Agribusiness Success Story

A local small business CEO team told me they “read these columns religiously”, but I have not written about “any agriculture related businesses”. My response was “you know your right and that is strange because my next client meeting is with a pair of local entrepreneurs that are developing an agribusiness. So, I will tell you a neat story related to this request”. The owners in this success story were mentored by SCORE colleagues of mine in another state.

Ann and Rodger Lenhardt took over a 176-acre farm in the Missouri River Hills after Norm, Rodger’s father, decided it was time to pass it on. He had produced corn and soybeans there, and Ann and Rodger were interested in growing those same crops organically. But to grow corn and soybeans, you really need 1,000 acres - or more.

The Lenhardts had always used elderberry for home remedies, and when they researched it, they realized that 90% of the elderberry consumed in the U.S. was produced in Europe. There was the opportunity. “We came up with an elderberry jelly, jams, drinks and invested a lot of our own money to get the products started,” Ann recalls.

The Lenhardts kept their full-time jobs in North Carolina and managed the farm from there, while Norm grew the crops. Their daughter, an MBA student, helped develop a name that told a story: Norm's Farms.

Norm’s Farms elderberry products are now available in 22 states, in natural food stores, major grocers, co-ops and independent stores. The company recently finalized a partnership with another family elderberry farm in Missouri.

As Norm’s Farms grew quickly, the Lenhardts knew they would need to bring on more and more help to meet demand. “We needed help finding investors and understanding the investors’ process,” Ann says.

In addition to helping Ann and Rodger with marketing, sales and logistics, Chapel Hill Durham SCORE mentors John Bartelme and Arlene Kaplan helped the Lenhardts through the many complex steps required to get their business investment-ready. Once a prospective investor was identified, Bartelme and Kaplan provided behind-the-scenes advice and counsel throughout the negotiation process.
After a formal proposal was received, Bartelme and Kaplan sought out another SCORE mentor with specialized skills in mergers, acquisitions and business valuations to review the proposal. Since SCORE has more than 10,000 mentors at 300 chapters nationwide, Bartelme and Kaplan were able to reach across chapter boundaries to Jim Lurie, a Canton SCORE volunteer. Lurie's review, along with Bartelme and Kaplan's continued counseling, was instrumental in the final transaction being completed.

“In retrospect maybe our path could have been a little faster if we had gone to SCORE sooner,” Ann says. “We are serial entrepreneurs, so we knew a lot, but there’s always a point where you say, ‘I don’t know enough of this in particular...’”

In Minnesota, the six SCORE chapters have developed a partnership with the US Department of Agriculture, the University of Minnesota, and the Small Business Administration to assist in supporting agribusiness clients in the state. Whether you own a family farm, a family ranch or another type of agribusiness, this partnership can connect you to free resources - from business planning help to other types of technical assistance.

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