



# Legacy & Leadership

**Tom Suber**, after retiring from the U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC) in 2017, continues to provide strategic trade counsel to companies and trade associations through Suber Global LLC while also serving on the boards of Great Lakes Cheese Co. Inc., based in Hiram, Ohio, and Casey Trees in Washington, D.C.

Suber was USDEC's first president when the council was formed in 1995. While there, he guided dairy's export growth from 3% of total U.S. milk solids to 15%. Representing U.S. farmers, processors and trading companies, his executive responsibilities included strategic planning, marketing, trade and regulatory policies, and issues/crisis management. He also was staff lead for globalization at the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, which formed a strategic plan with Bain & Co. to galvanize industry efforts to become a more consistent export supplier.

Suber served on numerous industry boards including the Dairy Research Institute, the U.S. Agricultural and Export Development Council, two U.S. government policy advisory committees and the Food & Agricultural Export Alliance. The American Dairy Products Institute recognized him with its Award of Merit in 2017.

**Q** During your tenure with the U.S. Dairy Export Council, how did you work to bring more awareness and education to the U.S. dairy sector about the benefits of exporting dairy around the world?

**A** Farmer leaders — like Ivan Strickler, Elwood Kirkpatrick and Tom Camerlo — were critical in the early 1990s to see that a protected, inward-looking dairy industry would stagnate unless it expanded globally. That sparked Dairy Management Inc. to create USDEC, which had to, first, show the favorable trends in global middle class growth, dynamics in competitive milk supplies, a liberalizing trade environment and dairy-friendly changes in global diets (especially cheese). Then, we had to show suppliers that our programs could lower supplier risks inherent in exports through effective market research, trade and promotional assistance, and road mapping through regulatory and policy constraints.

**Q** Why is it important for U.S. dairy companies to be engaged on an international scale?

**A** Not all companies can/should pursue an export growth strategy. However, each company should examine it closely as a strategic option against domestic options. Company size isn't important. Relevant issues include product mix, partnership opportunities, competitive strengths/weaknesses and market positioning. Once the decision is made to pursue exports, a broadly accepted corporate strategy is vital along with assigning dedicated staff. Simply adding export duties to those with a largely domestic focus is a recipe for disappointment.

**Q** What inroads have U.S. companies made into becoming more reliable/consistent business partners in international markets? What more needs to be done?

**A** Global consumers have emphatically shown their love of dairy products and ingredients during the pandemic. Yet, U.S. suppliers may find it difficult to rebuild the trust and consistency upon which it had improved so much over the last 10 years. COVID's disruption aggravated the turmoil that the U.S. brought to its existing (NAFTA) and prospective (TPP) trade partners, reigniting concerns that we are short-term players, not committed to the long term, like the European Union and New Zealand. While we gained regulatory concessions in some markets, it is far from overcoming what we lost with our go-it-alone brinksmanship. Suppliers will need to overcome our "relationship deficit" with buyers by expanding their market presence. Frequent, collaborative personal interaction is a must for the road back, but it comes neither cheaply nor quickly.

**Q** Can you give an example of another country that increased its consumption of U.S. dairy during your time with USDEC?

**A** Considering the span of my career, it's fair to say that most EVERY country (except perhaps a "closed" Russia) increased its consumption of U.S. dairy over my time. That said, U.S. dairy growth in Japan has been the most personally gratifying, due to its tight quality specs, intense domestic and import competition, and many market access constraints. It's also one of my favorite foreign cultures.

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

**A** Be ready to tell hard truths to stakeholders (farmers, CEOs, policy-makers). It was both necessary and difficult to tell leaders early on that our milk powder was second tier, our cheese ordinary and inappropriately packaged, our product mix too narrow, and our marketing practices outdated and arrogant. Believe in the objective. Tell it

straight with facts, patience and collaborative solutions. Repeat as necessary.

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

**A** Humility. Few of us achieve whatever we achieve on our own. Know what you know, what you don't, what you need to learn and listen to those who can help you get there.

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

**A** It will be a challenge for farmers and suppliers to make decisions based on commercial market signals and not the distortions that the flood of government relief money and programs has brought. As we readjust, it's an appropriate time to finally revise our pricing system to permit better price transparency rather than the look-back aspect of federal orders, thereby easing better long-term export pricing that our competitors use.

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

**A** USDEC was able to emerge because no other group was then in the export space. Therefore, it was important as its first exec to establish sound and fair governance and ensure that staff sees success as ultimately moving more dairy, not just executing programs. It was also important to mute the self-laudatory chest-thumping that can often come from industry associations. Sharing success is easy and will beget yet more collaboration. The industry's unified trade policy effort by USDEC, the International Dairy Foods Association and the National Milk Producers Federation is a good example of what unity can bring.

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

**A** Mistakes are inevitable when pushing new concepts, programs and markets. The learning sequence is clear: be open to bad news; determine the cause and impact on key objectives; own the mistake without equivocation; fix it and/or move on. I remember three times (at least!) where we were too in front of members with a shippers association, an export receivables credit forum and premature mar-

keting efforts in Taiwan. In short, one can't lead if no one is prepared to follow.

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

**A** The people, by far. My background was in industrial trade, not ag or food. In dairy, I found rewarding work with people from widely different perspectives here and overseas. It reinforced my view that treating people with respect and an assumption of goodwill is usually rewarded.

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

**A** Stay curious. Read widely. Be prepared to change your mind.

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

**A** Two decisions were critical. The first was putting significant resources into the Market Access Export Guide that provides members with real-time market access rules for documents, labeling, tariffs, etc. While often tedious and arcane, its unique resource reduces transactional risks while boosting the learning curve for U.S. suppliers. The second was resisting pressure that USDEC stay out of product development. First, when working with Wisconsin's Center for Dairy Research, we showed suppliers how to make Gouda, a widely traded global cheese, in a Cheddar plant. Second is the ongoing effort to improve spore counts in our milk powders through better processing practices.

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

**A** Trying to ensure that organizations "stay in their lane" was tiresome, especially when it manifested solely as a cosmetic "me-too" effort without impactful programs. Wasteful redundancies seem less prominent these days. Yet, it remains critical for farmers and suppliers, whose dollars support all the organizations, to resist "mission creep." Unify and focus: The competition and challenges are too difficult for fractured efforts. **CMN**