

Plenty Food Group

Over 120 local businesses are now part of an active food industry in the north that benefits from networking and group buying power.

The Plenty Food Group is a network that assists small, medium and large companies involved in food processing or in supplying products or services to the food industry. Established more than three years ago and supported by the City of Whittlesea and Hume City Council, participants use group buying power to gain discounts from suppliers. They also share knowledge and expertise, and participate in workshops of relevance to their industry.

Plenty Food Group project officer Marshall Dwyer recently completed a survey of more than 85 businesses to gather current information on what companies require and produce. The survey showed that they offer a diverse range of products, including processed and convenience foods, beverages, confectionery, dairy products, bakery, fresh produce, specialty foods and more. Distribution channels vary, with a high 48% already exporting and another 40% interested in export markets.

"This information will help us to draw up a plan for seminars, training and workshops that are relevant to what businesses need," said Marshall. "Our program in 2006 will include sessions on research and development in partnership with RMIT Bundoora, water and energy sustainability, packaging, exporting, marketing, dealing with major supermarkets and succession planning. Training for employees in food handling, OH&S and English language is also a possibility.

"We leave time at each session for networking, which is equally important," he added. "For example, after a casual chat last year,

two participants with complementary businesses decided to share container space and contacts for the export market. Both companies have increased business because of this successful move. A lot of support among members happens informally like this."

John Francis, Director Economic Development with the City of Whittlesea, said that the food industry is of growing importance to the region.

"We already have a strong local industry and this is set to expand with the relocation of the Melbourne Wholesale Fruit, Vegetable and Flower Market to Epping in 2010," said John. "We want to make sure that local companies are in the best possible position to take advantage of the opportunities available.

"We are also aiming to become recognised as a 'food hub' that incorporates manufacturing, wholesaling and their supply chains as well as research and development linkages with RMIT and other academic institutions – a total 'package' for the sector."

Connie Manglaviti is marketing coordinator at Naturally Good, a small manufacturer of natural food products that are particularly targeted towards people with allergies and intolerances.

"The Group has been great for us, giving us the opportunity to meet local people in our industry and share ideas," said Connie. "We've been able to access products at a cheaper rate through group

purchasing arrangements. And in the longer term it's helping us to prepare to expand our export capacity."

Over the coming year, the Group aims to develop a global export strategy focusing on Asia, develop a strategy to counter the move by major supermarkets to private labels, increase combined export sales by \$10m by the end of 2006 and increase annual turnover of members by 5% pa over the next two years.

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