

2018 – Robert E. Drane



Robert (Bob) Drane was born in 1942 and raised in River Forest, Illinois and attended Lake Forest College, where he majored in English Literature, minored in math, and earned Phi Beta Kappa recognition. He also worked summers at the IBM Corporation as a systems engineer. He received an MA degree in 1965 from UW – Madison.

Bob was then hired by The Quaker Oats Company and worked there for the next fourteen years, navigating back and forth between marketing research and product management jobs. It was at Quaker that he began his fascination with finding a “better system” to develop new products. In 1979, he was recruited to join the Oscar Mayer Company to impact the strategic thinking and new product efforts at the firm. First he set up a marketing research department, essentially from scratch. This expanded into other marketing services, then strategic planning, total quality management (TQM) and finally into leading the company’s efforts to invent breakthrough new products -- to take Oscar Mayer beyond its core line-up of lunch meats, hot dogs and bacon, and into new categories which could address evolving consumer lifestyles, needs and wishes. He soon became Vice President of Strategy & New Business Development.

The most notable success came from a core team of twenty or so members that he called the “Lunch Company Team”. Oscar Mayer Lunchables® was launched nationally in 1988-89 after two years of development, and created a brand new category of pre-packaged ready-to-eat lunches in grocery stores. Lunchables® became an overnight sensation, topping \$200 million in sales during its roll-out, and winning the prestigious SIAL D’Or as the Best New Product of the year from the United States. Bob and several members of his team experienced the fun of accepting the award on stage in Paris. Since 1988, Lunchables® has been able to sustain its momentum, approaching \$1 Billion in annual retail sales. Efforts to expand the brand globally led to the success of a Dairylea brand version in the United Kingdom. Within Kraft, which acquired Oscar Mayer, Bob won two “Chairman’s Awards” for innovation, along with the moniker of “father of Lunchables”, which he always attributed to the broader team efforts.

Just before starting at Oscar Mayer in 1979, Bob had agreed to teach a class on innovation at the University of Iowa School of Business, every Friday afternoon for fourteen weeks, as a “personal growth.” The company honored this commitment, and it began an ongoing bridge between Bob and the university world. Henceforth this involved the UW – Madison School of Business, which became Bob’s “second home”. In 1990, Bob taught an “Introduction to Marketing” course after work to local Madisonians unable to enroll in a day program because of conflicting job hours. This led to a request to help set up a “Center for Excellence”. Bob became the first chairman of an External Advisory Board for the Center, which brought some thirty corporate practitioners to campus to share learning and recruit students. Over twenty-five years later, the “A.C. Nielsen Center for Marketing Research” and the EAB group still flourish on campus.

In 1992 Bob published a Harvard Business School case-study on the development of Lunchables®, and used it in a capstone course titled “Inventing Breakthrough New Products” to second year graduate students across marketing, R&D, engineering and finance. This course became Bob’s laboratory experiment in trying to improve the theories of his “Invention System” and apply them back in reality, with his Oscar Mayer challenges.

In 1999 Bob took advantage of a generous “early-retirement” package, and jumped into a host of new endeavors. Included here was a firm, “Growth Catalysts, Inc.,” which completed management consulting projects for Oscar Mayer as well as many other leading national and smaller start-up companies.

Another interest has been decades-long service on the Board of Families And Schools Together (FAST), a Madison-based non-profit that improves early childhood education by engaging parents in helping their kids succeed at school and in life.

Growing out of a childhood fascination with the Civil War, Bob has also authored a website titled antebellummuseum.com containing a scholarly book/database on the formation and dissolution of the Union, along with a photo archive of some 2500 original nineteenth century photographs drawn from Bob’s collection.

The End of this story involves family. Bob and his wife Susie will celebrate their 55th wedding anniversary in 2018 and currently live in Middleton, Wisconsin. Their three children and eleven grandkids are relatively close by in Milwaukee and Chicago. Together this group translates to “a wonderful life,” right out of the movies!