



Legacy & Leadership

Van Salmans is a cheese marketing and sales consultant. He founded Salmans & Associates Inc. in 1981 and sold the business in 2018.

Salmans' previous industry experience includes serving as general manager at Cellini Foods Inc., Chicago, for two-and-a-half years before becoming executive vice president of sales at Tolibia Cheese Inc., Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, from 1974-1981. During his tenure at Tolibia Cheese, the company was acquired by Stella Foods, which eventually became part of Saputo Inc.

Salmans is a native Texan and earned his B.A. in economics at Stanford University in California and his M.B.A. in marketing and finance at the University of Chicago. He also served on the boards of the American Blue Cheese Association and International Dairy Deli Bakery Association.

Q *What needs in the dairy industry were you seeking to address when you founded Salmans & Associates in 1981?*

A Personally, it was the opportunity to have a go at owning my own business. In my previous position as executive vice president of sales for Tolibia Cheese, I saw a need for better sales/marketing plans among smaller cheese manufacturers. These were family-owned businesses that basically hoped other, larger cheese companies would have the need for the products they produced, and by being at least somewhat active in industry associations, that some of these companies would reach out to them. There was generally no active plan to target prospective customers.

Q *How did your specific background and knowledge base position you to help dairy companies thrive in the sales and marketing space?*

A I majored in economics as an undergraduate and marketing for my M.B.A. Early on, I consulted for a few companies, and I widened their horizons as to sales possibilities and how to approach current and different markets. We developed a sales/marketing plan, implemented it, critically analyzed it, reviewed it and then implemented a revised or new plan.

Q *What are some of the primary benefits companies receive from partnering with a firm like Salmans & Associates?*

A There are a few factors that stand out. Although we aligned ourselves with several companies over the long term, we are able to source product from most

any company that can supply a product to best suit our customer's needs. We are very functionally and technically knowledgeable about the cheeses we sell and often utilize the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research to help us develop a specific product for a customer's specific application. We are very responsive to our customers — questions are quickly answered and information promptly supplied.

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

A Oddly enough, even as a smaller company, we were among the very first to offer fixed pricing through hedging on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange long before most larger companies. I had an interest in this area from business school and could see that some of our customers would greatly benefit from more stable pricing for planning, budgeting and operating. I also took a couple of executive-level options courses to further my knowledge. Later, much to my surprise, I even had a few much larger manufacturers ask me to educate them on how to provide hedged pricing.

Q *What valuable business insight do you feel is necessary to pass on?*

A Integrity is something in both life and business that you can't have too much of. Be honest in all of your dealings — it shows through. Secondly, never stop learning — learn as much as you can — about products, trends, competitors, applications and industry happenings. Knowledge is power. Lastly, put the customer's interest first in giving advice. Once your customer sees that, he or she will be much more inclined to award you more business. In fact, for several customers,

we became their in-house cheese expert and sourced most if not all of their cheeses.

Q *Please comment on the importance of product quality, consistency and reputation to the longevity of a cheesemaker and their brand?*

A All three are vitally important, and you should strive for excellence in all three. Not everyone can make the best cheese, but consistency in producing the same product every day is long remembered. There is a cheese specification target in cheese manufacturing — the least variability in the product will serve both the manufacturer and the customer well. The last thing a customer wants to deal with is a product that's functionally variable.

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

A Unfortunately, not everything goes perfectly all the time. I learned early on that trying to diminish or work through a problem or mistake usually resulted in the problem taking longer to resolve and/or often the problem becoming larger and the customer more frustrated. My advice is to address any mistake as promptly as you can and do what it takes to make it go away. I believe in the adage, "your first loss is your best loss."

Q *How have communications methods evolved over the years, and what have you done to adapt?*

A Change certainly happens over time and it certainly seems to be happening at a faster pace. While we've used phones for a very long time, communication with customers has moved from letters to faxes to emails to cell phones and texts. We need to be careful of too much reliance on electronic responses. Emails and texts have their place, but we shouldn't become too reliant on them. Verbal communication is extremely important, and nothing is as important as a physical meeting, which, even in the age of Zoom, needs to occur with some frequency.

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

A Consumption of cheese has grown markedly since I first entered the industry and continues to grow. It's a nutritious, versatile and stable food with a myriad of applications. Promoting the product and the cheese industry serves to increase the size of the market, which welcomes innovations and new products. I think those in the cheese/dairy industry are a very collegial group and gladly support other manufacturers.

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

A Aside from always conducting yourself with integrity, I tried to educate and train my employees in the ways we wanted to conduct our business. That meant empowering them with considerable latitude to make decisions and at the same time being available to discuss and review situations that were challenging. On bigger decisions that weren't time critical, I encouraged them to think the issue through thoroughly, discuss it and then step back for a day or two before revisiting it — the subconscious is working in the background during that time, and you almost always experience more clarity when considering the issue a day or two later.

Q *What has been the most rewarding aspect of your 40+ years in the cheese industry?*

A Although we sourced cheese from probably 10 states at one time or another, our principal supplier/partners were Wisconsin-based and sourced. I watched several Wisconsin family cheese manufacturers grow into substantially sized companies, and the children of those family businesses become the owners and managers — that was very gratifying. I made many friendships that have outlived the business part of the relationship. I can't say enough about the honesty and industriousness of the people in the Wisconsin cheese industry. I'm thankful for having met so many people, made so many friends and participated in such a warm, friendly and tightly-knit industry. CMN