



# Legacy & Leadership

**Lou Gentine** is chairman and former CEO of Sargento Foods. Born in 1947 in Plymouth, Wisconsin, he spent his first eight years living on the second floor of his father's (Leonard Gentine) funeral home.

Sargento, which was founded in 1953, was the eventual outcome of several of Leonard Gentine's entrepreneurial attempts over five to six years to gain a small foothold in the cheese industry. Lou Gentine and his siblings (Butch, Larry, Ann and Lee) all began working for Sargento before they were 10 — initially performing the simplest of jobs while being exposed to their father's dreams and business philosophy.

Lou Gentine graduated from Notre Dame in 1970 and began work with Price Waterhouse in Hartford, Connecticut. He returned to Sargento in 1973 serving in a variety of financial and administrative roles before being named CEO in 1981.

With an unwavering focus on innovation and brand equity, and the dedication of the Sargento family of committed employees, the company grew to \$1.2 billion in sales by 2013, the year Lou Gentine's son Louie Gentine took the reigns as CEO. Today, Sargento employs more than 2,250 employees and is a brand leader in the U.S. retail, food service and ingredient industry.

Lou Gentine also has served the industry and led both the boards of the National Cheese Institute and International Dairy Foods Association. He and his wife Michele will soon be married 50 years. They have four children, 10 grandchildren and attribute their success to a strong faith in God.

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

**A** Approach your new responsibilities with an open mind. Spend time with each of your team members (touring facilities where applicable) to understand their roles, strengths, weaknesses and what you can do to help them succeed. Where applicable, visit at least a sampling of customers and/or suppliers to understand their needs and perceptions of company performance.

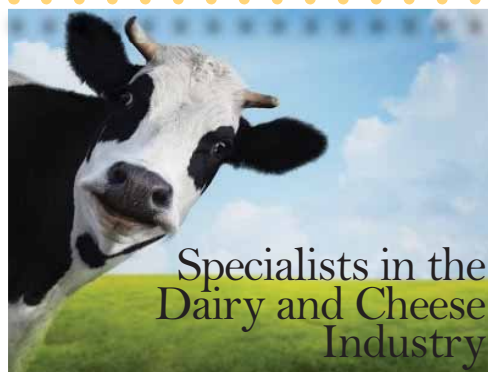
**Q** What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

**A** Humility.

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

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**A** Competition is ever-present. Everyone is looking for an opportunity to take a share, if not all, of your business. Your product and corporate reputation, with customers, suppliers, and employees, if good, can "help" to insulate you. That takes years to build and unfortunately, moments to begin to crumble.

**Q** What are the most important decisions you made/have made as a leader of your company?

**A** To continue my father's philosophy of doing business — "Hire Good People and Treat Them Like Family!"

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

**A** Our statement of Values and Purpose: Sargento is a family-owned cheese company dedicated to enhancing long-term stakeholder value. Sustained by an insatiable winning spirit, we are guided by our faith in God. Our central purpose is to be the best at responding to customer and consumer needs for cheese and cheese-based solutions.

We will achieve this goal by exceeding expectations for innovation, service, quality, value, taste, and convenience. We share the results of our success with those who contribute to that success.

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

**A** I think the culture of our industry is so very positive. There are strong bonds of friendship and respect, willingness to support each other, cooperation in educating each other and developing industrywide markets, while of course doing our very best for the company and stakeholders we represent.

**Q** What are some of the key concepts that supported the long-term success of your company?

**A** I previously mentioned my father's long-standing business philosophy and our Statement of Values and Purpose. Beyond that, I would say the prominent emphasis we place on innovation.

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

**A** Ground yourself by staying true to your values and focused on the things in life that really matter, like family and faith. You will thus be more proud and pleased — in any environment — with the business decisions you make.

**Q** Please tell us about a favorite product or marketing campaign your company rolled out under your leadership. What made it special?

**A** Many years ago, we introduced "Montage," a line of chocolate-covered cheesecakes on a stick! It was truly innovative, had fantastic taste and was only 700 calories! But we did not understand the frozen novelty business we were entering, we had no relationships with customers relative to this category, and we were not set up for the logistical necessities Montage required. What a surprise — it failed! But I believe we have learned a lot more from failures than success!

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

**A** I think our industry is doing just fine in this regard. Just look around! CMN