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Building relationships Dairy now part of Wegman's farm-food focus

By **SHERRY BUNTING**
Special for Farmshine

WILKES-BARRE, Pa.—Food—how it's made and where it comes from—is very much a focus for Wegman's, based in Rochester, New York, with locations in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia.

From the gazillion recipes and ready-to-assemble meal deals to the over 350 specialty cheeses and hundreds of store-baked breads displayed in the German-style 'bake shop', and from the organic section to the ultra fresh seafood... Wegman's pays attention to details. That's their forte, to provide a memorable shopping experience, and increasingly to connect consumers with producers.

In fact, their thriving "farm-market-like" produce section is built on relationships with local produce growers that have been developed over the past 15 years. The produce is often labeled not just by where it was grown, but who the grower is. They even have a clock they set in the growing season to show shoppers when the next fresh batch of corn will arrive from so-and-so's farm, for example.

"It's a give and take relationship," notes produce manager Brad Fesolovich. "They'll call me and tell me what seed prices are looking like this year and I'll call them and ask how the crops are looking."

Relationship sales have born fruit for the produce industry. And it's a concept the dairy industry is just beginning to get its arms around. Of course collection, sales and distribution for dairy involve more steps and more processes between the producer and the store shelf, but the concept is still rooted in the importance of first building those relationships.

That's precisely what has happened since the 2009 Pennsylvania Dairy Summit a little over a year ago. What started as a guest appearance by Ken Cassara, Wegman's vice president of dairy and frozen food, has evolved into a relationship between Wegman's and Pennsylvania dairy producers, with each learning from the other.

Cassara initiated multiple farm visits last summer where store staff visited dairy farms in the Commonwealth, and he returned to the 2010 Summit last month, not only as a speaker, but also brought some of the store managers, including Keith Grierson, at the Wilkes-Barre location.

Working with the Center for Dairy Excellence (CDE), Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania (PDMP) and the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council (ADADC), Wegman's tours for dairymen were scheduled and Summit goers could select one of half a dozen locations over the past four weeks to visit.

This week, the tour was here in Luzerne County.

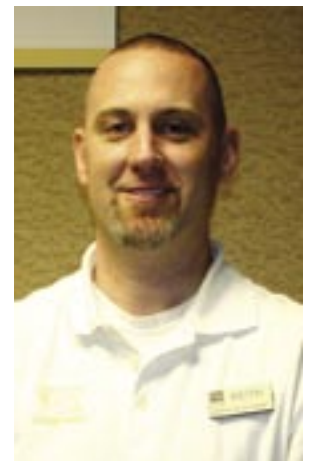
"This is one of a few retailers we as dairy farmers can interact with to get more of our story out there in a positive way to consumers," said PDMP president Glenn Gorrell who attended the program at the Wilkes-Barre store Tuesday, March 16.

The relationship began with shared values and it has grown into a CDE / ADADC program for telling the dairy farm story with photos of farms and farm families hanging prominently above the dairy case.

Half a dozen people attended the tour Tuesday, and were



(Above) Wegman's shoppers, in Wilkes-Barre, reach for milk beneath banners depicting Pennsylvania dairy farms. (Bottom left) PDMP president Glenn Gorrell, who operates a dairy farm in Bradford County, takes the tour at the Wegman's in Luzerne County. (Bottom right) Keith Grierson, store manager at the Wegman's in Wilkes-Barre.



treated to a prepared hot lunch as well as an informational program after the tour with Melissa Osgood, corporate communications specialist with ADADC and Alan Zepp, director of risk management programs with the CDE.

Grierson talked about Wegman's commitment to food safety and sanitation standards, reinforcing a shared value with dairy producers who have similar standards.

As we walked through the store and talked with various department managers, it became clear that people stay here and love what they do. The average time of service among the employees at this location is 12 to 13 years. Wegman's promotes ongoing learning opportunities for their employees. In the cheese department, for example, managers are sent to Wisconsin, or France, even Italy, to see how cheese is made and to learn about the different varieties.

In each department, the managers and employees make it their business to know their food. In the meat department, we

learned that Country-of-Origin labeling (COOL) is not much of a hassle, and consumers like the fact that the meat and produce are labeled. In the produce department, it was impressive that the manager knew the ins and outs of Integrated Pest Management, for example.

We heard that organic and "grass fed" are food attributes more and more of the Wegman's clientele are looking for. The store's sales by unit are 6% organic, with organic representing 20% of the store's sales.

Whatever your philosophy on production practices in agriculture, this type of relationship-building and information exchange is healthy for the dairy industry. The more opportunities dairy farmers have to interact with people down the value chain, the better everyone understands each other. And the consumer is the biggest winner. Shared values that focus on producing high quality food and planting positive seeds of knowledge, ultimately bear fruit for everyone involved.

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