



Legacy & Leadership

Jerry Dryer has had a long career in the dairy foods business as a consultant, market analyst and trends forecaster that serves market participants from farm to table.

In 2012, Dryer was presented with a Distinguished Service Award by the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association. During his acceptance, Jerry listed three accomplishments he was proudest of: Susan Quarne, John Umhoefer and Dick Groves.

Dryer hired Quarne into the dairy foods business as he was founding The National Dairy News, now Cheese Market News, the weekly newspaper that Quarne now owns. Dryer hired Umhoefer into the dairy business a couple of years later, and Umhoefer is now the executive director of the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association. Earlier in his career, during his tenure as editor of the Cheese Reporter, Dryer hired Groves, the current owner/editor of that publication.

Dryer was born and raised on a farm near Reedsburg, Wisconsin, graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville in 1966 with a B.S. in agriculture and from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a M.S. in agricultural journalism. He spent seven years in Washington, D.C., working for the National Milk Producers Federation and USDA before returning to Madison where he became the editor of a dairy publication. Dryer then went on to found his own consulting business and a weekly newspaper, The National Dairy News (now Cheese Market News) with Harold "Pete" Peterson, inventor of Co-Jack cheese.

Dryer and Peterson sold the newspaper to Gorman Publishing in 1985 and Jerry joined Gorman as editor of the newspaper, editor of Dairy Foods magazine and editor of The Dairy Marketing Letter, a weekly newsletter Jerry had created in 1978.

Dryer left Gorman in 1989 and subsequently relaunched his consulting business, which handled public relations and marketing efforts to help launch the U.S. Dairy Export Council and the dairy futures and options trading platform at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. As part of his consulting business, Dryer also served as chief market analyst at Rice Dairy, a boutique commodity brokerage house in Chicago.

Currently, Dryer is the editor of the Dairy & Food Market Analyst, a weekly newsletter he founded in 1981; and president of JDG Consulting, the company he founded in 1978.

Dryer is the proud father of two sons. Gerald Jr. is an educator currently pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin School of Education. Andrew is owner of Andrew Dryer Cinematography, and is a videographer and director of photography with clients worldwide.

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

A Shut up and listen! Seriously. Leaders, especially new leaders, should understand that they are not the purveyors of all wisdom. Learn from your staff. My father was fond of saying, "Jerry, you have two eyes and two ears and just one mouth. God was trying to tell you something."

Your staff is likely one step closer than you to your customer or the manufacturing or packaging operation you've been tagged to oversee. You probably have staff members with more years of experience than you.

This makes them a valuable source of information and marketplace/marketing intelligence.

When I was the editor of Dairy Foods magazine, we had weekly staff meetings to work on the current issue and issues out into the future.

We needed lots of ideas. What subjects deserve coverage? How much coverage? How might we illustrate that article? What about the cover? What story was worthy? What goes on the cover?

The editors and writers I oversaw were much closer to hundreds of people working for dairy companies of every ilk. They almost always spotted emerging-trends in their area of specialty before their boss, the editor in chief (me).

Hence, I always imposed one hard and fast rule at staff meetings: There are no bad ideas; just some ideas that are not quite as good as others. As Thomas Edison summed up his work he frequently said, "we did not make any mistakes trying to invent a light bulb; we did however learn 700 ways not to make a lightbulb."

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

A An open mind. You need to be receptive to new ideas.

Do yourself a favor: Before launching into that monthly report you hate to do, take a few minutes to think about it. Is there an easier way to collect all of these data? An easier, more informative way to crunch these data? Remember the staff we talked about? They're probably full of ideas; some of them pretty darn good and there just might be a gem hidden in there. Approach with an open mind.

How do you help nurture an open mind? See question #1 (use your two ears) and then (use your eyes) lay down the remote control for your television or the video game you are messing with on your cellphone and read a book — any book, as long as it has nothing to do with the dairy business.

As a five-year-old, I was fond of running away from home. Getting out of the rut. Seeing and doing something new and different. You can do the same thing with a book. But you get to stay there sitting in your recliner or your airplane seat or listening to books on tape while driving down the highway. You don't need to leave home to go on an exciting and informative adventure...just open up a book about a subject you'll enjoy.

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

A Too many of us think we are in the dairy business. Thinking only dairy, we limit our field of vision for opportunities.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in the food business, not the dairy business. We are in the business of offering consumers snacks and beverages and desserts and entrees and breakfasts and ingredients and condiments.

By only thinking dairy or cheese, we put ourselves in a very small box. A bigger box (the food business) means many more opportunities.

Here's an example: Several "cheese" companies are offering snack packs — easy-to-open, single-serve packages of cheese, nuts and dried fruit. Lots of yogurt is positioned as a snack or a dessert or breakfast, not yogurt.

A very long time ago, a new beverage, now a worldwide top seller, was developed. They did not call it artificially flavored, artificially colored and artificially carbonated water. They called it Coca-Cola.

Step back from the dairy business and become a participant in the food business.

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

A Meeting, getting to know and working with so many fine ladies and gentlemen. The food business and the dairy business, more specifically, is blessed. Great, honest, caring, helpful people.

It is family. Figuratively and literally. There are countless companies now on their third, fourth and even fifth generation in business ... the same family, but an ever-evolving business.

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

A I had the good fortune of getting acquainted with Tom Suber a couple of years before the U.S. Dairy Export Council was nurtured into being. I was informally "of consult" to Tom as we bounced ideas around about how to engage U.S. dairy businesses in the international market.

Don't get me wrong: Tom was the purveyor of all knowledge and wisdom, but I helped him get better acquainted with the nuances of the dairy business.

The Export Council brought together dairy processors and milk producers. They had been two tribes at war for years. "The milk price is too low!" "The milk price is too high!" There was a steady stream of conflict between processors and milk producers, most notably at the national level.

Once united, they were unstoppable and drove export sales from about 5% of U.S. production to 15%. This while U.S. production increased dramatically.

With the current trade wars, the Export Council is facing some serious speed bumps that are causing serious near-term disruptions to trade. And the longer the wars, the more disruptive over not just the near term, but the long term.

That said, the Export Council is positioned to make the best of a bad situation. Thank you Tom Suber, for your genius and for the opportunity to ride shotgun. CMN