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The story behind the brand matters - Boston ICSC summary - by Diana Perry

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As we flip-flop between the Boston Convention Center in the Seaport and The Hynes in the Back Bay for another Boston ICSC New England Conference and Deal Making show, one thing was clear – things, they are a changin’. From the session, Women in Real Estate finally making it to the main part of the show, to a morning keynote about revitalizing local food systems, Millennials living in the suburbs, grocery stores modeling Amazon-Go, and hearing the word “fracking” a bizarre number of times, this year’s conference was different from any past Boston ICSC event.

The morning keynote was with the ever refreshing, Jon Olinto, co-founder of B.GOOD and CEO of One Mighty Mill out of Boston. Jon’s genuine, yet passionate demeanor hit us like a shot of espresso first thing in the morning, jump-starting our own desire for farm-to-table healthier food. Throughout his work with the fast-casual restaurant over 14 years and building the B.GOOD brand to 65 restaurants across the country, Jon realized that the missing link of farm-to-table was wholesome wheat and flour. He then started One Mighty Mill, making products from milled flour with the tagline, “Wheat you can eat.” Flour has become so industrialized to cost-cut and maximize shelf-life, Jon explained, that all the plentiful vitamins and minerals have been stripped out. Jon bought up 7,000 s/f of space at 68 Exchange St. in Lynn, Mass. where he is building his very own boutique mill to grind up wheat grown in Linneus, ME keeping the fiber-rich bran the way Mother Nature intended it. His vision includes experience retail, “almost brewery-like” Jon said, in that there will be a viewing area to see and learn more about the wheat and flour process. Products ready to launch this September include bagels, pretzels and tortillas. Jon has created an amazing story behind a brand once already, and I’m certain he’s on track for #2. Can’t wait to check out the experience retail concept and try the three products. Feel good about what you eat, right?!

Moving from fast-casual to grocery, I was able to catch the Grocery Trends session with Arthur Ackles, vice president, buying and merchandising of Roche Brothers out of Wellesley, Mass. To Jon Olinto’s point, we all now want to know where our food is coming from – something that Roche Brothers has been working on too, by carrying less processed food and even catering to more vegans. Arthur thinks that “healthy eating is not a trend, it is a way of life now,” and envisions “going antibiotic free which may take ten to twenty years, but it’s a new way of thinking.” He did admit store

sizes will most likely continue to shrink as customers embrace the small convenient market, and that customers are continuing to shop at multiple stores to get all of their products (mentioning Instacart and Shift – a two hour delivery service). I asked if Roche Brothers would embrace a similar model to that of Amazon Go (grab and go concept), and he chuckled, but replied with a smile and said they will continue to embrace new technology but would always offer all kinds of checkout options to cater to different customer preferences...smart.

In modifying grocery stores for more Millennial habits and adopting more technology, it brings us to the session, Into the Mindset of Millennials. Here, a panel of actual Millennials sat on stage talking about Millennials, something I don't think many of us have ever seen before. There was an excellent mix of panelists including a director of leasing, a retail store owner, a marketing and social media manager for Newbury St., and a seasoned researcher as moderator. Key take-aways included the actual diversification of Millennials based on living situations and family responsibilities, the utilization of technology and social media in learning about and searching for brands, and how Millennials are challenging retail in demanding more unique products and retailers with values that match their own.

The spotlight feature presentation included a talk from Steve Weikal of the MIT Real Estate Innovation Lab in Cambridge, Mass., about how innovation and technology are creating new business models, tools and startups. One interesting point he brought up was how companies are maximizing the use of space that would normally sit empty including conference rooms, cubicles, lab space, restaurants and others. It's almost like the zip car concept, renting it when you need it on and off; Steve referred to it as "real estate fracking." He noted, "It's the use of assets being broken into smaller pieces and put back together in new ways that are more profitable," mentioning WeWork and Airbnb. His slides were chalk-full of new companies and brands shaking things up. It will be interesting to see what's next, but more importantly, how to be at the forefront of it all.

Fun Fact: 34% of Millennials in the U.S. have a bachelor's degree or higher, more than any other generation – Quoted in the Into the Mindset of Millennials presentation created by Liz Berthelette of NAI Hunneman .

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