



Legacy & Leadership

Fermo Jaeckle co-founded Roth Käse USA along with his cousins Felix and Ulrich Roth in 1990. The business sold in 2010 to EMMI of Switzerland, and the U.S. operations — known today as Emmi Roth USA — are now based in Fitchburg, Wisconsin.

Jaeckle was born into a family that has been active in the business of producing and aging cheese in Switzerland and the United States since 1864. He is a 1973 graduate of Cornell University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics and food marketing.

After college, Jaeckle spent three years working in cheese production and distribution companies in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland. He joined the management of Otto Roth & Co. in 1976. The business was acquired by General Foods in 1983.

Jaeckle is a former president of the Cheese Importers Association of America as well as a former member of the board of directors of the American Cheese Society.

He continues to be active in the specialty cheese industry as the principal owner of Intercibus Inc., an importer and distributor of high-end specialty cheeses, and Fresh Pack LLC, a converter and packager of cheese headquartered in Monticello, Wisconsin.

Jaeckle enjoys spending time with his fiancée and business partner Lorie Appleby, hiking with his three Labradors, bicycling and motorcycling. He has two children, Kirsten and Peter, and three grandchildren.

Q How is the coronavirus pandemic affecting marketing messaging and positioning for dairy products?

A The focus of marketing messaging during the pandemic should remain on helping the consumer adjust to a new set of circumstances. Understand what your consumer fundamentally needs during this period of crisis and change and communicate how your company and/or brand can be of service. Many dairy companies are giving back to help their communities, and it has been heartening to see so many organizations stepping up to lend support through donations.

Q What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

A There's a difference between being a "boss" and being a "leader." The wisdom that was shared with me early in my career was to become a leader who knows the way, goes the way and shows the way. Instincts can often serve as a starting point in the decision-making process but are not a replacement for experience. Nothing beats experience — a hero always needs a guide. Seek out advice and counsel from experienced, trustworthy colleagues before making critical decisions, and once you've devised a strategic way forward, own your decision (and your mistakes).

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

A Learning how to truly listen is a core leadership competency that sets the stage for effective communication throughout the organization. Listen to people, listen to the market, listen to the data and listen to your gut.

Q What is the biggest challenge facing the dairy industry today?

A For many, myself included, the greatest challenge has to be forecasting where our business will be in six months, one year or two years. The economy, health and social issues, consumer sentiment and environmental concerns are all shifting so rapidly that the industry can have trouble adjusting quickly enough. Many are flying blind and can only look in the rear-view mirror.

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

A Providing superior customer service levels is as important as making great, uniform product. As producers, we all know that the quality of our raw

material is critical, yet there is likely little we can do to alter the impact of many external forces such as weather and feed quality. To be a reliable, capable resource for our customers, it is the producer's responsibility to navigate through the natural raw material changes to create a superior, high-quality product. It's a balancing act — an art and a science. Those companies committed to developing and evolving QA processes and best practices can advance their reputation and overall success.

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

A Cheese brings happiness to so many people. When I meet someone and share what I do for work, the most common response is a big smile followed by "I LOVE cheese!" It is an honor to be able to help get great cheeses onto the plates of more Americans and to be part of their celebrations and mealtime traditions.

Q What advice do you have for adapting in an ever evolving marketplace?

A Stay agile, embrace design thinking and do the work needed to fully understand and empathize with the consumer. Innovate, iterate and invest in your team.

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

A When it comes to the market for specialty cheese, the rising tide lifts all boats. Brand awareness and loyalty in the category are still evolving, and the more that we can do as an industry to promote trial and consumption, the more we'll grow together. If you are clear on your points of difference and have nailed down a compelling value proposition, there will be room for your brand to share its unique, authentic story with customers/consumers provided that price and quality are in line with expectations.

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

A I am a convinced proponent of looking first to develop and hire from within. Encouraging and financially supporting promising team members to further develop their skill sets just makes good sense in so many ways. For the most part, you have a pretty good idea of what strengths or weaknesses an existing employee possesses — not so when hiring from the outside. Likewise, existing employees intrinsically understand an organization's ethos or culture. Finally, having a well-developed internship program should be a key component of any successful, growing dairy company.

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

A Almost to a fault, I continue to search for the next new product or idea, knowing full well that when I encounter a customer/consumer they will ask, "What's new?" I hate to disappoint.

Q What would you cite as an example of a time where your company showed innovation and leadership in the dairy marketplace?

A In 1989, the original vision for Roth Käse USA included making an impact on the cheese industry in the United States, and in many ways, we succeeded. Our motto: Import the technology — not the cheese!

We were "confidently cheeky," hardwired to "innovate with agility" and by "failing fast" before these were entrepreneurial buzzwords. When you find yourself strapped for resources and living on a prayer, necessity is truly the mother of invention. Some of that drive can get lost once you start throwing money at problems instead of creatively trying to solve them with limited resources. In the end, it took seven years to break even and become bankable — but eventually, that impact was made. **CMN**