



MARYLAND

A Trusted Name

An Interview with Jim Perdue, Chairman, Perdue Farms

EDITORS' NOTE Like his father, Frank, Jim Perdue grew up in the family business, but didn't decide to make it his business right away. He thought at first of becoming a marine biologist. In fact, he earned his Ph.D. in fisheries but, in 1983, he accepted his dad's invitation to return to the family business, joining the company as an entry-level management trainee. After working many different management jobs in just about every area of the company, and earning his master's degree in business along the way, Perdue became chairman in 1991 and also took over as advertising spokesperson.



Jim Perdue

COMPANY BRIEF Perdue Farms (perduefarms.com) is a third-generation, family-owned, U.S. food and agriculture company. Through their belief in responsible food and agriculture, they are empowering consumers, customers, and farmers through trusted choices in products and services. They focus on continuously improving everything they do, constantly learning, and sharing those insights across different production methods. That innovative approach is driving change throughout the company and onto farms. This continuous advancement is leading the company toward their vision of becoming the most trusted name in food and agricultural products. The PERDUE® brand is the number-one brand of fresh chicken in the U.S., and Perdue AgriBusiness is an international agricultural products and services company.

Would you discuss the heritage of Perdue and how it has evolved to where it is today?

My grandparents, Arthur and Pearl Perdue, started their typical family-farm business in 1920, selling table eggs to customers in New York City. They then switched to selling chicks to other farmers. When my dad, Frank, joined the company in 1939, he was only the second full-time employee – so the growth rate in those early years was relatively slow.

It was dad who took the company to the next level, first by getting into the grain business to ensure he had fresh corn for chicken feed, then by introducing the PERDUE® brand. The things Frank and the PERDUE® brand stood for – providing the best possible quality and service, keeping their word, and treating others with respect – didn't come by accident. Dad got those values from Arthur Perdue, and built on that by teaching us to listen to consumers and customers.

Today, our company vision, which is, “to be the most trusted name in food and agricultural products,” and the values that guide our decisions – quality, integrity, teamwork, and stewardship – define how we carry out our strategies. The things we're doing, such as no antibiotics ever and elevating animal care, are because we want to continuously earn the trust of consumers, customers, farmers, and other stakeholders.

Perdue's operations consist of Perdue Foods and Perdue AgriBusiness. Would you highlight these business areas and the growth opportunities for each segment?

Perdue Foods is focused on premium, branded proteins with attributes relevant to today's consumers. This is clear through our acquisitions of Coleman Natural Foods and Niman Ranch, the move to no antibiotics ever, increased organic production, and the transformation of the way we raise animals.

The grain and oilseed business will always be the core of Perdue AgriBusiness, but that business continues to diversify geographically and into adjacent businesses. We're building a grain receiving and soybean crushing plant in Pennsylvania, which will provide the state's farmers with a local market for their grain, and support livestock farmers with soy meal produced in state. We're opening a trading office in Brazil, which will increase direct sourcing of corn, soybeans, and other commodities from Brazilian farmers, improving our ability to supply international and U.S. customers year-round.

We're also working directly with farmers to produce specialty seeds, including a soybean that yields a trans-fat-free oil for food processing and restaurants, and rapeseed, which provides oil for food, pharmaceutical, and cosmetic uses. We have a dairy feed supplement that increases milk production, and organic fertilizers, so there's a vast diversity to Perdue AgriBusiness.

Perdue AgriBusiness is also helping farmers convert to organic grain production, which supports our organic poultry business.

Where is innovation taking place at Perdue and how critical is innovation to the company's future success?

New products are the lifeblood of any company, and that is why we built the Perdue Foods Innovation Center for new product development, packaging innovation, and improving existing products.

It's also very important that we remain a learning organization. Many of the recent changes in our company have come about because of what we've learned from Coleman Natural Foods and Niman Ranch.

The most important part of innovation gets back to the heritage of our brands: listening and responding to consumers. If something is important to them, it's important to us, and we have to be willing to change and innovate.

Perdue has been a leader in regard to corporate responsibility. How do you focus these efforts and do the areas you support align with Perdue's business?

We have a platform: “We believe in responsible food and agriculture,” with commitments to responsible actions in every aspect of our business, and with all of our stakeholders. Again, when we look at our vision – “to be the most-trusted name in food and agricultural products” – responsibility naturally follows. Environmental stewardship is so important that we've incorporated it into our annual bonus program.

Perdue is headquartered in Maryland and has been actively engaged in the state. What do you see as the strengths and advantages of Maryland from a business standpoint?

Maryland is our home, and the modern U.S. broiler industry began on Delmarva. Our corporate office is across the street from the farmhouse where Arthur and Perdue raised their first chickens, and where dad was born. He raised my sisters and me in a house 50 feet from the office, so it's an important part of our heritage. Maryland, and the rest of Delmarva, is also within hours of major markets in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, which is important when we have a fresh product.

How do you define the key traits that make for an effective CEO today?

I'm the head cheerleader and I believe strongly in teamwork. My most important role, though, is to make sure we're staying true to our values and heritage, and to protect those values as we carry out strategies for the next century.

Perdue has achieved great success and is consistently an industry leader. Do you take moments to reflect and celebrate the wins or are you always looking at what's next?

We realize that success is accomplished through the efforts of our associates. If we do well, we pay a bonus at year's end to all 21,000 associates in the company, but we also know we can't sit still. As Will Rogers said, “Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.” ●