

Living the Brand and the Bonds

Siblings Chris Felosky and Laura Wilkas model family commitment and brand promise at their 11-branch New York dealership.

Meet the brother-sister team that is making its mark on Monroe Tractor, a family-owned Case agriculture and construction equipment dealership with 11 locations throughout New York state. While each took a different path to leadership positions within the dealership founded by their grandfather, they're on the same page as far as what it's going to take to continue the growth of the 65-year-old brand. Chris Felosky, 39, in his 14th year with the company, was recently named general manager of the Agricultural team. Laura, 36, joined Monroe Tractor in 2011 as marketing manager. Founder Henry

Hansen just recently retired as chairman of the board and CEO. His daughter, Janet Felosky, (mom of Chris and Laura) is the current CEO and president.

Growing up, Chris worked summers at Monroe Tractor's main branch in Rochester, N.Y., and always had an idea that he wanted to work for the company; but he also wanted to explore other career opportunities. After graduating from the University of Delaware he worked in banking and then in sales for Paychex payroll service. "I really liked selling, but what I didn't like about selling the payroll service is that it wasn't relationship selling – it

was about getting the business, and operations would take over from there," he said. In 2001, he took a sales position at Monroe Tractor in Rochester, and has assumed increasing responsibilities ever since. For Laura, the decision to join the dealership was more difficult. It all started when Chris decided they needed someone to bring in new ideas and more professionalism to the marketing position. "The first person who came to mind was my sister," he said. When he

The brand promise is far more than a slogan.

approached her about the opportunity, she was enjoying a successful career with office supply retailer Staples, headquartered in Boston. "I was hesitant because I was feeling really good about my position at Staples. I was also worried about the dynamics of working with my mom and brother – I didn't want our relationship to change. Lastly, I didn't want to uproot my family."

When Chris sent her the job description, she promised him she would at least look through it. She quickly realized she was far more invested in the success of the family business than she had first imagined. "I came to understand that it was the right decision for me," said Laura. After working remotely at the onset of the job, she now also works at the headquarters for one week each month.

More Than a Brand

"It is getting to the point where I need to figure out if I want to continue in the marketing role or if I want to play a bigger role and move back," said Laura. When she started the job Laura found that some of the branches were marketing independently and there was a clear lack of strategy. "There was a need to build consistency and continuity across all 11 stores," she said. Developing consistent messaging and a consistent brand promise to our customers became the priority. "It was recognized that we needed to bring everyone together and represent one company not 11 separate companies," she added.

CHRIS FELOSKY AND LAURA WILKAS

Monroe Tractor

Age: Chris 39 and Laura 36

ABOUT MONROE TRACTOR

11 New York Locations:

Construction – Albany, Buffalo, Rochester (corporate headquarters), Syracuse

Construction & Ag – Binghamton, Elmira,

Agriculture – Adams Center, Auburn, Batavia, Canandaigua, Hornell

Years in Business: 65

Brands Represented: Case Construction Equipment, Case IH, Wirtgen, Doosan, Leeboy, among others



Laura's experience in corporate branding helped convince the management team there was value in developing a more consistent brand as they took steps to take the company to the next level. Both siblings believe that differentiation today is created less in the equipment and more in the way the dealership delivers on the promise to keep its customers working.

Balancing Family and Work Relationships

When you talk to Chris and Laura, it becomes rapidly evident that family means everything to these two. The day CED spoke with them, they were excited about the arrival of a new family member – their younger sister's first child.

"Our grandfather set the role of the family as the most important thing," said Laura. My mother has the same values – that family comes first."

Laura says making a transition from a sibling relationship to a professional relationship takes some effort. "It is your first instinct to respond to your brother as your brother, because he's been your brother longer than he's been anything else in your life." She had to learn to work on responding to him as a professional in the workplace.

Chris experienced similar challenges. "It took me some time to look at her as a counterpart in the business, not as just my sister," he said.

He added that he's grateful the dealership isn't filled with arguing or difficult relationships. "That is one of the nice things about our family business. I think it makes it easier."

For these two, work and family are clearly integrated. Talking about the family business around the dinner table is something they both enjoy. "It's our passion," said Chris.

Although she doesn't report to her mom in the business, Laura says it's easy for her work world and personal world to overlap, and it's important to keep the context straight. "I have to keep in mind whether I am talking to her as Janet, as my mom, or as my friend," she said.

Chris says he found a role model in his grandfather. "Just being around him and seeing how he would act with customers and employees," he recalled. "He always said, 'take care of the customers and the business will grow.'"

Today, Chris is proud of the company's last four years of consecutive growth. In addition, he helped grow the parts and service business by adding and managing a team of product support reps throughout the territory.

For Laura, seeing the branding efforts come to fruition has been rewarding. "It is one thing to tell employees about it, but it's another thing to see them embracing it in their everyday interactions with customers," she said. In addition, she recently led the efforts to establish the company as a certified woman-owned business in New York state.

Keys to Success

The two siblings have similar beliefs when it comes to the importance of communication and having a clear vision. "Nearly all problems a business has result from a lack of communication," said Chris. "We try to be very open. We don't hide anything from employees. We encourage employees to interact and challenge us."

Laura agrees. "People should feel that they can go to anyone. It is important to keep all forms of communication open so that everyone has a voice."

The brand promise is far more than a slogan. It's a way of doing your job and being there for the customer. Monroe Tractor wants employees who are problem solvers, energetic and want to help.

"The only way we are going to differentiate ourselves is by taking care of the customer better than anyone else," said Chris.

The Future

While Chris and Laura continue to delve into their leadership roles, they can and do turn to their Mom, Janet Felosky, for inspiration and advice. While no formal announcement of a change of ownership has been made, you can expect any future transition to be as well planned and executed as the one that occurred from father to daughter.

"She wants to make sure we're doing exactly what she wants and that there is a smooth transition," said Laura, who added: "She's not ready to retire. She loves what she's doing."

Apparently it's contagious. ■

LEADER OF LEADERS

Laura Wilkas recently took on a leadership role with AED's new young leaders group. A dozen young dealer executives met during the AED Summit to share their ideas about how AED can meet their needs as future leaders at their companies. The group elected Wilkas to chair the Future Leaders Council, and chose Brian Meisen from Reynolds-Warren Equipment as vice chair.

Wilkas says she is looking forward to the opportunity to network and learn from peers at other dealerships who are not competitors. "As a family-owned business it is difficult to get unbiased feedback," she said.

AED Regional Manager Phil Riggs facilitated the February meeting, which, in addition to the new leadership, was attended by: JB Closner, Closner Equipment; Brooke Tyler IV, Tyler Equipment Corp; Katie and Chris Anderson, Anderson Machinery; Jeff Bonomo, Indy Equipment; Corey Vander Molen, Vermeer MidSouth; Jonathan Campbell, Wheeler Machinery; Jonathan Berry, The Berry Companies; Remington Lawyer, Star Equipment; and Matt McGowan, Cowin Equipment.

All future leaders are encouraged to attend AED's Leadership Academy in Napa, Calif., Aug. 25-27 at the Meritage Resort.



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