Natural foods CEO tells students to follow their gut

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Irwin D. Simon has some simple advice for students: Don’t listen to advice.



Irwin D. Simon, president and CEO of the Hain Celestial Group, shared insights about his career and the natural foods industry as this year's R. W. Freeman Distinguished Lecturer.

In a talk at Tulane University’s A. B. Freeman School of Business on Wednesday (March 16), the founder, president and CEO of natural foods giant Hain Celestial Group recalled how many times he’d been told early in his career that a company focused exclusively on healthy eating would never fly.

“If I had listened to them, I never would have gone out and done it,” Simon told the students. “It’s good to go out and get advice, but your best mentor is your gut.”

Simon’s gut has served him well. Since founding the company in 1993, he’s grown Hain Celestial into one of the world’s leading natural and organic food manufacturers, with a portfolio of well-known brands — including Celestial Seasonings, Earth’s Best, Health Valley, Arrowhead Mills and Garden of Eatin’ — and over $3.5 billion in sales.

Much of the company’s growth has come through acquisitions. Simon told students that strategy goes back to the earliest days of the business, when he feared customers would grow tired of the company’s then top-selling product: rice cakes.

“I always said one day everybody is going to wake up and say, ‘Man, they taste like crushed Styrofoam, so I’m not eating them anymore,’” Simon laughed. “I never wanted to be a one-product company. I wanted to be a diversified company in multiple categories.”

Simon concluded his talk with an unabashedly inspiring message.

“There’s no dumb ideas,” he said. “It’s only dumb if you don’t have the conviction. It’s okay to fail. Just go try.”

“Having Irwin serve as this year’s R. W. Freeman Distinguished Lecturer was a very special treat,” said Ira Solomon, dean of the Freeman School. “We couldn’t be happier or more appreciative that he was able to spend quality time sharing his knowledge, experience and perspectives with our students and faculty.”