

Big Enough To Get The Job Done



# SEEDING SUCCESS

one, Yet Small Enough To Do It Right



## BUSINESS LEADER OF THE YEAR

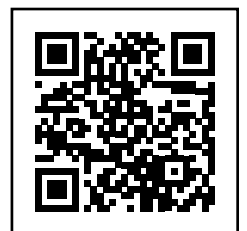
# Beck Guides Ag Industry Power

By Tom Schuman

Stroll through the expansive Beck's Hybrids operation in northern Hamilton County and one will find no shortage of inspirational messages. Speak to CEO Sonny Beck for any period of time and many of those same sayings seamlessly flow into the conversation.

In other words, the "words" are much more than terms or expressions that are placed on paper and forgotten. They are the driving force behind the largest family-owned seed company in the country – one that has experienced tremendous growth over the past quarter century.

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View Award Video





The first tractor Sonny Beck drove, at age 5, is recalled in this display with a historical message and a display of the Farmall, a 1938 model purchased in 1937 – the year Beck’s Hybrids was started by his father and grandfather.

Sonny Beck was born three years after his father and grandfather founded the company in 1937. That was a result of Purdue University offering three acres worth of this “great new invention,” hybrid seed, to anyone who wanted it. Sonny earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Purdue, returned to the family operation a short time later and has led – or maybe more appropriately been behind the wheel of – one of Indiana and the nation’s leading business success stories.

But what about those sayings. A few examples:

- “We are going to help farmers succeed.” That was part of Sonny’s 1992 State of the Company message to the Beck team. It came at a time when he was writing a paper on the future of the approximately 300 seed companies in the industry and calculated that only a third would survive over the next decade. Helping farmers was how Beck’s was going to be among the survivors.
- “Find out what you do best and do more of it.” This was part of the strategy for helping farmers succeed. “We decided to expand our testing and practical farm research to show farmers how they can make more money using the products they already had,” Sonny recalls. In addition, companies with new discoveries (herbicide or insect resistant products as examples) flocked to Beck’s to be part of their research efforts.
- “Learn from the mistakes of others, because you won’t live long enough to make them all yourself.” This was a lesson Sonny learned from his father, Francis, and

one he still utilizes today in his decision-making process.

- “The only truly sustainable competitive advantage is the ability to learn and adapt faster than your competition,” from of the 2009 State of the Company address. Asked if Beck’s does indeed move faster, Sonny, now the CEO, points to his management colleagues. “It’s faster. We’ve all been together since 1992. We all have our unique abilities and strengths; that’s what makes a good leadership team.”

Scott Beck, Sonny’s son and company president, is a key member of that team. He says, “Having him as a father and mentor through all these years has helped me to grow and develop. At the same time, we challenge each other on different points. We may not always agree on every issue or decision, but we have a relationship where we can talk through things. That makes it much more enjoyable.”

- “We are going to be a large company that still feels small.” This came in 2016 from Scott, who was the 12th employee when he was hired in 1987 (there are more than 580 members of the Beck team today). It demonstrates the evolution from a 1970s company slogan that states Beck’s is “big enough to get the job done, yet small enough to get it right.”

Sonny believes the company’s Attitudes and Actions – teamwork, integrity, innovation, adaptability, commitment and passion – allow that phrase to ring true. “It got to the point six or seven years ago that

we said, ‘How do you maintain this culture of helping each other, helping your teammate and helping your customers.’ Most corporations find that very difficult as they get larger.

“We took all our policy books and narrowed it down to one page – those six items. That is the culture we live by, what we interview by, what we hire by, what we evaluate you by and what we part ways by if it doesn’t work out.”

### Simple approach

Others view success for Sonny and Beck’s as a natural result of several straightforward attributes.

“He personifies all the qualities, all the things that make someone successful,” shares Mitch Daniels, president of Purdue, who also terms Sonny ‘infallibly constructive’ in his service on the university’s board of trustees. “You start with the business philosophy of doing the right thing, doing right by the customer and the business will sort itself out along the way.”

Tom Bechman, editor of *Indiana Prairie Farmer*, has written about Midwest agriculture since 1981. He calls Beck’s a “business with high ethical and moral standards. That’s something that is disappearing, and I think people appreciate (companies that still have) that. You can trust them. A lot of it comes back to family values, treating people with respect. Sonny is just very shrewd, very smart. He makes informed decisions.”

Those early 1990s decisions required Beck’s to evolve in order to be a survivor. For the business, Sonny says, “We used to be a production company that happened to

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market our products; now we're a marketing company that happens to produce most of our products." For him personally, the change meant, "I parked my boots for my 8 to 5 job, but could still go out and scout the fields at night."

It wasn't a simple transition as he admits, "I was 50 years old before I ever got involved with a lot of things outside the farm."

But it was a critical one. "A good part of the reason we're here today – still surviving and thriving," according to Scott, "is his ability to look ahead and see, 'What do we have to do now to be in the place we want to be in five years, 10 years.' It's recognizing that we are growing and changing and we have to be adaptive."

Prompted to describe his typical day, 75-year-old Sonny outlines getting to the office at 7:30 a.m. to talk with team members, extensive meetings, taking the opportunity to check on the production and/or processing sides of the business and additional activities in the evening.

"I work best working later. I love it," he shares. "I'm okay on five, six hours of sleep. If I didn't love it, I wouldn't do it. I love the fields, the production side, but I've grown to love planning a lot."

Gary Reynolds, owner and president of Reynolds Farm Equipment, is a few years younger than Sonny but says they have been friends since their 4-H days. Reynolds, in business in Fishers since 1955, moved its headquarters to Atlanta near Beck's in 2014.

"What I like about Sonny is the intangible that not only has he set the bar for the seed industry, he set it for anybody else that relates to agriculture. Do I keep our places a little cleaner because Sonny keeps his clean? Yes. Do we worry about grading the stone on the lot because his is manicured? You bet. When it comes to philanthropy, he doesn't tell everybody to give, but because he gives, you're willing to give. It's a quiet standard, but it plays well."

## Personal touch

Beck's has always brought customers to its operation to showcase the latest research or products. It continues to grow its market share in Indiana and the four surrounding states. The company also now does business in Iowa, Missouri, Tennessee and Wisconsin. A new private hangar dedicated in September at the Indianapolis Executive Airport will support the nearly 2,000 flights that are used for attracting and retaining customers.

Becknology Days is a three-day showcase that brings more than 12,000 farmers and customers on-site. As the crowd grows on a sunny Thursday in August for the first of what will be six President's Message sessions, Sonny smiles and greets people who patiently wait just to shake his hand and share a few words. He hurries, joined by other team members, to set up additional chairs as the steady flow of listeners continues.

During Sonny's portion of the presentation, he documents the ongoing consolidation of the major players in the industry. He shifts to some of the advantages Beck's offers, "selling" his guests in a soft-spoken, effective manner. The line of well-wishers resumes as he concludes before he rushes off to thank the farmers and their families waiting in the food line that stretches outside the building.

Asked later if he enjoyed the sixth presentation as much as that first one, he quickly chimes in, "Oh yeah, because you've got different people there. I didn't used to like to speak. My wife was the more natural social person. But in the 1990s, they helped me realize I've got to be more visible, do more things."

Doing more today includes working with young people. While talented interns help Beck's get work accomplished, the real benefit, according to Sonny, is "helping students learn what passions they have, what business they should be in or what job they should have."

Students often ask him about the key to being successful in business. His answer is direct and aligns with the company philosophy.



Research, from the fields and the lab to production, plays a major role in the Beck's mission of helping farmers succeed.

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Becknology Days attendees, with a company reminder on the wall, receive updates from both Sonny and Scott Beck.

“Make the guy ahead of you look good. Don’t make your supervisor look bad thinking the boss might promote you to his job. Make your supervisor look good so he gets the heck out of the way and you can take his job – or he’s the one who’s going to recommend you for a raise.”

Sonny’s love for basketball comes out when he describes teamwork as not needing five shooters or five 7-foot centers. Or when discussing his current role, he gives the example, “Maybe I’m not as good a shooter, but I’m still a great defensive person or a great point guard.”

In evaluating his career in a discussion with his wife, Sonny shares, “If I wasn’t a farmer, I wanted to be a coach, and if I wasn’t a coach, I almost could have been a professor. Farming is my passion; I got to do that. Then I got to assemble a team and help coach them in the 1990s; and now I love getting back and talking to interns, college kids, high school kids, because there is such an enthusiasm there. Maybe I can help them learn a little, and I actually get to do all three things.”

### Listen and learn

Francis, Sonny and Scott Beck are all winners of the prestigious Master Farmer award from *Indiana Prairie Farmer*. The longevity of an organization preparing for its 80th anniversary means something special for Daniels.

“One of my favorite things when in elective office was when we honored Indiana businesses that succeeded or thrived over 50, 75 or 100 years,” he reflects. “Maintaining a family-owned business in the second or third generation is so hard to do. I’m sure Sonny

would be the first to try and spread the credit, but we know it wouldn’t have happened without him.”

Reynolds says, “He’s extremely driven, but not to the point that he micromanages. He’s willing to let people do their thing. He intentionally went after the best people he could find. He’s kept them happy – let them do their jobs. And he never lost track of what’s going on out in the field.”

Bechman adds, “Sonny is a good farmer to start with and he’s a hard worker. He surrounds himself with quality people that have different strengths. Not only does he surround himself with good people, but he listens to them before making decisions.”

Scott Beck details how that listening extends to other areas of the business.

“He’s known as a pretty good negotiator. I think that’s because he really seeks to listen and understand what’s important to the other person or the other company – then finding what we can do as a business that supports their need while at the same allowing our needs to be met too.”

And just as Sonny learned valuable lessons from his father, Scott recalls one (of many) special times with his dad. It was in the Quonset – the name for a catch-all shop where a variety of work projects were completed.

“He told me at one point, ‘If I tell

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Sonny Beck enjoys building and growing relationships with the company’s customers.



Beck continues to focus on looking forward and being prepared for the next challenge or opportunity.

somebody I'm going to do something, I'm going to do everything I can to follow through with that.' That's a pretty simple statement," Scott contends, "but I remember it as if it was yesterday. It had an impact on me. I saw him live that out. I saw that not only spoken, but lived."

Bechman says he asked Sonny about seven or eight years ago if he ever thought about retiring. The response: "If I retired, I'd just go start another seed company so I might as well keep this one."

When asked a similar question for this story, Sonny sums up his status and offers perspective for all.

"When you're retired, you're supposed to be doing something you really love – I'm doing that right now. Some of these skills we talked about increase as you get older; some of your skills go down, Your ability to analyze the whole problem and bring life experiences in as well as new data – that can seem to not diminish and maybe get better. I think each person can figure out when they no longer add value.

"We're growing fast enough that I keep giving jobs off to other people and my son now keeps giving jobs off to other people," he continues. "But we keep thinking of new ideas we want to do. I'm always thinking about new projects.

"You wake up every day and play the hand the good Lord dealt you that day. If you don't like it, then try to make the hand better for the next day. But you have to play the one you got. You are responsible for today forward. Once you understand that, you can leave all the rest behind you."

Success and  
leadership  
like yours  
take vision.

We congratulate **Sonny Beck** for his esteemed recognition as the Indiana Chamber's Business Leader of the Year for 2016.

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