

Guiding Principles: Craig Yunker

By [Tanner Ehmke](#)

Craig Yunker and his son, Christian, are managing partners of a growing farm portfolio in New York consisting of about 6,000 acres of vegetables, corn, wheat, soybeans, cabbage, onions, green beans, peas, spinach and malting barley; a feedlot raising 4,000 head of dairy replacement heifers; and a 300-acre commercial sod farm.

Located between two metro areas of Buffalo and Rochester, the diversified agribusiness has maintained a path of growth and success since Craig's father, Carl, started the farm in 1951 with 18 dairy cows. Craig identifies 11 principles that have guided the family farm for three generations.

- 1. Hire the right people:** "The core is finding good people and letting them help the business grow. Your name doesn't have to be Yunker to be part of the farm."
- 2. Invest for synergy:** "Each business has a management team, budget, payroll and P&L, but they'll share equipment and truck drivers, depending on the season and the need."
- 3. Treat people right:** "My father always said, 'Treat other people so that when they walk away they're happy they did business with you.' I think that is a great deal of our success."
- 4. Engage with neighbors:** "Around here, we have a lot of neighbors that aren't involved in agriculture and we have a lot of landlords that are several generations removed from the farm. We try to let them know what we're doing with a newsletter."
- 5. Add value:** "We did a partnership with our town and dedicated 45 acres of sod to a sports park with 12 fullsize soccer fields. This last year we built a concession stand. That's a lot of fun and it added value."
- 6. Learn and adapt:** "We're copy cats. We look at what successful people do and try to adopt it."
- 7. Diversify:** "The corn and beans business cycles are not the same for the sod business. It has cycles, too, based on construction and home building, but it's not related to the agricultural cycle."
- 8. Communicate regularly:** "We meet with the crew every morning at 7 a.m. We want everyone to understand what's going on so they can help each other. That 20 minutes in the morning used to get my father upset. He thought they were sitting around doing nothing, but I like to take that time to communicate."
- 9. Serve your communities:** "We encourage our employees to be engaged in the community by serving on boards. That's good for community and us. We try to make the point that the farm is not why we exist. We farm so we can live full and meaningful lives with our families."
- 10. Take risks:** "We push the envelope in terms of leverage. That's why we've been able to grow. If we would have been conservative, we wouldn't have grown."
- 11. Let the next generation grow:** "I was very fortunate that my father was willing to let go of the reins and gave me as much responsibility as I wanted. I've done the same thing with Christian. There's a balance to it, but as he wants to take more responsibility, that's great with me."