Ketchum and Food PR Industry Pioneer Bee Marks Passes at Age 95

By Jaime Schwartz Cohen, SVP, Director of Nutrition, New York

We are very sad to share the news that, earlier this week, one of our Ketchum family members passed. The modern practice of food and nutrition marketing was developed under the Ketchum banner in the 1960s and 70s by a remarkable woman named Beatrice "Bee" G. Marks, whose tenure with Ketchum spanned more than 40 years. As one of the first individuals to use nutrition science to market food and the basis of health and wellness, Bee was a true pioneer in the field. She was also a friend to all. Her office (affectionately called the "Bee hive") welcomed a constant flow of visitors and she always had time for everyone.

A number of Ketchum colleagues, past and present, have shared their memories of Bee.
Click to watch a video of past Ketchum leaders reminiscing about Bee and her contributions.

David Drobis, chairman emeritus of Ketchum, who worked with Bee for more than 30 years, shared that Ketchum's worldwide food practice is built on Bee's vision, passion, indomitable spirit and belief in the success of Ketchum and the role it could play in communicating and promoting food and nutrition. She was among the most positive people he's ever known. She was always smiling; she was never daunted and she always found a way to solve a problem. She had so many friends who admired her and appreciated her because she was always a great source of inspiration.

Barri Rafferty partner and president, said, "Bee set this agency on a trajectory to be dominant in the food category with her passion for food and nutrition. Her vision for how PR could drive education and sales evolved our industry, not just our agency. Her legacy as a strong female leader and innovator lives on in our halls. For that we will always be grateful."

Linda Eatherton, director of Ketchum's global Food and Beverage Practice, describes how Bee is credited with recognizing that the fresh food commodity organizations were under-served and unable to adequately tell their stories and compete with big branded marketers. These groups had invested in considerable scientific research, but had not found a way to connect evidence-based science to consumer education in creative and responsible ways. Bee knew that the insights predicted on sound science would be of value and interest to a wide audience if shared with care, keeping the principles of sound science front and center.
Bee with her two sons on her 95th birthday

Nancy Sumner, who served as Ketchum's director of Nutrition and Science Communications, shared that Bee's greatest contribution to our profession was her ability to think strategically (long before anyone else) and expand food PR into nutrition PR. She commented that Bee was brilliant at new business in envisioning the best way PR could help solve a client's problem and achieve the client's goals.

Ketchum San Francisco's Betsy Quinn, director, Global Awards, remarked that Bee had built close and trusting relationships with doctors, university scientists and regulatory/governing bodies, officials and associations. It had never been done by anyone in the PR industry at that point.

Bee was part-time by the time Ilene Smith joined Ketchum as one of the agency's first registered dietitians, but Bee was a mentor to her and became her surrogate grandmother and frequent theater partner. Ilene remarked that Bee wasn't just a pioneer in nutrition marketing, she was a pioneer among women in PR, among women in the workforce and working mothers. She raised five children on her own as a single working mother - which was unheard of at that time. She wasn't afraid to try or do anything. For Bee, nothing was impossible.
Bee's colleagues describe the most valuable lessons they've learned from Bee.

Linda shares that Bee taught her:

1. Farmers deserve to be heard, to be appreciated and to be able to tell their stories.
2. Smile and hold your tongue - if you can't say something nice don't say anything at all.

Sandy Hu, who served as a director of the Ketchum Food Studio, shares:

Bee was always generous with her time and gracious to all. Even as her status in the industry grew to iconic levels, she always had time for everyone and never considered herself above it all. Success, in Bee, didn't breed arrogance - she remained the same warm, loving person. And people were charmed by her in return.

Debbi Reinschmiedt, VP, designer/curator, Ketchum West, shares:

Like so many women of that era (including my mom), she helped put the first crack in the glass ceiling for most of us.

Rob Flaherty, partner, CEO and chairman, had this to say about Bee:

Bee blazed many trails for Ketchum as our colleagues describe here, including being part of the trio that opened our New York office (with Dave Drobis and Paul Alvarez). Bee was so smart
and, as noted, it came with an unassuming touch, like a cross between Yoda and Carol Channing. Charm and humor on the outside, wisdom, strategy and perspective on the inside. She had a great sense of humor, most of it aimed at herself. Her self-effacing stories were priceless. A great person and certainly a legend and cornerstone of Ketchum.

Bee's legacy lives on. Ketchum and the Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior (SNEB) created the Bee Marks Fund in 1993, supporting an annual educational seminar - known as the Bee Marks Communications Symposium - that showcases current advancements and best practices in evidence-based nutrition communications and marketing, given annually at SNEB's meeting.