



Legacy & Leadership

Dallas Wuethrich was the third-generation president of Grassland Dairy Products Inc., Greenwood, Wisconsin. Under his direction, the small, rural butter manufacturer with 25 employees became an innovative industry leader with nearly 500 employees, producing one-third of the butter sold in the United States.

Grassland Dairy was one of the first to establish a quality assurance lab and to utilize an anhydrous milk system. The company invested in additional plants and established a transportation division to ensure an effective and efficient product distribution system.

Grassland Dairy also emphasizes environmental stewardship and has been able to produce three times more butter than 15 years ago, but with less energy, land, water and with fewer emissions.

In 2014, after 39 years at the helm, Wuethrich turned over management of Grassland Dairy to the fourth generation, his two sons.

Wuethrich was a founding member of the Wisconsin Dairy Products Association and in 2012 was honored with the organization's Presidents Award. In 2017, he received the Cheese Industry Champion award from the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association.

Q How is managing a multi-generational family business a unique endeavor?

A Of paramount importance is maintaining the business in the traditional manner that built it to what it is today while, at the same time, growing with today's demands. Our root focus has always been to provide quality products at competitive pricing with exemplary service. All family members, both on-site and off, need to be recognized as equitable to the business. This takes communication and a highly skilled attorney to create a legal instrument which all can abide and adhere to.

Q What are some of the benefits and possible challenges that come with running a family business?

A Working with my family (father, spouse, children) my entire life has been a privilege not many have experienced. Passing down the ideals and life lessons my father instilled were important. At 6:00 p.m. we returned to casual family structure. Challenges occur when family members' positions vary on a subject. This is beneficial when the challenge is constructive.

Q What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

A A true leader leads by his actions. Employees observe the way you handle every type of situation. Positivity is "contagious." Share in the victory and learn together by defeats.

Q Please comment on the importance of accuracy, product quality and reputation on the longevity of a business?

A Today's consumer expects perfection and we need to provide it. Just okay is not okay. Company leadership needs to instill on the organization the expectation that doing things in a respectable manner with great accuracy is the norm. Competition gives no room for mistakes or retakes. Your trademark and brand define your company.

Q How do you communicate your company's "core values" and encourage others to do the same?

A Core values come from the top down. All business transactions created are reviewed by ownership. The dealings need to protect the company while at the same time, need to be fair to the customer. Once the staff understands this virtue, they value it like we do.

Q What was an obstacle you faced for your business and how did you overcome it?

A Supply of our ingredient, cream, was becoming scarce. Our facility, located in central Wisconsin, was in the heart of milk production in the United States. So, we returned to buying milk from the local family farm. Something we hadn't done for many years. This gave us a stable source of butterfat we needed for our butter customers.

Q They say you learn from your mistakes. Please share an example where this was relevant for you?

A We attempted to market a flavored butter in the '70s. At the time there was a surplus of butter in government possession. Consumption per capita was dropping. So, we thought we could innovate with a flavored butter line: Maple, Honey, Garlic, Chive, Chocolate, Orange and Cinnamon. We developed a great product, attractive packaging, set up distribution and had a marketing plan in place. We found the public was not ready for the product at that time.

Q What has been your favorite thing about working in the cheese and dairy industry?

A The people I've had the opportunity to work with. Coworkers, vendors, customers and even our competitors, be it equipment, packaging, cream and milk. We compete each day, but at the end of the day we are respectful friends. I was assigned at an early age to meet and compete with people 30-40 years my senior. It was an honor to say, "I know that guy." A great education.

Q How has social media and electronic communication changed the way people do business?

A It is amazing how social media has changed the way information is exchanged. People spend more time on their devices than watching TV, reading or listening to radio. The efficiency with electronics is outstanding. Gone are the facsimiles and pay phones we couldn't live without 30 years ago. I, myself, miss the verbal communication

that was required a few years ago. Now transactions can be accomplished via email, often without any verbal communication.

Q Please discuss the benefits of collaboration among industry leaders versus the need to protect your brand?

A Wisconsin was an island of medium-sized, family-owned butter creameries. We fought for rules to quality grade our products on a state level to compete with large manufacturers on a national playing level. It was accomplished as a group effort. Our university systems in Wisconsin are also supported by the butter industry for research, improvement and training. This will ensure the Wisconsin butter industry will maintain and excel as the leader of butter processing in the world.

Q What in your opinion does the dairy industry need to do to attract the next generation of leaders?

A There has been a lot of consolidation of the industry the last 40 years and it will continue. One would ask if the next leader comes from educated business/investment backgrounds or is trained in quality or manufacturing who understands the day-to-day movement and marketing of the product itself? Grassland continues to plan by employing great talent at all age levels in all areas.

Q Have you fostered certain habits throughout your career that have encouraged your company's success?

A After 116 years of continuous business, our family is committed to manufacturing and supplying butter and dairy products to our valued customers. People like our stability in the marketplace. Our entire family lives in the small community of Greenwood and helps support the local schools, churches and hospitals. We live here and want our communities to succeed. Employees are our greatest asset. Just be kind and fair to everyone. **CMN**