



Legacy & Leadership

Dick Baker is currently chairman of the board of Baker Cheese Inc., St. Cloud, Wisconsin. He is a 1968 graduate of Spencerian College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with a degree in business administration. After working for Milprint Packaging in Milwaukee for 3 years, he returned to Baker Cheese as part of the third generation of ownership. Dick Baker was the president and CEO of Baker Cheese for 30 years prior to transitioning to its chairman.

Baker Cheese was founded in 1916 by Dick Baker's grandfather, Frank Baker, and is currently managed and operated by the fourth generation of the Baker family. It has transitioned from producing cheddar to mozzarella and now is one of the largest string cheese plants in the United States.

Dick Baker has enjoyed serving on many cheese boards throughout his career and has been honored with multiple lifetime achievement awards within the industry. He and his wife, Karen, have four sons, Mark, Brian, Jeff and Kevin. All four sons have held management positions over the years with Baker Cheese. The company's current executive team includes Brian as President/CEO, Jeff as executive vice president, and Kevin as CFO, along with Dick Baker's nephew, Eric, as vice president of marketing and sales.

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

A I believe leaders of each generation must answer three questions as they evaluate the organization's future:

1. Should the company continue as a family owned and operated business?
2. Whom of the next generation is willing and capable of carrying on the values and traditions of the company?
3. How and when is ownership transferred to the next generation in a fair and sustainable manner for all concerned?

Even if the next generation has capable leaders who want to continue in the family business, its success or failure moving forward is dependent on if question 3 above can be accomplished.

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

A In my 50+ years at Baker Cheese, I have worked with my grandfather, father, brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, sons, nieces, nephews and now some of my grandchildren. Some may ask, "Is that a blessing or a curse?" It is most definitely a blessing for me.

My grandfather brought me back into the business and I often shared the same office with him. This afforded me with the opportunity to personally get closer to him, but it also gave me a better understanding of entrepreneurial spirit. That same tradition of learning from and appreciating family members continues on to this very day.

I believe that working together through both the good and bad times

has strengthened our family bond and therefore our company. Disagreements at work, which naturally will happen in any business, most often stay there.

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

A Learn to listen, as the act of listening is better than the act of talking.

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

A A few of my thoughts on challenges for the dairy industry:

1. "Plant Based" foods competing and trying to share space in the dairy category.
2. Labor shortages at farms and dairy plants. This especially hold true in our dairy industry due to the "round the clock" operational needs of both businesses.
3. Continued risk of unexpected dairy market fluctuations due to some of the archaic pricing models for milk.

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

A 1. To recognize and develop the next generation of leaders and knowing when to let them lead.

2. To successfully transfer ownership of our company from one generation to the next on multiple occasions.

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

A In the 1980s, as our branded string cheese business was growing in Wisconsin, a decision was made to develop additional market in the Midwest (and beyond). Due to the fact that string cheese was a relatively new product, it took more capital resources than our company had at the time to successfully get this growth accomplished. Our company changed direction and started to align and partner with reputable companies that had strong regional and national brands with the agreement that Baker Cheese would be their source of string cheese for their respective brands. Though we continue to have great pride and success with our Baker brand, this decision in the 1980s to partner with other companies and brands has helped generate most of our growth and represents a vast majority of our string cheese sales.

Q The say "you learn from your mistakes" ... please share an example where this was relevant for you.

A In the late 1970s, we were in our infancy of making and marketing string cheese. My father, Francis, made the statement that "someday string cheese would be our primary product line." I was still relatively new in the business and quietly thought to myself, "no way this will happen." It became obvious that the saying "Father Knows Best" was evident in this situation.

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

A Meeting so many genuine and dedicated people over the years. Many relationships have grown into lasting friendships. We have a very unique industry on how it interacts and values these relationships.

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

A 1. Building long-standing partnerships with our customers, farmers, suppliers and employees.

2. Being fiscally responsible as we managed company growth.

3. The reinforcement of company values throughout all management levels.

4. Having our next generation of leaders work outside the cheese industry before assuming management roles with Baker Cheese.

5. A key company mantra we have initiated is that "Every Stick Matters." We were on the leading edge at the beginning of the market for "snack cheese" with our award-winning string cheese and our entire operation knows the high expectation of quality that is demanded on each and every stick of cheese we make.

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

A In 1975, my parents were visiting relatives in California and they returned with a few packages of a ropey type of mozzarella cheese that a small deli was making from a recipe they brought over from Europe. They called it "string cheese." At the time, there wasn't anyone in the Midwest manufacturing or marketing this product. Our group decided we would give it a try and see if we could take some of our mozzarella and stretch it and cut it in similar styles and create our own style of string cheese. Forty-five years later and our string cheese has a national reputation of exceptional quality, with multiple national and international awards and distribution across all 50 states and in many other countries.

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

A Being one's own self at all times. I believe this has helped foster camaraderie with all of our company's partnerships across all levels.