

# 30 years later, Expo still special for Sikkema Equipment

BY PAUL W. JACKSON

When Dennis Sikkema starts to put himself – his needs, his desires, his bottom line – at the center of his farm equipment business, there's always a mistake lurking, ready to knock him off his pedestal.

"People would say this is the wrong way to run a business, but I honestly rarely think about the bottom line," said Sikkema, one of few MSU Ag Expo exhibitors who've been there every year since it began.

"That may sound a little pious, but to be honest, my heart and soul are into wondering how I can make this guy standing in front of me successful," he said. "In the long run, when someone becomes successful with your help, that's success."

In 1979, Sikkema and his fledgling business – Sikkema Equipment, with locations today in Byron Center and McBain – were aspiring to find success when he brought a wooden conveyer, a fan, a free stall divider and a dairy feed cart to the first official Ag Expo on MSU's campus. Since then, Sikkema has been faithful to Expo and never missed a year.

"I remember that first one well because it was so hot," he said. "I don't think anyone had thought of a tent, so I sat there and took the heat, and I remember that the few people who came really appreciated it. I sold a few pieces, but more important than that, I was excited because I had a new business, and I had a venue. The people who came to that first show were very engaging. It was more than a day off for them. They were curious."

Curiosity is a requirement if today's Ag Expo participants want to get the most from their time, Sikkema said. It's also driven his business to develop new products and solutions custom-fitted for clients. For example, the StepSaver crowd gate, designed by Sikkema soon after that first Ag Expo, now has six models to fit a variety of animal handling needs. And even for the casual



**Team members of Sikkema Equipment include, from left, Bob Schuurman, Scott Turner, Bob Deacon, Mike Dustin and Dennis Sikkema. The company celebrates its 30th anniversary this year along with Expo.**

attendee, it is curiosity that makes a trip to Expo worthwhile, Sikkema said.

"Compared to 30 years ago, agriculture has better equipment and machines, and an ability to do things at a much higher level of production," he said. "That speaks well about the folks who are curious – those who read at night and study and develop themselves and their businesses. Those people get the most out of Expo. I'd recommend that people follow their lead and come with a list of what bothers them and tend to the list. If they're talking with friends or hurrying to be somewhere, they can walk right by an answer they may need. Finding those answers is at least part of the intent of the show. I also look at it as a place whereby friendships are renewed, and our interest in our customers are renewed. It's helpful to people to come to see us, and even if they have a complaint, I'm eager to hear it. People who have bought from me in the past can stop and see what's changed about the product they bought, and many times we can give them inexpensive updates to improve it."

Constantly seeking improvement is one thing. Surviving and thriving even in the tough times is what makes agriculture –

and Sikkema Equipment – resilient.

"Many times, during the good times when you have excess, you don't develop," he said. "For us, even after we'd taken shots from our competitors, we were stuck on certain ways of doing things. We believed in what we were doing, but when you start to lose business or your competitors take it away, you start redesigning things in your head."

That's why the present state of the economy doesn't bother Sikkema much.

"I think even the hard economic times we're going through now in this country are not all bad," he said. "They're not pleasurable, but they do make you reconsider your actions. I go back to the curse of Adam. When he was released from the Garden of Eden, his curse was to pull weeds. Curses like that attach themselves to your life. If you had things perfect all the time, you would not appreciate what you have. To me, the hard times are a good thing. During these times, you can't sit still. The demands of business are crushing, but for the sake of my employees – whose professional skills have never been greater – we're poised well to learn new things because of the tough economy."

The people still working in agriculture are good at what they do, and through the advent of the computer, they can manage business and source products in a way they couldn't 30 years ago."

Through all the changes at Expo and in the farm economy, Sikkema has remained philosophical about change, and adapted to it.

"There's a choice Michigan ag has," he said. "Do we hide under a bushel basket or address change and make sure our products are good?"

If change means serving the needs of ever-growing farms, Sikkema is prepared for that. But he'll never forsake the small and medium-sized farmers.

"Our focus tends to be more intense on the needs of the development side," he said, "but the smaller guy is still as important to us as the next guy. In fact, during the last six months, some of the smaller operators have helped sustain us. They're more insulated from the economic downturns, because they don't have the big expenditures, and are positioned better for a downturn in milk prices. But we appreciate anyone who's putting forth the effort to stay in agriculture."

Through all the ups and downs, Sikkema believes agriculture can learn a lesson from this nation's early history.

"To me, the advent of the large farm has been very much like when the British introduced themselves to Native Americans," he said. "They were living very well here, then along comes this new guy who tells them 'you're all wrong, that you have to develop the way we have.' Well, those Native Americans had probably never seen a stone house or a fireplace or a roof, so they had no basis to tell if the new guy was right or wrong. They just knew he was offensive. I think many of the traditional family farms feel that same way about the big new farms. But it's encouraging to see smaller farms develop along with the big guys and adapt to better systems and techniques. What's discouraging to me is when I see people dedicated to their businesses at the cost of their own families. When they're constantly working, they're not with their families. When they're not engaged with the community or socially, to me that is painful. They miss what's really fun about life, and if they put the farm on a pedestal, they lose their lives. That's not a cost anyone should pay."

With that philosophy, Sikkema, who started his business with \$200 and a plot

at the inaugural Expo, said he admires farm families who maintain a business - and respect for each other - generation after generation.

"I could have had that option as a kid, but I had my mind made up that I would start something from nothing," he said. "I think when you have a lot to start with, and you jump right into the middle of it, you don't always develop the way you should."

Which brings us back to what Sikkema believes is the right way to develop, as a business owner and a human being.

"My philosophies are driven by my faith," he said. "Every day I exist, I'm cared

for and watched over. God has been good, and has shown me that when I put myself in the center of things; when it's all about me, I make my biggest mistakes. If you find yourself in a situation where you're running your business for yourself, you'll end up with yourself."

By contrast, Sikkema said he's taken shots from competitors at least in part because his willingness to sacrifice self for his customers and employees is becoming a rare commodity.

"Many times my competitors win, and it's not hard for someone to say that they'll

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