

Will Steele

Frontera Produce Ltd.

By Pamela Riemenschneider

EDINBURG, Texas — It took some persuading for Will Steele to join the ranks of the produce industry.

A former State of Texas police officer with ambitions toward criminal law and possibly a job with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Steele said he had no intention of joining his father, Jim Steele, in his newly founded Frontera Produce Ltd., 15 years ago.

"He called me one day, I said 'no,'" Steele said. "He called me another day, I said 'no.' He called me about 15 more times and finally caught me on a day when I finally said 'yes.'"

That was about six months after the company was founded, and Steele has found his home there ever since, assuming the role of president this fall. Steele, 42, who is from the Rio Grande Valley area in Texas, has always been around agriculture. His father was in the produce packaging business before founding Frontera, and his grandfather was involved in the citrus and vegetable industry. Titles don't really describe people's roles at Frontera Produce, Steele said. "My management style is that I don't believe in management," he said. "It's a bad word. The key to success is finding and surrounding yourself with the best people you can." Steele said he and his father recognized they would need to bring in some brilliant minds to really make the company grow. "We recognized that with him being an ex-packaging guy and me being an ex-cop, and with the business changing as rapidly as it is, we'd better start finding people who are young and smart," he said. "Everybody had to be smarter than we were." Steele, with a sense of humor, said that wasn't too difficult a task. To that end, the company brought on Amy Gates as its chief financial officer and Ken Nabal as manager of its Florida imports office in Boca Raton in 2004. When the company named Steele president, Gates and Nabal were named vice presidents of administration and finance and sales and logistics, respectively. Gates said Steele's leadership is by example. "We're running everything as an equal rather than as a figurehead," she said. "He does as much as everyone else around here. You won't see the level of trust from ownership to management anywhere else." The model seems to be working just fine. In his new role as president, Steele said he can get back to his roots. He spends most of his time building grower relations and finding new deals. "Selling produce day-to-day was not my favorite, even though I enjoyed the interaction with people," he said. "The cool thing now is that my involvement is strictly on the ag end — being in the field, meeting new people and traveling to new countries." All of that travel is helping Frontera establish itself as a major player in Central and South American tropicals. Since its inception, the company has kept a track record of about 30% growth every year, Steele said. In the past few years, that growth has really ramped up. Last year, Frontera Produce also launched its own logistics arm and is focusing on optimizing ocean freight from Central and South America. Steele said the company's growth is due in part to attrition in the industry and Frontera's philosophy. "If you bring in brilliant people and let them work, good things are going to happen," he said. "You can't help but grow." Jim Steele said he is positive about the company's future under his son's direction. "Will has spent much time recruiting the right key management for the future of the company and I am looking forward to seeing what he and his team can accomplish in the next 15 years," he said. "It is an exciting time for Will and all of the folks at Frontera. I am very proud of him and each and every one of them." Will Steele said he can see similarities between the produce industry and law enforcement. "You have to have people skills," he said. "Law enforcement is similar to produce because every day is different. You don't know what situation you're going to go to walk into on a given day." The biggest challenges facing the industry — food safety and labor — need to be addressed by leadership, Steele said. "We have to unite and finally throw away the competitive garb that we're wearing and get together or some of us are going to fall," he said. "The strong can fall as easily as the weak." Frontera is involved as a steering committee member of the Produce Traceability Initiative and has sent representatives

to speak Washington, D.C., about the need for labor reform. The bottom line is that the industry needs to find solutions. "These are things we all need to get together and get done and do the right way because the government's not going to fix it," he said. "If we're going to try to let the government resolve our problems, we shouldn't be entrepreneurs."



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