



Legacy & Leadership

Jim Banks is the founding member of Banks Consulting LLC. He retired in 2017 after 38 years in the industry.

Throughout his career, Banks held senior sales and executive positions with many leading equipment manufacturers including Superior Stainless Inc., Damrow Co., Johnson Industries International, Sudmo North America and Custom Fabricating & Repair Inc., where he was employed when he retired. These positions took him throughout the United States and to several foreign countries.

Banks has served on committees for the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA), including the Nominating Committee and the B-Team, and he received WCMA's Distinguished Service Award in 2018. He also is a past member of the International Society of Pharmaceutical Engineers. He served on the Dairy Committee of the former Food Processing Suppliers Association and helped coordinate the dairy judging contest for many years.

Banks does consulting for a few companies at the present time.

Q How are the cheese industry's suppliers uniquely positioned to keep the supply chain running during the COVID-19 crisis?

A COVID has been and continues to be a major challenge for the cheese industry as well as the companies supplying the cheese industry. The suppliers have been crippled to some extent by a material shortage leading to extremely short quote validity times and project delays. I've heard of 24-hour quote validity! Some installation companies have, out of necessity, purchased tubing from East Asia and have gotten burned on the inferior quality. The distributor network has stepped up and done an excellent job sourcing products to keep the plants running.

Q How has the equipment business evolved over the years in terms of customer interaction and 24/7 on-call services?

A Throughout the course of my 38-year career, I've seen the relationships — and more importantly, the partnerships — develop and grow between service providers and cheese companies. The development of automation and monitoring of processes in real time have enabled “quick fixes” of problems, resulting in less downtime and product losses.

Q With customization more prevalent than ever before, do various equipment suppliers work more closely on collaboration these days?

A Definitely: Customization of equipment and the related process are more critical than ever to optimize production and efficiency. All companies need to protect their brands, but competitors will usually work together for the good of the project. The owner of one of the companies I worked for always reminded employees and customers that the word “custom” was — the first word in their company name!

Q What is one type of equipment or new technology that you feel was really a “disruptor” during your time in the industry?

A The one type of equipment would be the enclosed cheesemaking vat as it developed from vertical shaft to horizontal shaft. It provided consistency from vat to vat, took out labor, ensured better yields, etc. The level of automation is so high now that some companies don't have licensed cheesemakers running the vats. Rather, they hire vat operators so their cheesemakers can focus on recipe development, optimization and other things.

Q What are some of the benefits and/or challenges the industry is facing with increased robotics/AI in manufacturing and equipment offerings?

A We never like to see people lose their jobs, but robots DON'T do certain things like take vacations, call in sick, take maternity/paternity leave, receive benefits like health insurance. They provide repeatability and accuracy through the programming and AI. Superior customer service by the robot manufacturer is crucial to the success.

Q What is an example of a trend in equipment that you were at the forefront of in the industry?

A While at Damrow Co., I was fortunate to be involved in the development of its horizontal vat, the DOH, along with the 640/500-pound block and barrel tower. Two great projects to go into the field and assist with the test work.

Q What is a valuable business insight you feel is necessary to pass on to the next generation?

A A few things: Always be honest as “the truth will get out,” and develop strong relationships — people buy from people. My motto, after my younger brother died at only 50 years old, became “work hard, play hard and be good to people.”

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

A Accuracy of order entry, accuracy of the process installation and/or fabrication, and product quality — along with customer service — all define and create your reputation.

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

A I've made so many mistakes over the years, I can't remember them all! One that comes to mind is when I got into a “discussion” with the president of our largest distributor because I thought I did his company a favor and he didn't see it that way. I hung up on him on a Friday afternoon. It bothered me all weekend to the point I called my boss and told him about it on Monday morning. I ended up calling the gentleman and apologized for reacting disrespectfully in a weak moment. All was well

after that. Lesson learned: Count to 10 and don't have a knee-jerk reaction.

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

A It's definitely the people. I've sold equipment to many industries (including beverage, biotech/pharma, food processing, wastewater) and met a lot of wonderful people along the way, but there are no better or harder-working people than in the cheese industry.

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

A You've got to be nimble. Learn your customers' needs, both present and future. Cheese producers and converters must respond to consumer trends and demands, and the equipment companies, in turn, must provide the appropriate equipment to produce those products.

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

A They need to promote it as one of the best industries to be in. It's a solid industry that is growing stronger each year. Look at the number of new plants being built. That alone is a testament to the industry's longevity and bright future. People will always need to eat, and dairy is essential to a balanced nutritional intake. Educate and promote leadership just as WCMA is doing with its cheesemaking classes and leadership workshops.

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

A As I mentioned previously, be honest, forthright and respectful. Tell it like it is! I was never one to “sugar coat it,” or so I'm told. **CMN**