

THE MANAGER

GENERATION NEXT

By Kathy Barrett

These owners have a plan in place to recruit, train and retain young people as employees on their dairies

Hire values; teach skills

Dairy producers John Knopf and John Mueller use “hire values; teach skills” as a guiding principle for recruiting young people to work in their businesses. Realizing fewer people are raised on farms these days, the dairymen look beyond the traditional farming community for employees and are prepared to teach farming skills.

“I have a very young staff,” says Knopf, who milks 500 cows on his Canandaigua dairy. “They bring a lot of energy and intellectual curiosity to the business.”

What most of Knopf’s employees didn’t have when first coming to FaBa Dairy was an on-farm background. The positive values they possessed – willingness to learn, work hard, responsibility and treat others well – more than compensated for what these young people lacked in farm experience.

“Without preconceived ideas about how things should be done, they challenge my thinking in ways that help the farm,” Knopf says.

He recruits young people through word-of-mouth, relying on his present staff as the primary source of referrals. Very often young people come to the farm because they are friends of an employee, a family member or a classmate.

“Good people know good people,” Knopf says.

He also takes the time to go to where young people are, whether it’s events locally or at ag colleges. If there’s an opportunity to speak or be part of a panel for an ag program, Knopf makes time to participate. FaBa also offers internships for students studying dairy. All these avenues provide Knopf with opportunities to meet young people who someday might make a good fit for his business.

Hiring the right person is the first step to integrate young people successfully into FaBa Dairy. After that, Knopf sees his role as that of a coach. “We work together to set goals, and I let employees know they are responsible for the results,” he says.

“The most difficult thing I had to

learn was how to stand back and let people make mistakes,” Knopf adds. “I’ve learned that accountability only comes when you allow people the opportunity to fail. You can’t always try to fix things. People with a good value set will not point fingers or make excuses. They will learn from their mistakes, improve their decision-making skills and become effective problem solvers.”

Communicating with his younger employees has stretched Knopf. He’s learned to text message but still steers clear of Facebook.

All in all, Knopf tries to remember what it was like to be a young person just beginning a career in dairy farming. By keeping things in perspective and remembering “I need them and they need me,” Knopf and FaBa Dairy reap the benefits of having an excellent staff with lots of promise.

Looking for 100% effort

John Mueller and Kevin Nedrow of Willowbend Farms and Spring Hope Dairy enjoy bringing young people into their business. The two Clifton Springs dairy facilities, combined, milk 2,500 cows and raise 2,100 heifers.

“We are constantly on the lookout for young people who are willing to give 100% effort, are honest, show up on time and are able to work as a team,” says Mueller. “If the young person starts with those qualities, the technical aspects of the farm can be taught.”

The partners agree with Knopf that to find good young people you need to go where they are.

“We haven’t used ads in years,” Nedrow says. Their recruitment strategy includes word-of-mouth from current employees, neighbors and employees’ young family members. They attend youth-oriented programs, whether agricultural or local events.

The two dairies employ about 50 people of all different ages and stages of career. This offers all

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John Knopf, Canandaigua, N.Y., has a young staff on his 500-cow dairy. “They bring a lot of energy and intellectual curiosity to the business,” he says.

FYI

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Telling dairy's story in the Facebook age
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Hauser also uses the site to inform family, friends, agribusiness contacts, employees and their friends and family about events on the dairy.

It might come as a surprise that potential hires are audiences to a farm's Facebook page. "The three top candidates for our last job opening had all 'liked' Table Rock's Facebook page to learn about the farm," Hauser says.

What tips does she have to develop and maintain a Facebook presence?

- Be clear and concise. "I try to limit the amount of text so people don't have to click for more information," Hauser says. "Alternately, I will spread some topics over a few days' posts to make sure the facts are well covered and presented in an accessible format."

- Always post a photo or video with your update. "The public needs to see images of what today's farmers and farming practices

look like," says Hauser. "Visuals also make your post more interesting and more attractive."

- Keep the page updated. Posting at different times of the day captures the attention of people checking accounts throughout the day and night. But 5 a.m. or earlier is when Hauser has time to enter new information and respond to questions.

- Remember your audiences. "Our audience ranges from those with no knowledge of agriculture, to family members in distant locations, to employees who know how the farm works," Hauser says. "I write my posts in hopes that a person with no knowledge of the dairy industry can understand my point."

Hauser is a bit of a Facebook pro, managing three other pages for community events. But if you're not comfortable with the technology, enlist your children, grandchildren, the high school's computer class or local dairy association for help.

Like any new technology, social media may seem unfamiliar at first but give it a try. Who's telling dairy's story? In less than 15 minutes with a laptop, camera or smartphone, it could be you. □

— Eleanor Jacobs contributed to this article.

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employees an opportunity to grow within the farm businesses. For young people, there is always something new to learn and ways to take on new challenges. A young person with interest and initiative can move up the ladder within the farm and take on new responsibilities.

Mueller and Nedrow look for educational programs that are geared to employees' responsibilities and interests. Training provides employees with opportunities for personal development and to bring ideas back to the dairies.

Education is ongoing. The partners encourage young staff members to attend college but don't consider it absolutely necessary to succeed on the dairies.

Employees' ability to own cattle at Spring Hope and Willowbend is another key to retaining young people. All employees have this option but for a young person who is just starting out and looking to develop some ownership, this can be particularly motivating.

First and foremost, treat young people with respect and encouragement once they're on the farm. "Don't chain them to the farm; be flexible with hours," Mueller says. "Remember what it was like to be that age; put yourself in their shoes."

Of course, you can't neglect the standard benefits such as fair pay, vacation, health benefits and retirement plans.

Mueller and Nedrow differ from Knopf on one point: Neither



Partners Barb Nedrow, John Mueller and Kevin Nedrow rely on word of mouth to bring young people willing to give 100% effort to their Clifton Springs, N.Y., dairies.

of them has learned to text message. In fact, Mueller doesn't even use a cellphone. When asked how he communicates with the young people on the dairy, he says, "We talk."

Very Stone Age but it works. The ability to talk through conflicts and work as a team is crucial when working with a large staff of different ages and backgrounds.

Bottom line for Mueller and Nedrow: Follow the golden rule. Treat people the way you would like to be treated. This is as true for working with young people as it is with anyone else. □