

Starting and scaling an agricultural business.

The questions every farmer needs to ask of themselves and their market.

A white paper by,
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State of the Soil Media
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Intro

"I am not a farmer or a businessman; I am a creative. Farm businesses just happens to be my medium" -Nick Burton, November 2016

I am hopelessly fascinated by agriculture. What other profession has shaped the way we have changed from ancient hunter gatherers to building villages and the great cities of the world largely predicated on trade routes for agricultural goods? Pushing technology advancements since the dawn of time, humans first tools were used for feeding ourselves. Looking at the Ag-tech of today we get a glimpse of how important data collections and connectivity will pair with the unchanged hoe, shovel, and plow. No matter what happens, we will always be intertwined with our past.

Wars over fertile land and the success and failure of these armies because of the ability or inability to feed them has always changed the fate of our world. Famine and plagues that decimated crops have killed millions of humans. The malnourishment and weakened immune systems facilitated the spread of diseases killing more people on this Earth.

Today the modern nations are so filled with food surpluses it is common practice to throw away upwards of 30-40% of our food. Organic food waste makes up the second largest contributor to landfills and the highest source of methane emissions. Each month the U.S. averages 20 pounds of food waste per person per month. In 2016 we have approximately 325,010,000 people living in the U.S.. That's 6,500,200,000 pounds of food wasted per year. Estimates put world poverty levels at 3 Billion people.

In the food paradox, we have food celebrities, food television shows and entire networks, podcasts, books, blogs, contests, and eating champions. There are emerging entertainments based around food. Still today, food and quality abundance make a major jewel in a hot neighborhood or a city's crown.

In a world where food is both in shortage and abundance, where quality and diversity push limits of innovation, and where there is a life or death need, farmers get slapped in the face in many sectors of the commerce chain of events.

Farmers markets have increased in some reports as much as 78% from 2008-2017. while other reports show a slowing down of market growth.

Have we hit a peak, or have we found out that running a successful market is an actual skill possessed by very few? The demands of a market staff is an unthankful and underpaid job. In today's absorption of information, the need for experienced digital marketers is in high demand. Those who are the best are working for Fortune 500 companies, not the small town market.

The convergence of people who want market items with the income to spend on handcrafted farm goods is not intersecting at the levels necessary to consistently pump cash flow into farms operating at high costs. Fighting with a cheaper market coupled with extreme weather patterns takes its toll on these farms. Spend some time on various growing for market groups on social media forums. There is a bounty of hardship, confusion, and lack of support from the public that says they want these goods.

Many times, getting the word out about individual farms is passed on to market personal (often volunteering), and through no fault of their own, the messages needed to foster a reason to care is not getting to the right people who can support the markets beyond 'just enough to get by' sales.

A farm needs to know who to sell to, what to sell, how much these goods are worth, and how to repeat this time & time again. All of this as the rules continue to change. The buying public wants sophistication in advertising, entertainment, and quality. But the people coming to market, as valuable and consistent as the support is, want down home good value, deals, and permission to negotiate prices. Unfortunately, these negotiations are part of the narrative that needs to stop. Educating and entertaining people who can appreciate the art, varieties, and nutritional values need to be the new focus. Market farmers can sell the Fountain of Youth but have defaulted to a flea market mentality.

The discount mentality has changed the landscape of purchasing power. Traditional media isn't dead, but it is not trackable. These statements can be good news. Not everyone wants to buy at discount stores. Increasingly, people want to know their producers and if told the truth about the cost of production, will spend the cash for a higher quality product. But the farmer is responsible for knowing the true cost. Never before can a farmer in a field whip out a smartphone, take a picture with compelling writing, and with a clear call to action reach a targeted audience of fans and be collecting sales in minutes. Playing the digital marketing game is going to separate the new small ag leaders from the ones who refuse to change.

I say it's high time to take more pride in our craft, learn the psychology employed by the world's top marketing firms and shift our buying demographics. We can laminate about the good old days till the cows come home, but the buyers are getting younger with more disposable income. They want status. It's high time to deliver what is being asked. The restaurant industry has figured it out. Hospitality services, distilleries, and gender reveal parties are all indications that buying isn't about instant gratification, but connecting to an experience.

The following is how I see our industry from several vantage points. The field & protected environments of my farm, the auditoriums of tech & thought leader panel discussions, the ugly underbelly of internet rant rooms, prosperous farms who implement romantic ideas, outside industry analytics, selling, and marketing processes, and connecting as many dots together as I can. Because of all of the moving parts and advancements in ag-tech, media platforms, and consumer trends, this is rapidly becoming an all-consuming topic.

At what point can a farm be considered big Ag? With an umbrella as large as agriculture, which is to say this farm is big, or that one is small? How many acres do you farm? How many head of livestock do you raise? How much revenue did you make, more importantly profit?

This year, I have had the opportunity to travel to and meet one woman operations to a globally backed investment bank urban ag farm breaking technical barriers. I have interviewed the young leaders of vertical farming, and multi-generational family farms. I've been to farmers markets from the East to the West coast of the United States. I have stood in the middle of a 33-acre barn under one roof with 4500 milking cows. If my opinion matters, I can assure you not once have I seen two agricultural models or operations even remotely the same.

Our farm is a microscopic 4,920 square foot of protected culture between a high tunnel; indoor grow room and a gothic greenhouse. We grow both hydroponically and in soil. I am not in a metropolis, but rather in the sticks of Northeast Texas. My town is about 25,000 residents with another 17,000 in our county & surrounding area. Nick Burton, an agricultural nobody. I am not the best farmer in the world. But, if that is true, how and why are you reading this?

How did a guy who started pushing a lawn mower in a small town in 2002 while waiting tables at night get in your inbox, newsfeed, or internet search? How did I, who only began hydroponically growing in 2013 find a voice?

My greatest strength is a love affair with small ag and the desire to propel family and urban farms into the places and faces of people who simply must buy from these farmers. There will be no question of where else to buy farm goods but from these farmers that take care of the burning pains of a beyond-hungry clientele who appreciates what is being grown for them and cannot go on without it.

I am devoted to the small farmer. I am devoted to you whether you agree with me or not. I'm brash at times and sometimes a big softy. Unapologetic, open to learning, and hungry to know what makes everyone tick around the topic of food.

We have to start asking tougher questions and diving deeper.
Everyone wants to eat better. But do they?
We all want to shop locally. But do we? Every time?

People root for the underdog unless it's inconvenient.
People all want to be better spouses, parents, fiscally prudent, and educated. So, why are humans so self-destructive?

Why do women ignore their husbands to watch romance movies? Why do men eat nachos & drink beer while watching action movies full of fit heroes? Why do people let go of their dreams? In the middle of the night when, all of these anxieties creep up, why do people default to junk food when nutritional fuel rots in the crisper?

This is what your customers, and the people not buying your farm goods go through. Thousands of micro-decisions being made in a day. The status quo is to do what we are told. What we have been conditioned to do. We listen to authority figures, celebrities, and company mascots placed in your eyes & ears at the calculated right time via the way you have told the system you like your content served. TV, Social Media, Radio all consume the conversation. And even if you cut the cable, never check the mailbox, and smash your computer, the background noise of everyone you know will assuredly permeate your ears. Their reality is contagious. And it is carefully crafted and doled out with precision.

These pains are real, but swirl under the currents of a distracted society being spoon fed by a media machine ran not by big ag, but big business. And that my fellow farmers is the difference. There is Ag, and there is Agri-businesses started, funded, ran, marketed, and distributed by businesses, boards, and conglomerates.

What can I offer our industry? As an agricultural outsider, who honors our profession that built the world as we know it from the fertile crescent, has simply never compartmentalized the "this is how we have always done things" way of thinking.

I hope to share some observations I have been fortunate to get out and see. I encourage each of us to step out of routine & look to other industries. What makes a business tick? Can you be a part of a grassroots movement already gaining momentum but far from cresting? Can you tell me why you farm? Have you told your story to your clients in a way that matters to them?

I also implore you to hold each other up. This is not an easy life, and few understand the hardships small Ag endures other than another small farmer. We are currently being divided by legislation & labels. This industry will not have a king of the hill. No one farmer can feed everyone. There are space and need for all growers in all spaces growing in all methods.

Part of my process has been to immerse myself in forums, meetups, conferences, and online groups dedicated to market farming and evolving disruptive tech that will change the face of agriculture. I have had to retrain my ears to detect the patterns of problems new and existing farms face on a daily basis. Developing empathy and understanding to why people put up invisible barriers to their success has taken a toll on me and other people wanting to help small businesses. When you spend time listening to the same questions and resistance to help, and you give gentle guidance to deaf ears, it makes you develop a tough love approach. Often I feel like I am harsh when I am helping people through their struggles. But over time that brash, tough love has proven to be the most effective. So, if I'm off putting at times, just know it is because your pains are my pains, and I want you to find your best path. I may not be for everyone, as long as you find help somewhere, I'm happy for you.

The pains you have are the pains we all share. Business is hard; farming is hard. Combined, it's hard, but for most of us; there is just no another truth to life than to be a farmer. My hope? That the mistakes I've made and learned from can help you save time and money. Above that, the lessons and stories I can share will help you find peace in your work and give future generations inspiration to continue farming.

The local food movement seems to be breathing life into the lost arts of small plot production. If we can combine today's technology to grow better, safer, and sell more to the people, who will be our art's benefactors we all may be part of a great legacy. There isn't any fame and certainly no vast fortunes, but a profitable, honest, and happy life is beyond the reach of any royalty.

I ask a lot of questions of you here. I want to take you down some paths and thought processes you may have missed. This is a learning process that will never end. Enjoy the process.

Plant Seeds Daily.

Discussion Points:

How big do you want to be?

What niche needs to be filled?

Crops & Growing Methods

Growing Philosophy

Evaluating space, infrastructure, utilities, resources, and environmental issues

Facility

Staffing & Organization

Inventory Management

Packaging & Distribution

Market Strategy

Marketing Strategy

Funding

Future Market Share & Expansions

The intent of this white paper is to compare & contrast small family farming to the agri-business. Not for vilification of big Ag or martyrdom of small farms, but to illustrate there are lessons to be learned on both sides. Big Ag and the one person farm are all in the business to survive. Both have the ability to do a lot of good for humanity. Both can significantly impact their area of productions from economics to environmental impact.

The above discussion points were labeled as such very purposefully as this is and always will be an ongoing debate worth having if we are to be part of a solution.

How big do you want to be?

How to see your future and deconstruct that vision to form the steps to get there?

According to hortidaily.com in 2014 OrganicaWorld, Florida's then largest hydroponic greenhouse, was primed to have an output of 77,000 heads of lettuce per week. Where does 4,004,000 heads of lettuce go? I can assure you the business team, and investors at OrganicaWorld had this question not only answered, but secured contracts before the first seed were planted.

In my grow room we currently sit at 1300 holes of production. Average ten turns a year we put out a measly 13,000 heads or bunches of specialty greens. However, everything is sold before we plant via our distribution method. This also extends to our high tunnel & greenhouse of fruiting crops. And I am entirely happy with my farm.

Each farmer is different; we are all in various stages of life with different opportunities. I have met one person operations delivering via bicycle to facilities that own fleets of refrigerated semi-trucks. The happy farmers vs. the frustrated ones are not dictated by size, but by sales. Each of us has to determine what their vision of success looks like.

When Venture Capitalists are looking at expanding their portfolio they certainly would find my slice of happiness comical. However, I know Victory Gardens employs two full-time people other than myself year round and feeds over 100 modified-CSA clients every week at a local level. I can also tend to my other companies.

Some farmers want to do the most ecologically based farming they can & go to market, completely content with living the life of undernourished farmer living off the land. Some farmers are carrying a family legacy and cannot escape their agricultural DNA.

Other farmers struggle at every size level. We have all heard stories like the fall of Grant Family Farm, a Colorado ag operation that went through three bankruptcies according to the Denver Post in 2013. I know a good friend of mine who was forced to shut down because of real estate being sold out from beneath them. I see people set up week after week at my local market who draw minimal one-off customers rather than a stream of fans of their farm.

Are you a business person or a farmer? If you are a farmer, you better become business savvy pretty quick or plan to hire that out. Believe me; I am not without business sin myself. Very few people have a natural business sense and farming passion innately within them. I knew just

enough to be dangerous, and only after seeking out both business coaching and farm training was I able to connect the dots that mark a successful farm. I made every mistake there was to make, and I will pay for those educational opportunities. However, without triumphing over failures, we can't learn. That does not make the kick in the teeth hurt any less, but I am fortunate to make those mistakes with a small operation that can recover.

So, knowing how big you want to play, being aware of the amount of risk you can stomach while maintaining your options will play a part of your decision.

When VC's acknowledge that they know not all of their investments will be a home run they demonstrate their calculated risk, stress, and financial options.

With population estimates rising by over 12,673,000 from 2010-2015, and health risks like diabetes and heart disease increasing at alarming rates investing in agricultural pursuits like fresh local foods seems like a home run.

Urban sprawl only fuels the investment bonfires as farm lands are being subdivided daily. Sadly, we also lose lifelong land stewards every day as farmers and ranchers pass away taking with them a lifetime of practical agricultural knowledge.

The problem with these investments? High passions lead to panic investing with a perceived customer base. The ones who win, big or small, are the ones who can combine talents or build teams.

Growers, executive teams, engineering, compliance departments, marketing teams, media buyers, nutritionists, botanists, sales forces, distribution networks, legal, accounting, branding, financial resources, and more can all scale to fit the size of the farm. A one person farm can do it if forced to, but only if the knowledge of all of these inner workings is realized.

Small farms have luxury and constraints at the same time by keeping things straightforward and small.

Large farms require a tremendous input of cash and resources to go through construction, propagation, harvest cycles, distribution, and finally the first payments. It is a massive dip that can easily cripple a new venture if all contingencies are not planned for.

The missing link? The farm in the middle between CSA/Farmers Market vendors and the mass producer supplying national terminal markets.

Farmers realize to double their profits they have to grow many multiples beyond doubling in size. The two sweet spots are essentially two separate industries.

What niches need to be filled?

Knowing the what to produce for why, and why your clients want your product will be the foundation to build a successful farm legacy.

Once the size of a farm and risk evaluation has been considered, one can look into what crops are to be grown.

For the small farmer, sometimes the passion is ." the process. The desire to grow pineapples in Alaska or boutique radishes may turn into a dumpster fire pretty quick. For the benefit of this paper & to derail my soap-box rant we will just move on.

Driving crop production, we can look at what crops can be sold. This is not the time for guesswork. The size of the farm, production capacity, available skilled & unskilled labor, resources like utilities, roads, and water are all taken into consideration.

Weather, altitude, frost dates, and soil types can also dictate crop varieties. Regional tastes and demographics now come into play. Then outlets like farmers markets, restaurant density, and type, proximity to food hubs and terminal markets all need to be taken into account. Smaller farms would typically focus on a localized marketplace and a variety of crops; while the larger operations would look at wholesaling mono-crops or larger harvests.

For the small farm, the predicting of sales could prove to be the point of success or failure. No IPM regiment or pruning technique can beat predictable sales as profit.

Selling at terminal markets and distributors is another animal. These Markets, located in major metropolitan cities are where professional buyers of agricultural goods representing the large food distributors come to buy for restaurant chains, grocery stores, and even smaller outlets.

I am not one to comment on that as we are not practitioners. However, understanding the USDA terminal market reports even at my basic level has helped me direct some of my farms' operations and pricing.

The link: <http://cat.marketnews.usda.gov/cat/?shortcut=terminalMarket>, brings you to the USDA's Terminal market averages report. Within this customizable report, growers can see what agricultural goods (498 commodities as of 11/25/2016) are trading at in daily updated reports from 15 U.S. terminal market hubs.

Some of the information include:

- Commodity Type, further broken down by variety.
- Prices the commodity are currently trading at on the wholesale level.
- Certified Organic or not.
- Packaging, sizes, weights, and counts per container type.
- How the product was grown; field/greenhouse/hydroponic.
- Grade.
- Demand, quality, and availability.

You can set up alerts, and daily emails that fit your farms needs to keep up with pricing as this is a commodity market. Keeping up with demand and pricing fluctuations in this industry gives growers a unique advantage over the back yard or small operation grower.

Beyond terminal markets, other niches to be filled are local independent restaurant needs, community needs/tastes/capacity to buy, food trucks, farmers markets, individual or networked CSA programs, and specialty market outlets.

To find out where your farm can fill voids in your local market, you have to do what seems to fly over the heads of a lot of new growers. Market research. If you want to start a farm to sell at a farmers market, would it not be wise to visit your local market throughout the year and talk to people? Farmers markets are widely known as a community gathering place. It is okay to walk around and ask people questions. Even other vendors. Some other growers may clam up, but others will be an open book. If you cannot bring yourself to talk to strangers and possibly deal with other farms how do you expect to do well when it comes time to sell at market? Ask questions, dive deep on the answers and get a full understanding of their answers and why they

responded to the way they did. It takes practice but anytime you can get honest answers from local customers the time is well spent.

But you have to get real answers. Platitudes from friendly people who want to support a local business all sound good and are nice to hear. I caution anyone to make a large investment of time & capital based on speculations. People are well meaning and may not realize the harm in being friendly.

Here is an approach. Start out general, but steer the conversation into specifics. After an introduction, you can start with, "So how often do you come to the market?" Then progress to:
What are you looking for?
Do you ever try anything new?

How often do you cook?
Would you be interested in new products?
How much do you spend at Market?
Do you follow certain vendors? What do you like about the ones you support?

Do you use social media? What platform? Would you like to see Prices and selection the day before to help you with you shopping?
Would you try a new variety if a recipe and cooking suggestions were offered?

Would you like to learn how to can or dehydrate food?
Would you be interested in outside of market farm activities like farm to table dinners or demonstrations? What would you be willing to spend for a night of not only food but events at the farm?

You see how this can go. Just keep in mind this is not an interrogation. Be gracious and thankful for their time. Most importantly, get a good cross section throughout the year. Hot weather, cold, rain will let you see who the diehards are.

The creation of surveys is wildly useful. Consistent questions lead to consistent data. The use of embedded survey links on your social media & websites linked to analytical data can help you make informed decisions based on real potential customer answers. Don't be too intimidated to rent a market table to gather survey results. A sign that says Farmer's Market Survey will most assuredly gain attention.

Look at it as a formula:

Ask+grow to fill the answers=selling the people what they wanted.

vs.

Grow+hope at market+maybe a sale?

Do you want to arrive at your booth with a period or a question mark?

To multiply this effectiveness, get early supporters on board. "We are building a farm for you, what do you want us to grow for you? Now follow us on our journey via the media platform you said you use. Look, your seeds are sprouting! We are finally harvesting your crops. This weekend pick up your first harvest of limited quantity at this price. We can't wait to see you as we have our grand opening at our local market."

Now you have engaged fans who have a vested interest because you listened to them and created what THEY wanted. You told not only your story but included them in the narrative.

Exclusivity+personalized growing=price irrelevance.

Direct to end user sales, no middle man. Enjoy your profits.

Still, having your products featured at a restaurant with cross marketing opportunities has it's own advantages too.

I recommend a diversified selling at first to fill in the gaps as long as you don't short one for the other. Don't disappoint your fans or your obligations to a restaurant. At some point know it's okay to choose one over another if it is working out better. Be flexible & remain open to new opportunities.

When approaching restaurants to offer your goods keep in mind the following:

- You have a sliver of roughly 5-10 seconds at some places to make a statement.
- Know your capacity to deliver, prices, and terms (COD or Net 5, 10, 15, 30)
- Understand the people making the orders may not control the payment.
- Be open to how they want you to package.
- Clearly, mark all samples as FREE SAMPLE.

- DO NOT GO IN AFTER 10 AM. The kitchen is ramping up; servers are filling in & it's getting busy.
- Watch you step; floors are slick. Most likely you will be in someone's way, be aware of your surroundings.
- The guy looking at you & speaking a foreign language is making fun of you, but it's ok. He does that with everyone.
- Chefs are damn busy people, respect their time.
- This is so obvious I can't believe I have to mention it, but please eat at the place at least once before hand so you can mention how much you like the food.
- Understand & do your homework as to the cooking style of the place.
- Research the background of the chef if you can.
- Be prepared to suggest pairings. "you know your side dish_____, what do you think of this micro-green, specialty green, or herb with _____.
- Practice your scripts.
- Read foodie magazines; chefs have their own vernacular. Speak to them in their industry language.

- Have thick skin.
- Have a price list & availability with your contact information.

- Respect their house.

One other thing to consider is just taking the time to observe people at the grocery store. When you walk around you can divide this resize into two parts. How people buy produce and what other items are in your cart. This is not a one-time deal. During your market research, this cross section needs to be gathered over an extended period. One interesting thing to do is go to the chain store during farmers market hours & compare/contrast the shopping activities.

I want you to get comfortable stereotyping people. Taboo in today's political environment, but this is business. Business is a battlefield won & lost with intelligence gathering. If you don't think large companies competing for the attention of your clients are not spending huge budgets on this type of research, it's time to wake up and play at a bigger level. If you don't have a budget, make time to objectively observe.

When you are in the produce section, what customer avatars can you begin to develop? Who is doing the shopping? How long are they there? Are they shopping from lists or impulse? What gender, age, and personal presentation are they presenting themselves as? What magazines are they buying?

Moving on to the rest of the store, what are people buying? Pre-cooked, fast, cheap, easy box meals? Is there a pattern to those shoppers given the above observations? What avatar is

buying sugar, pre-prepped foods? Are the pre-prepped foods any resemblance of a farm product?

All of this is important because when you start narrowing down a generalized idea of who your clients are or could be developed into, you can start making ad campaigns targeted directly towards the people who fit your customer avatar. Do not advertise to people who will never buy from you. Speak to these customers in their language.

Lastly, when finding your space within the growing industry, commodity, specialty, or market grower; remember it's about your clients. Just because you are passionate about heirloom parsnips does not mean your clients are. Grow for them to stay in business and keep your emotional side products for you & VIP clients or influencers.

Process before passion will keep you in business.

Crops & Growing Methods

Your markets have told you what crops to grow, be the trusted professional who decides how to grow them.

Crop selection and more specifically variety types should be narrowed down post-market research. But how will you grow?

Do you own enough land to field grow? Are you a reasonable distance to your end user? Are your clients in a central location or are you becoming a logistics company? Is aquaponics something you just feel compelled to do? Is hydroponics peaking your interest? Do you want to specialize in a reticular ultra-niche product (remember, you have established who will be buying this already)?

The real estate issue is a bigger problem that I ever would have thought. When I speak to groups of new growers, I have become increasingly aware that a lot of people have not secured their farm space yet. I urge you to consider how important the right piece of land & location can become.

Some of us can grow in buildings, brown spaces, and urban lots. Some of us can hyper-intensive crop on a small area. Many farms might get away with a single small greenhouse to supply enough for a small market stand. Others need vast averages for grains and field grown varieties.

This is such a regional, personal, and market-driven aspect. The clear separation of bigger operations to small ventures is almost night and day.

Larger operations have the network & teams in place as well as a budget for prime land found by dedicated real estate experts. More often than not, small scale is limited to what they already have, family and friend support, or some less than ideal leasing option. If the land is to be purchased in general, this is the first commercial investment property adding to the learning curve. Zoning must be addressed at length. Irrigation issues must be inspected hourly. Water needs to be tested. Soil must be tested.

In an Urban Ag situation are there environmental contaminations or cleanups to be done? Are the streets capable of handling larger trucks for construction or distribution?

Land and crops dictate growing methods. Proximity to market determines harvest delivery procedures and vehicles. Do you need a refrigerated truck? Is your farm stand easily accessible and in a high traffic area?

Do you have room to expand or host functions?

Allow time for trials of varieties that respond to your particular environment. Record the data & experiment regularly. You'll always have staple crops, but the search for your next new staple is work well worth the time.

Growing Philosophy

Why we must support our fellow farmers and methods of production.

Earlier I used one of my catch phrases, Passion Before Process. No other aspect of this profession can bind us to an inflexible linear thought process than your philosophy of how to grow.

I catch a lot of flack at first when the conversation is steered toward some methodologies. So, before we get to a point of hysteria let me be absolutely clear with you on where my heart is.

I care about the fiscal & emotional health of small farmers.

That's it. This is my driving force. Sometimes I have to play the role of the bad cop, and I'm okay with that. Let me explain.

The controversy comes into play when I meet a grower, and the introductory conversation begins with "I want to start a sustainable farm". I think this is a worthy goal. The historical problem is they want to start Utopia Farm tomorrow, instead to working their way there.

Me: "Tell me more". And in one long run on sentence I get: "We want to start a nonprofit permaculture & wildlife habitat that employees homeless people to teach them skills and feed under-nourished communities through the Organic harvesting of heirloom non-GMO varieties with a zero emissions solar & wind-powered water collection & irrigation system that irrigates our crops & heritage fowl. Do you know of any investors who might be interested?"

You now can yell out bingo as the entire list of sustainable buzz words has been named off.

Take it easy if you just got offended. I give you permission to make a profit. If you want a sustainable farm, you must sustain the infrastructure & operations with working capital. You need profit to invest in solar power. You need cash to buy seeds and organic fertilizer. You need payroll for skilled labor and administration to oversee the homeless unskilled labor you might get. And as far as an investor? The people who have the bankroll to start this kind of farm have that kind of cash because they make calculated business decisions. If you think I'm a jerk for what I just said, wait till they explain to you they expect a return on their on their investments. Wait until they ask in what market can you make a profit donating your products to an audience of people who do not give a damn about artisan lettuce, or lettuce in general. You are dealing with communities where soda is cheaper than water. A burger & fries is less than what it costs you to grow a tomato.

I promise you I do believe that no other industry has more opportunity to make a social & ecological difference than small Ag. I want our industry to be the leader in these reforms. But

you cannot be a benefactor until you can stand on a solid financial foundation. A bankrupt and abandoned farm will not do anyone any good. In fact, it makes things worse. "Oh, another failed farm? Let's put our investments in pharmaceuticals, oil, or cyber-security. Those companies don't mess around." We cannot let this become the narrative.

The more money you can make the more people you can help.

My philosophy is to do more good than harm, then improve every day. The importance of feeding my community is what I care about & I do it in a transparent and ethical manner. As we move forward, we become more educated. We use fewer resources to produce. We increase yields on smaller footprints. We extend our ranges during production to irrigate more efficiently and use less electricity & gas. Through the profits, we will be able to convert to more efficient lighting and HVAC. Through advances in Ag-tech, we can get 24/7/365 monitoring and data that can further push the envelope. We might even get to expand enough to have a surplus to donate product *after* we satisfy our paying clients who have helped us grow.

Recently, and this breaks my heart, I have seen infighting among two growing methods. As of this writing, the details are still coming in. The question? Does Organic Certification extend to soilless media? Passions right now are hot, tempers have been flaring, and some farmers are letting a term claimed by the government separate & divide small farms.

Again, I will never tell you I know all the answers when I don't know all of the details. What I can tell you is this: I will never, ever, discourage or shame another farm or farmer.

I may not get along with someone. I may not agree with their methods. I may question their single-minded devotions. But I cannot add fuel to a pointless fire. We need more farms. We need more transparency and community in our industry. Farmers get shit done. If we work together, we can solve a lot of problems. Just look at each farms ingenuity. We are tinkerers and problem solvers. We all at the end of the day want to accomplish roughly the same goals of providing great food. It is an honor to be a farmer. It is transformative to be an ethical leader. And we are all working towards that, including myself. No one is perfect.

It looks like I'm taking an 180 approach to that utopia isn't it? Abrasiveness for the sake of argument does nothing for me. If I question someone it's because I want them to succeed. I will never have all of the answers, but I sure want to be part of the discussion that is looking for them. I encourage everyone to learn all they can and step up into the numerous and growing leadership roles in all aspects of the green space industry.

I am inspired by the technology advances toward information tech, conservation tech, and the connecting of buyers to sellers. I also believe if the living pioneers of agriculture embrace the

contributions of the future younger thought leaders we can advance the processes that have stagnated due to the reliance of chemical and fossil fuel driven commodity crops.

When deciding conventional field grown, aquaponic, hydroponic, hoop house, greenhouse, vertical, indoor, specialty mono-cropping, oil extraction, cannabis, apiary, dairy, livestock, poultry, ornamental, etc. , know we can all learn from each other. Know you might need to start based on market research over personal passion.

After creating a trusting client base, you now have an outlet for those passions of yours. Now you have some play money to harvest your own personal peach grafted tobacco plant. Evaluating space, infrastructure, utilities, resources, and environmental issues. How to understand your needs and resources to get growing faster and within your budget.

When looking for and moving into retro-fit, or build on your farm's site there are many considerations.

The space you choose will be heavily dictated by financial resources and aversion to risk. You already may have some land, or be content to work with a space you already have. If your market research tells you that you need very little space, your own back yard may be just the spot.

What are the current tax evaluations?

You may want to make sure you don't have any HOA restrictions or problematic neighbors.

If you are building a large farm, can the water supply handle the volume, pressure, and be economical? Do you need a well? How much is that going to cost? How deep will you need to go? Can you simultaneously build in pump houses and storage tanks? Is the water usable? Do you have enough space to properly discharge nutrient water?

Is electricity available without extending a meter drop? Usually at the landowner's' expense. What amp draw will your systems require? What codes will be to be followed? What about permits? Is the area prone to brown or black outs?

Is internet available? What is the download & upload speed? Is it reliable? Can you get telephone & cell service? What carriers?

Are their windbreaks, privacy screens in place? Do you have to clear some land? Will existing trees hinder sunlight? How does rain water flow & drain across the property?

Does your State/County have any agricultural exemptions for utilities? Can you negotiate or be entitled to a better rate?

Will you be on natural gas, or will you have to ship in propane? Do you need to install gas tanks first? What will that cost?

What will you do about sanitation pick up?

How are the roads? Are there bridges with weight limits that could impend delivery trucks? How far from the closest market or repair store are you? How are those roads in ice, or high water?

How pro-Ag one place to the next? Can you ask for tax abatements? Is there any immolate domain issues in the future that could put your property at risk?

What is the soil make up? Will you have to amend heavily? Is there any invasive plant species like bamboo, cane, or kudzu that might be an issue?

Are there any protected animals using the land for migration that could be an issue?

Is there an opportunity for additional agritourism on the property?

Have you looked over with a realtor specializing in Ag, or a single family residential specialist? Can you have your county extension agent help you look into the land's past or possible future development with fresh, experienced eyes?

Is the land eligible for any Ag grants for protected habitat heritage sites? Is the land historically protected or have any restrictions?

How much work will existing structures need?

If building an Urban Ag operation are prepared for your land prices and thus taxes rising exponentially? Will the inflation of property values or gentrification force you to move?

Don't read this and panic. I've never met anyone that has had more than a couple of these issues, usually minor, but I have seen or read about all of these factors. I know I am missing some points too.

Just make sure your biggest investment is well researched.

Facility

You will spend more time on your farm than at home, make it strong, efficient, and inspirational to be at.

Any farm, big or small, will need storage, office space, and parking. Indoor, vertical, and urban ag is more susceptible to some of these questions.

How old are these buildings? If you build new what kind of building permits, codes, and restrictions will you have to jump through? Are you prepared for a property improvement tax increase?

How old is the wiring? Can the breaker box handle added electrical demands? How is the insulation?

Is there fire suppression systems? Is there a storm shelter? That might not seem important, but I can assure you after hearing a 22'x60' high tunnel slam on the roof of our warehouse, roll down the length of the building, and take out two electrical poles & our security fence; a storm shelter became damn important quick. The thought of 228+ T-5 light bulbs, forklifts, tools, and buckets of bolts didn't seem like a fun thing to play catch with.

As far as high tunnels or greenhouses; crops & regional concerns will play a role in what you get and how you build it. Rafter spacing, bracing, gothic or round sides, glazing, orientation, all will be gone over at length too.

This is where you need to carefully look at your individual concerns, gather information from trusted sources, and eventually just pull the trigger. If you research for ten years before finally implementing, you'll still find things you would have done differently.

Shop around, shop smart. Don't cut corners. It's alright to be creative and innovative, just don't get caught up in the "every farm needs to reinvent the wheel syndrome".

Staffing

The X factor to your farm business' success or failure, not to mention your support system.

One thing big operations have over small farms is proper staffing.

There is administrative personnel handling the accounts receivable/payable, employee & client files, compliance from the various regulatory responsibilities, taxes, insurance, accounting, reporting to the CPS & legal team.

We can even put IT in here for larger ventures.

Then the Marketing department (creative) can properly brand the farm across all media outlets, deal with advertising & campaigns, handle public relations & awareness, keep up with social media platforms, promote brand awareness, handle the local baseball team boosters, deal with press releases, and control interviews.

Marketing sets up sales for a win and needs to be treated as a working relationship between two different departments. Without marketing driving sales there will be no product, no income, no administration, and no farm.

The sales department is the personnel maintaining the accounts, getting the contracts, staffing the farmers market, co-working trade shows with marketing staff, networking, and selling the goods.

Then you have the people managing the growing, IPM, propagating, transplants, harvests, packing, and distribution. These are both skilled (greenhouse management, trailing, IPM, and safety) and unskilled (pruning, harvesting, planting, packing, labeling). The daily maintenance and upkeep of equipment and systems are also in this category. Some farms need a person to tend livestock.

And right in the middle of this circle of Administration, marketing, sales, and product is the owner or board of directors who let their staff do their jobs with guidance when needed. A staff allows the creators and directors run the business, create opportunities, and grow for the good of everyone involved. Just make sure you always keep a pulse on the well being of your operation.

Make no mistake, on some level, all of the above and more is handled by each farm regardless of size. It is scalable. But the amount of work to do is staggering.

It is a lot to handle for a mom & pop shop. Especially if the technology is not their forte.

So what gets left out? In my observation of thousands of farmers the acceptance of marketing playing a crucial role in the survivability and progress of the farm. I'm not just talking about staying afloat here. I'm talking about something as simple and critical as getting a paycheck.

A crop of perfect greens or tomatoes is worthless without buyers. Cultivated buyers paying premium prices vs. wholesale hagglers are night and day differences.

As protected culture increases in market share and more cash is infused into startups the need for skilled labor becomes increasingly harder to find. The vegetable production entities are seeing a poaching of top experienced greenhouse managers are moving to the cannabis industry; often with significant pay increases.

Schools like Arizona State University, Santa Fe Community College, and Cornell, like other vocational colleges & universities across the country are responding with programs intended to fill these positions. The students coming out of these programs have scientifically based hands-on training. The investment of skilled labor with this kind of training and experience will make all of the world of difference in IPM, records, production times, quality and yields. You could even take things a step further by having dedicated R/D and Quality Control departments.

If these students also had secondary skills in marketing or business administration, or if additional key management was brought in to cover these business and marketing positions the success rate would multiply exponentially.

Other than volume of consistent yields, I see labor forces being the primary differentiation between the market gardener and the emerging in leaders of the industry.

This next issue is very alarming. The suicide rate of farmers on a global scale is higher than that of the general population. In the U.S., males in the farming profession can be twice as susceptible to suicide than non-farmer populations. The University of Oxford found in one study that Financial troubles added to depression, occupational stresses, physical stress, personal relationship strains, and isolation with no confidential outlets all added to the severity of suicide rates.

A small farm with all of the jobs to do on the farm much less the additional administration and marketing in a high competition sales environment takes a toll. It takes a strong family to weather the day to day challenges in an occupation that never has a down time. There is always something to do on the farm. It is a job that never ends and only rewards the hardest of workers and sharpest of minds.

When working months of 16 hour days seven days a week there is little time to recharge, much less encourage strong relationships, family time, and *being there* for your wife and kids. And you can just forget about friendships outside of the farm.

This is a discussion worth continuing. We have to protect ourselves and watch out for our fellow growers. This has become a life or death issue.

Continuing with staffing, where do we find employees? How do we retain seasonal help?

Interns are a great answer. These are people who need experience and are happy to have a learning opportunity. Guidelines need to be set. Unpaid interns still need to show up & complete quality work. An internship usually has a timeline of a beginning and an end. An understanding of expectations of both sides should be up front. Hours worked per week, professionally representing the farm, what skills they can expect to learn, and introductions to networks for future employment are great starting talking points.

Internships are also great vetting tools for future employees. Unskilled college or high school students interested in agriculture or business can also be an excellent choice if properly vetted. A relationship with local schools Ag/FFA and vocational departments is one to be nurtured as they can pre-vet and send qualified, driven, and capable candidates your way. These are also sources for welders, HVAC, and general labor who need to learn higher skill sets.

Do not abuse or take advantage of these relationships. You are better off being a mentor passing along knowledge than a person overworking cheap labor. Don't be that person.

Hiring restaurant personnel with a passion for foods is another multi-win proposition. I don't suggest headhunting in your local restaurants, but employment opportunity announcements could be worded to attract this demographic.

At the end of the day you want to hire carefully, know you'll have to let people go for various reasons. It's hard. Get over it and move on. Do not let a cancerous employee rain the moral of your operation.

Have a training program, checklist, clearly defined tasks and responsibilities with the added understanding of how farm life works and you may need people beyond their scope. Being upfront is an easier pill to swallow than surprise extra shifts.

Be the boss people can look up to. Grow ethically, and run a respectable, ethical, and keep integrity in all things you do or say. When you make a mistake, we all do, own up to it, apologize, and move on. At the end of the day employees, like all people, want support, guidance, and respect. It's a good way to live in general, and these actions will permeate to all of your business and life dealings.

Inventory Management

Saving time and money by streamlining your stocking and ordering process.

Equipment, implements, growing media, fertilizer, seed, tools, repair items, and the final crop are all of your assets. The maintaining of the correct amount to efficiently run an operation of any kind is an overlooked stress.

I like to divide inventory into four parts.

Tool Assets

Maintenance inventory

Growing inventory

Post Harvest inventory

In the accounting world, tools are listed as assets, but tools get lost, worn out, break, and need to be replaced. So they are inventoried. If I came up with a book about how to guarantee not to lose tools, I could buy a private island. Regardless, we all misplace things, leave tools out in the weather, run things over with the tractor or leave tools on the truck bumper on the way to the hardware store.

Having quality tools when and where you need them requires duplicates or triplicates if your facility is spread out or has multiple maintenance stations.

Shop vacs and cleaning equipment like mop buckets and high volume fans also belong in this area for us hydro producers.

For instance, in our grow room we keep a cart of tools and repair items stocked to make quick repairs as leaking water in an indoor grow room isn't fun or productive.

This leads us to maintenance inventory. Zip ties, bailing wire, an assortment of glues, lubricants, solvents, PVC fittings, irrigation hose, lines, wire nuts, thread barbs, irrigation parts, extra bulbs, hose clamps, and entire extra NFT trays or dutch buckets with fittings all have a place in your inventory. Keep these items organized and repairs are painless. On your operational checklist keep an on-going shopping list so one store trip can take care of all needs.

Aquaponic and Hydroponic producers: in the rare event of a pump failure I even keep a new pump and extra light fixtures in inventory. That is one item you don't want to wait on shipping or

have to deal with stocking issues from your suppliers. Keeping an extra circulatory fan might be a good idea too. Having a back up water tester might be helpful depending on your operation's needs.

Your growing inventory are supplies you need to keep the growing part in daily production. Containers, labels, cleaning/sanitation supplies, IPM supplies, grow media, 1020 flats, humidity domes, fertilizers, buffers, and of course, seeds all on hand and in quantity keeps you up and producing. Watch his section most carefully.

Keeping your pest management controls on standby can mean the difference of a total infestation and a minor inconvenience.

Keeping up with the above inventory saves labor hours from looking for supplies and tools, waiting on shipments, and money by keeping repairs quick. Fixing a small problem now keeps these repairs from escalating into bigger repairs or replacements. Eliminating multiple trips to the store also saves time.

The biggest savings outside of labor is freight charges. When ordering one box, it often isn't any more to add on some of these repair items to the freight bill. If you get caught in an emergency and have to overnight a shipment, you will pay dearly.

On to post-harvest inventory. Your crops post-harvest are now perishable goods that need to be accounted for and stored/transported properly. Every action on the farm across all departments led to this moment of post-harvest inventory management.

That means having properly packaged and labeled product to your pre-sold end used in a proper time frame, correctly accounted for billing or sales at market.

Don't be afraid to make occasional revisits to this part of your operational checklist to make sure inventory controls are being done in the most efficient manner. This is a good time to make sure takes on an accountability roll to make sure all is well in your systems. Having proper storage or working spaces helps.

Large commercial operations have these controls in place and are likely controlled and accounted for with computer aid. Small operations can find a keep it simple method as long as the system is routinely followed.

Packaging and Distribution

Why getting from farm to table is often the biggest obstacle.

My biggest relation through my travels has been even the large growers struggle with distribution. I visited an 8000 Sq' greenhouse with roughly 20% of the space in production, in a major metropolitan area. When I asked why, we had a lengthy discussion of limited channels for profitable delivery.

Twenty minutes from some of the highest rated restaurants in the world, in a state of the art facility. However, logistically it was a nightmare of toll roads and bridges. This facility fell into that spot of too big to be a viable Farmers Market vendor and too small to supply the nearest terminal market. Inconvenient to the kinThis location was also plagued with staff who failed at pest control, leaving a huge workload & necessitated a complete start over for the new team.

The new people involved are highly plugged into the networks that can turn this around, but a failed staffing issue combined with planning obstacles made this venture an uphill and costly battle.

Because packaging, labeling, and GAP certifications are open to interpretation and different from state to state and even county by county; packaging and labeling can become a big problem really quick.

Add on the fact that to make packaging cost efficient one often has to order enormous quantities with high freight bills the necessity to get it right the first time without guidance is a frustrating problem. Then throw on label sourcing and plating set up for initial runs and the cost per unit increases. And by the way, now you have to have boxes to pack clamshells with their own labels, and the price goes up. Oh, one more thing, the distributors at the wholesale level require barcoded containers that can be traced by harvest date back to your facility.

A quick note on packaging; in the groups I monitor, packaging sourcing seems to be this massive pain point for farmers. Where to source? Who has the cheapest? What size do we get? What do chefs want? These questions should be part of your business pinning and are questions to ask during your market surveys. Don't wait until your crops are grown and it's time to pack up for market. Packaging, like any other supply, bought in an emergency tends to cost more both in purchase piece and shipping.

Once you have all of that sorted out, you either have to truck it yourself (like you have time for that) or set up a courier to take it to your end user.

Fuel fluctuations, tolls, inspections, insurance, maintenance, repairs, CDL drivers, the unstrapped dolly bouncing off the truck into oncoming traffic (I've seen that too).

Again, I'm not trying to be doom and gloom. I do want to shed some light that staying small has its benefits. Do you think my friend who delivers to market by bicycle and lives below her means is miserable with her choices in life? No. But there are as many types of people as there are farm operations. Some people can only go big. There are no right or wrong, only questions to ponder and consider.

Have a buyer set up, but also know how that buyer will receive your products.

Market Strategy

Knowing who you will sell to and how they will buy saves costly guess work during a company's initial start up.

You have narrowed down your ideal client, what products they will buy at what price, defined your ideal location, facility and growing method. Then you selected crops and varieties, did all the regulatory hoop-jumping. Now, your staff and management is in place; even if you are all of those people rolled into one. You figured out labeling and shipping.

It's time to choose what kind of farm you will run.

Farmstand

Farmers Market

CSA

Direct Restaurant Supply

Terminal Market Producer

Direct to Processor

Added Value Sales

Agri-tourism

Research

Retail Store

Affiliate Sales

or Diversify into a variety of these outlets.

The decisions will be determined by factors already discussed.

Often time new farmers come in saying they want to be a restaurant supplier, and then after a year of stabbing in the dark change markets or fold up the farm all while obtaining a very expensive education.

If only during research and immersion into their regional market needs could they at least narrowed down to their conclusion, found another way, or decided to have a hot dog pushcart instead.

Market Strategy is quality, deep research beyond surface value answers. It's being that annoying toddler and asking why, why, why, why, why someone or entity will or will not buy from you.

In an industry thousands of years old, the status quo has things pretty much figured out. It's designed to keep small people small and big people growing their market share through assimilating failed small farms.

Either play by the establishment's rules, or turn over the tables.

Where the hell was Instagram, Uber, and Amazon ten years ago?

What was the internet 25 years ago? Industries change, and new industries emerge. Can you, through your market research be bold enough to fill a need people are subconsciously telling you they need but haven't figured out for themselves yet? It's a bigger risk, but it may be a bigger reward. You might find a way to incorporate it into one of the more mainstream selling avenues.

Let's perhaps look at things like this, we have all heard of Vilfredo Pareto's 80/20 rule. In its basic form the rule states that, among other things, 80% of your income will come from 20% of your clients. Observers of Pareto also found the 80/20 principle span across multiple disciplines of life and business. So how can you use the 80/20 rule to develop products and services you find your customers want but are not offered on the market yet?

In his book, *The Greenhouse and Hoop-House Growers Handbook: Organic Vegetable Production Using Protected Culture*, Andrew Mefferd illustrates how most farms can profit from eight crops. Tomatoes, Cucumber, eggplant, and peppers in the fruiting category. Then leafy greens, micro-greens, herbs, and lettuce. These staples have not only sustained my farm but most modern countries' agricultural output, large and small. The multi-acre greenhouses who mono-crop to the market farmer all relish on staples. If these crops are making 80% of your income, where is the remainder coming from?

Cut flowers, honey, added value items like canned foods, home & body care, infused items, eggs, or farm crafts all have a place at market. All of these items add value to your stand and can extend the sales season.

Notice, all markets have stands that specialize in some of these ancillary items. Is there opportunity to be had by specializing in these items? The guy that always has the best tomatoes along with great peppers and cucumbers. The woman who always has the freshest herbs with eggs and jelly. The stand who had good season long production but also has the biggest & best cut flower bouquets.

When a farm stand or restaurant supplier becomes known for a particular item, that product has the ability to be a megaphone for that farm's awareness. That centerpiece of the marketing will anchor client' perception of that farm' specialty.

That specialty has the ability to transcend all income if marketed to the right people. An audience who can afford it, under exclusive availability as a premium item.

In a Blue Ocean Market one can create services and products that fill an unmet need within the marketplace. Cleverness can take you far when developing a Blue Ocean business strategy, but understanding your client's needs and unfulfilled desired will enhance the value of your offerings.

Think of each year's new hot toy at Christmas. The kinds of things that won't matter March first, but cause grown parents to stock big box stores fighting over the plastic that are marketed as THE thing to give. Limited availability means that these items resell for many multiples over MSRP on the secondary market.

Buzz, exclusivity, a great story, an event, all drive desires to forgo financial intelligence. Now, all farmers will at this point call B.S. over such a scene at the local, wholesome farmers market.

What if you did specialize in a specialty crop? What if you told the story of the crop's production and your farm's journey along the way? What if you gave recipe cards and pairing suggestions? What if you had a limited amount each week to the first come first serve? Better yet, what if you sold these excuse items through a club? Membership has it benefits, right? Price becomes something far down on the scale of people's concerns if they want something that they know will sell out because of high demand.

Consistent branding, your story- crafted in your words and tone, and creating value beyond just a sale will turn customers into clients. It will turn you from a farm to a farm business. It will turn that farm business into the pride of a community the farm serves.

The world needs some slivers of hope. Maybe I'm a bit sappy, but I believe getting back to feeding our neighbors plants from seed while showing them this simple act is still significant can mean something. Food, farming, and small business are political, competitive, and hard. It can also be freedom, fulfilling, and a lot of fun.

A marketing plan does not have to be this intense or in depth. Just start somewhere do something. At the minimum start your Facebook page. Keep the content your pictures and stories. If you just want to make one post a week, start there. If it is a Friday post on market availability, just never miss yah post. Put up a picture, as pictures will gain much more looks than text. As you practice, it will get easier, faster, and better. Crawl before you walk. Just please do something.

If you need more help, there are resources out there. Just vet your sources a bit before you go all in on someone. Make sure you resonate with their message, that they have a proven track record and understand your needs as a small farm.

The large farm operations have dedicated marketing teams and plans as part of their business model and overall business plan from day one. They are tech savvy, understand great copywriting, know how to engage and pull information out of customers, and have all web-based platforms ready to go. That's who is already gaining your farm's buyers. They may not be your competition at the farmer's market, but food dollars are being spent somewhere. Get your share.

Marketing Strategy

Give yourself a voice before someone does it for you and gets it wrong.

It has taken me years to figure out what I should be doing with my life. To start a new market, niched down to farm marketing, was an odd cliff to jump off of; but I had to do it.

The thing I enjoyed the most, the thing that helped other people and me the most was putting marketing puzzle pieces together with game theory, business strategies, networking, and self-improvement techniques all centric around the modern agriculture movement. I am so comfortable doing this it just seems to be my natural state.

I may only touch a hand full of farm producers, or I may change the landscape. Either way, right or wrong I am committed to this, to you, to your farm, and our combined story of feeding humanity.

With that out of the way, let's dive in.

Why should you attempt any marketing? Why don't I just call it advertising?

I am not interested in helping you make one sale; I want you to become an intriguing part of your community. Through marketing, you can tell your story, so it becomes not just important to you, but the people in your community.

People need to understand why you matter and care that you are here. To get to that level of client loyalty and commitment, you have to embrace the fact that you matter. If you were gone tomorrow, people would miss you and your farm. The farm should be a part of people's daily lives so much so; they cannot fathom life without you. A bit much?

Have you ever heard a smoker say, "I need a cigarette"?

"Don't talk to me before I had my coffee."

"It's five o'clock, right?"

All of the vices in the world. Sugar, sex, drugs, tobacco, alcohol, the internet. Vegetables, community, health, peace, fresh food. Can we change the narrative?

What do people want most of? To live longer, to lose a few pounds, to be a better lover, to be confident, to be more attractive. Why is all of the things people desire the most and what is right for them so hard?

We have been conditioned by marketing machines since day one.

Our bodies have been reprogramed by comfort food, stimulants, and sweets. Our celebrations and gatherings revolve around massive piles of food that does not nourish. We celebrate self-destructive behavior and equate it with good times. We have to force ourselves to do the right thing in a way that "takes away the bad," like sugar, booze, and cheeseburgers. Our reward? Built in cheat days to binge on what we are fighting for.

Society mocks vegans, vegetarians, rolls our eyes at gluten free and mocks those snarky bastards with the 26.2 marathon sticker on the back of the cars we pass at boutique grocery stores. Healthy Bastards, who do they think they are?

Marketing has divided us and fed us what our weak flesh wants to devour. I'm not any better. I love craft cocktails and sweets. I pound coffee in the morning, and I don't want to talk to anyone for the first hour of the day. I feel your pain. I am not innocent.

What does all of this mean? In today's world, thanks to the internet, anyone- you, me, a garlic farmer in Rhode Island or a small winery in the New Mexico plains can within minutes and for little or no money put something on the web that millions of people can see. Best part, people are looking for what you are talking about! You just need to be compelling enough to cut through the white noise of everyone's life. You have less than a second to grab someone's attention, make them care about you, and click through to an action. The action can be a follow, a comment, joining an email list, or making a purchase.

First major disclaimer: digital marketing IS A LONG GAME. I was working with a farmer who needed a little help, after a quick few tweaks he hit a grand slam. In context, the win was they learned one step in the process. The loss, they expected to double that one extraordinary event every day. It doesn't work like that.

I have spent hours a day, every day, for years working on my craft. I have paid thousands to coaches and courses to hone my skills. I have to keep up with changing algorithms, platforms,

new systems, and new rules. I will never learn it all because of the rate of new technology changes at such a rapid pace. I also started years behind.

The person I mentioned in the last paragraph, had one small microscopic lesson. A month after that event he closed his farm. Earlier I said you have to be aware of the amount of stress you can stomach. You have to love losing, learning, small wins, and long-term goals. Unfortunately, farming wasn't for them, but maybe they can move on to their natural state.

Big AG, I'm talking conglomerates with many acres of greenhouses and thousands of acres of farmland that are publicly traded on the NYSE has a marketing team.

The guys in the upscale grocery chains with their down home kraft paper colored and handwritten digital labels in the perfect fonts and colors. They have a marketing team, and their brand transcends the labels at the store to their web page, to their social media accounts, and their companies cookbook and fun runs they sponsor. They have a fan base that will follow them wherever they go.

Today the internet gives anybody the opportunity to have a voice. Here is the big secret, small business, and especially small Ag, lets technology baffle and intimidate them. People don't believe the weight social media and digital marketing has in today's market across all demographics.

If you started doing any, even mediocre & undirected posts, you would be ahead of those who will not take action. If you received even a little advice, coaching, or investigated for yourself some of the training available, you would start to climb the ladder to success in online marketing.

If you are the only farm, or one of the few in your area that practice this side of your business you will soon be the go to in your community. Your farm becomes the narrative in people's news feeds that are algorithmically chosen by the user and the platform they digest their custom news from. Giving your farm a voice is the first step to creating that story that attracts people to your why.

You do not want some journalist who received the slow news day's feel-good story putting their slant on your truth, mis-spelling your name or mailing in a report just to fill space. You are responsible for your story, the tone, and who it reaches.

A marketing plan revolves around connecting emotions to your farm's offerings. Imprinting happy and fulfilling associations with your farm will help associate your farm with answers to problems. Some of these problems are real; some are perceived.

Where do we get our families' organic food? Where can we get free range chicken eggs? I think we need organic wicker ottomans for our sun room.

Do any of us know what any of this means? Is any of it real? It doesn't matter in some ways. Labels are made to divide us. And that is exactly what the organic label has done.

People are misled and distracted by a committee of lobbied lawmakers as to what is or are not Organic. People are taught to demand something we cannot clearly define or agree on. Passions are rightfully hot from producers to consumers. This is also marketing.

The kind marketing you don't see outright, but are affected by in small aggregated doses are where larger companies play, and conglomerates excel. The switch is a marked strategy to a Media Strategy.

Carefully curated, long-term media strategies turn free attention to the business by creating news and knowing how that news cycle works. Press releases, staged interviews, controversies and the "reaction" to the media investigations all provide coverage many small farmers never get in mainstream national media coverage.

Bloggers can write their versions of their perceived truth without much recourse of being right or wrong. As a story gets picked up through the media food chain, things can get out of hand quick. Joe Q Blogger said is all the citation a regional network needs to run a story. The twenty-four-hour news cycle coupled with countless blogs, magazines, rag newspapers, radio, regional outlets as well as the media we all grew up with all rely on massive amounts of stories to keep eyes on the information and click rates on the web. All to sell ads. The necessity of having a constant stream of information means a story can get traded up by the media very quickly. The truth is lost, but truth can also be manufactured if the source is the companies wanting the information out.

Is it so outlandish to think a multi-million dollar food distributor would leak information to garner attention? The creating of controversy that can be mitigated gets the name out. Now a company can show how pro-active they are to problems. Sometimes, manufactured problems and

solutions are worth the hassle for thousands and thousands of dollars worth of prime air time and front page exposure.

Funding

How businesses receive funding vs. small farms stay afloat.

Small Farms: Friend, family, bank or credit union loans, credit cards, grants, and moderately successful crowdfunding.

Farm Businesses: Investors, Venture Capitalists, seed rounds, Series A, B, C rounds, Grants, Successfully marketed and executed crowd funding, and shareholder equity all secure not only start up costs but have additional funding to scale as the business hits growing pains and expansions.

Getting off the ground and staying afloat with hopefully no major setbacks might get a small farm started if all of the puzzle pieces are in place and evicted. Right product, right people, and right audience all can sustain a farm. Growing a farm will be slowly incremental without outside capital or significant luck within the marketplace.

Larger operations know that the money to start isn't the same kind of money needed to scale. These investments are in stages, managed by boards of business people who know diverse business specialties like construction, ag-science, IT, legal, accounting, marketing, and professional buyers and sellers of commodities. These people have vast networks and connections beyond the agricultural realm to draw help, guidance, and business connections.

Both large and small Ag will have a business plan. The difference is a small business plan will make money by farming. A large ag business will use a farm to make money. Such a small change in words, but major consequences.

Small Ag: We will grow crop x and sell at venue x for an x price and we estimate it will cost x for a profit of x.

Big Ag: We will build a facility that can grow x based on market research. Our crop x will grow to the highest standards as we have the personnel trained to do X, Y, & Z. Through various sales channels, our branded x will be marketed in a way customers will ask for x by name at multiple

sales outlets. As growth accelerates, we will pace our growth by scaling x part of x system funded by x funding methods, which are already established.

That's a lot of x's. Linear vs. complex business strategies that all tie in together. A solid plan with contingencies in place. That's the difference.

To start a business from zero as a small venture, you better have liquid assets, or know your stuff with passion and be fortunate enough to know the right people at the right time.

To start an Ag business that will be a serious regional or national player you need a team of skilled, connected, and talented people. Even if one is starting a business without a board, and there is one person responsible for the ship; that person cannot do it alone. Mentors, partners, and staff supported by professional service providers all make up a team investors can stand and rely on to help the investment principal stay grounded.

Once again, this is not my specialty, but I have seen ag businesses big and small fail, stagnate, and succeed. Executing a solid plan with the right people in the right market with a product that fills a feed certainly is a step in the right direction. Passion to grow is not enough to sustain a business built on cutting corners in infrastructure, market R&D, and hoping "if I build it they will come." People do not care and are too busy at the end of the day unless you can become a part of their lives and solve problems through your goods or services.

There is yet one more angle to marketing. Everyone from 8-year-olds to your grandma's bridge club has more media reach and capability than all of the major TV, Newspaper, and Magazines of the golden age of print and television combined.

That movie studio in your pocket can be whipped out, edited, and broadcast to millions of people in seconds by people on the ground where no reporters are available.

There are eyes and ears everywhere. So, be fair warned. Your truth is your truth. Your beliefs are your beliefs. But when someone sticks a recording device of any kind, even a phone, you better make sure you are representing you, your family, your farm, community, and all of us in the agricultural field across the country in a light that cannot be used against yourself or our profession.

This is not an ethics paper, but remember to do right by all things and people, livestock, and customers. A small moment of time can go viral, good or bad. Make sure you are on the positive

and inspiring end of a sound bite or viral clip. Unfortunately, for the most part, only shocking, disturbing, and problematic events get viral attention. Staying positive with a few hundred engagements is better than being the voice of momentary insanity to millions.

Future Market Share and Expansions

'What got you here won't get you there.' - Marshall Goldsmith

Every person going into business for themselves goes all in with the hope and assumptions they will be the one to beat the odds. Unfortunately, businesses fail because they fail to gather all of the skills to to the discussion points in this paper. They fail to build support systems and networks to see them through the hard times and guide them during the manic growth that can be a cursed blessing.

As the business scales in a positive incline do you grow or streamline what you have? Do you build a business to sell, or is this dream job your end goal? Either way, as much as having contingency plans for rainy days it is equally important to know how to grow in the correct increments. Second locations, taking on larger contracts, or offering new product lines can often require large capital investments. Sometimes these investments may be bigger than the original funding rounds of the first inceptions of the farm.

These are exciting problems to have, but are a new kind of stress. I recommend if you are at this point to seek outside help from a mentor or consultant that can help transition new opportunities into wins instead of mistakes. Doubling your income is not equal to doubling the size or output of your operation.

I wish I could tell you how to account for expansions within your business plan, but client reactions, marketplace shifts, legislation changes, and the nimbleness of your organization all play interconnected roles for deciding the path of your Ag business.

Explore opportunities, expand your network in and outside of your industry's network, study other businesses big and small. You will be shocked along the way how small mindset shifts can impact your approach.

It is important to keep an open mind with a safe distance. Vet your prospects. Do your homework. Not all opportunities are the right ones at the right time. As a business owner you are responsible for your business, family, employees, financial obligations, and clients. Tread lightly, but remember there are also times for calculated risk.

Conclusions.

Business is balance. It's the best thing and the hardest thing in the world. I hope I have asked some of the questions you may not have asked. I wish I can guarantee you a blueprint to follow that will enable absolute success. But, I can't- and no one else can either. So check your sources. Check compatibility with the people you trust to guide you through any part of life where you seek outside guidance. Know that the most important thing to listen to is your gut. Equally important is making sure you are on the same page and understanding with the person you share a roof with.

There are layers and layers to consider. Systems change, but fundamentals remain constant. You will struggle, things will be up and down. Some people are natural business people, some are perfectly wired to be a great manager or part of a management team. Knowing yourself and your strengths and weaknesses is most likely the best place to start when deciding whether to start a farm or not. A clear why should be understood and established to help guide you as you make tough decisions.

Plant seeds daily is my ending catch phrase. Not just for plant seeds, but for constant daily progress. Farming is a job that never ends or takes a day off. Business is an all day everyday lifestyle. You have to not love it, but need it.

Plant Seeds Daily