groups – it is part of the looking forward and seeing what needs to come next.”

And why does he see membership as being so important to companies operating in our industry today?

“Compliance is important because if you are not a member and don’t comply with regulations, then that undermines the whole industry. Some of the newer companies are not necessarily aware of how to be compliant,” he commented. “Members can also report companies to us if they feel there is a compliance issue and we can look into it. It might be a small, genuine error, or it could be a bigger issue, but we can refer it to the relevant authorities, whether the MHRA or the FSA. That is another benefit of membership.”

Regulatory challenges

Our industry is well-used to facing regulatory threats, and this continues, despite Brexit. But Martin points out that it is something the HFMA is constantly lobbying over.

“Brexit has come and gone now. The main challenges now are the Windsor Framework around movement of goods into the country from Northern Ireland. It is now about transition,” Martin commented.

“I think there was an expectation that there would be lots of benefits of going through the transition, and some of those are there – being more autonomous is good, but our main trading partner is Europe and so we don’t want our regulations to be too divisive from what they have, although we can interpret things in a more UK way. Look at CBD – products are still on sale here, we have a list with the FSA that is going through authorisation. In Europe, they cannot be sold because they are novel foods.”

Turning to maximum permitted levels, something that has been rumbling on for many years, Martin commented: “We are watching what’s happening in Europe. In Europe, the Commission is looking at different methods that may be approached for setting maximum levels. The EHFM, which the HFMA is a member of, is very active in this, working

on a model that is balanced and based on safety. It is a very robust approach and is not dissimilar to what the EFSA might look at. EHFM is engaging with the Commission, urging that there needs to be transparency. They should be issuing some kind of guidance and stakeholder engagement but that’s been delayed. It was meant to come through a long time ago.”

Then we turn in greater detail to CBD, after CBD products were brought under novel foods regulation.

Martin explained: “The deadline for manufacturers already on the market to submit a dossier has passed and they were then put on a list. That doesn’t mean compliance, it just means they are on the list and allowed to be for sale. The FSA has applied a transitional approach and allowed it to evolve. The FSA is going through a scientific review of the dossiers. Some will stay and some won’t.”

But Martin added that this is where Brexit has brought a benefit.

“We have a situation where product can continue to be sold in the UK, whereas in Europe it can’t – if there is a benefit from Brexit, it is that,” he explained.

Other issues of importance, both now and for the future, includes probiotics.

“Probiotics is a big issue. We are at a stage where HFMA is lobbying MEPs to influence this change. It is now a political issue,” he explained. “There is encouragement from other countries – nine countries now use the term and they have said this is not a safety issue, it is about informing the consumer about what these things do. If the consumer understands what a probiotic is, they should be able to locate that on the shelves and buy it. It is freedom of choice. There is activity to get this in front of Ministers here to put the argument that this can be done now, it does not need to go through the legislative process. We are working on pushing this through and that’s happening right now.

“It is about sustained pressure, and that’s the case with many of the things we lobby on. It is about speaking in their terms but it’s important to say that doesn’t have to be in an aggressive way or to put people’s backs up – for the HFMA, it is about putting the arguments across in a persuasive and calm way. What we want to ensure is that there is a level playing field for all. It is about making sure the industry is doing things properly.” **hfb**