



Legacy & Leadership

Jerry Lippert joined Nelson-Jameson in 1992, with roles over his tenure including sales management, director of operations, vice president/general manager and president. He assumed the president's role in 2002 and held that position until 2020. Lippert now represents Nelson-Jameson as a consultant and a member of the Advisory Board of Directors.

Lippert grew up on a registered Holstein dairy farm, taking an active management role at an early age when his father was disabled in a farm accident. A 1975 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, he went on to a career in the paper industry. His 17-year career in paper distribution included sales, purchasing and general management positions with Great Northern Nekoosa Corp. and Georgia Pacific. Lippert was a regional vice president of a Georgia Pacific division when he left that industry to join Nelson-Jameson.

Today, Lippert is active in the Food Industry Suppliers Association and several dairy processing organizations including the International Dairy Foods Association, Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association and Wisconsin Dairy Products Association. He also supports the United Way and other civic organizations.

Q How has the supplier side of the dairy business evolved over the years, and how has Nelson-Jameson positioned itself as a leader?

The industry has become far more sophisticated and complex, as has our core customer base. Years ago, needs that are now common and expected were either in their infancy or not a large factor. A couple of examples include laboratory equipment and supplies, as well as safety and PPE (personal protective equipment) items. Today they are bread and butter needs in food manufacturing plants, and Nelson-Jameson has continued to offer a large product selection in these two vital areas, which in turn has fueled significant growth for us.

Q Nelson-Jameson is known for providing solutions, not just products. Why is this an important distinction for your customers?

We source over 55,000 products from 850 vendors, yet we know that there's more to a business relationship than just the supply of products. Our philosophy has always been customer solution-focused — knowing our industry and its specific needs is an essential element of what we are about. By working with Nelson-Jameson, you have access to our wealth of products, as well as access to cheese, dairy and food experts who can work with you to answer questions about your application, new regulations and industry trends.

Q Please discuss your ability to offer customers a one-stop shop for their needs due to your connections with more than 850 vendors — how does this give you an edge in the industry?

The one-stop shop has been our key concept since the company's founding in 1947. We have and always are looking for suppliers who meet and exceed what our customers want and need. This includes unique specialty items, like our M926 Chloride Analyzer. There are many items we carry that are hard to find and have a specific food industry focus. Stocking and providing those items along with day-to-day supply needs and delivering them on our company trucks means we can help lower your transaction costs while providing the products and services our customers need to produce safe, quality food.

Q As your company has grown and added new locations, how have you managed to maintain your core philosophies and consistent services across the locations you serve?

It certainly gets more complex as the organization grows. Fortunately we have very active owners in the Nelson family who emphasize company culture and consistent services. We have standard, written procedures and practices across locations, as well as the ability to travel between headquarters and our various branches to collaborate. COVID has made this difficult, so Zoom and other technology solutions have been heavily employed by Nelson-Jameson to keep the lines of communication open.

Q Please touch on the importance of "giving back" and some examples of how Nelson-Jameson has done this over its years in business?

One of the first things that impressed me when I joined Nelson-Jameson in early 1992 was the company's ethics and community involvement. I had spent 12 years working in sales and management for a large nationwide paper wholesaler. While I learned a great deal about business, "giving back" was not something we focused on. The

Nelson family has from the beginning emphasized giving. Earl Nelson, one of our founders, served in county government and was a key force in bringing a two-year UW campus to the community of our headquarters, Marshfield, Wisconsin, in the 1960s. Earl's philosophy on charitable giving is still extremely prominent in Nelson-Jameson's culture, and the organization continues to be actively involved in various community organizations and charities.

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

All three are absolutely essential. Nelson-Jameson says and means — your safe, quality food is our business. As an industry we have a duty to provide consumers with safe, nutritious food that people enjoy consuming. Cheese is at the top of that list for me. A supplier needs to be a key link in that chain. If we send the wrong product to our customer, or it's not up to standard, we can derail their production schedule. Like a good umpire in baseball or an official in basketball, if we do our job well, we are virtually unseen in the process — essential but unseen. That is the way it should be. If we do it right, we can sleep well at night knowing we are respected in the industry we serve. That's our goal!

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

I tend to be a Type A person. I've been managing aspects of, or complete, business enterprises for over 40 years now. Early in my career I tended to gravitate towards people who were like me. In the early 1980s I attended a two-week training seminar for young executives in the paper distribution industry at Hillsdale College. The most dysfunctional groups I've ever been in were when they broke us into "group activities." We, me included, all wanted to be leaders, and as a result we got precious little done! What I learned was — hire intelligent, hard working, ethical people and challenge them professionally in positive ways, BUT don't try to put them in a box of your creation that isn't right for them. Let them do their thing, in their way, and everyone will be a lot more successful and happy.

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

Without a doubt, the people. This industry is filled with talented, inspiring individuals. I would be doing a disservice if I started to mention names because I'd forget to name so many. Added to this is the fact that virtually all of them are enjoyable to be around. I can truly say my 28-plus years in this industry (starting with being raised on a Registered Holstein dairy farm) have been so enjoyable because of the great people. The fact that these same people are instrumental in producing great products only adds to my pleasure!

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

Collaboration is essential for dissemination of knowledge and for growth. If you hold your cards too close, you become insular and lose value. We belong to several industry trade associations, and attending their events and collaborating with other companies makes us all better. Yes, there is proprietary knowledge that needs to be held internally, but taking what you learn from others and putting into practice will lead to success.

Not to offend "non Packer" fans, but ultimately success as an organization depends on how you execute. The "Lombardi Sweep" wasn't that complicated. The key was in how it was performed on the field.

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

That is a great but difficult question to answer. We, whether I'm referring to the distribution business or the food industry that we serve, are not "glamorous" industries. Trust me — I didn't grow up dreaming of going back into the dairy industry or distribution. I wanted to be the next Warren Spahn (I'm left handed) or Henry Aaron.

Mike Ditka was once quoted as saying, "Desire without talent is a daydream. Talent without desire is a nightmare."

Early on it became clear my childhood desire was a daydream, I ended up where I'm at by putting one foot in front of the other, and finding out I had a talent and, more importantly, really enjoyed what I was doing and the industry I was part of. That's my way of saying — we need to "nourish" the talent that we recruit. Nelson-Jameson has many talented people in key positions who joined us in entry-level positions. They were looking for an opportunity, they had talent, they worked hard and they were rewarded. We need to continue nourishing and developing the next generation of leaders by giving them the opportunities to grow. Once they are valued and find their "calling," they will realize what a great industry this is to be a part of! CMN