

Leverage Your Organic Advantage!

Jamey Coughlin

Leverage Your Organic Advantage will help to answer the following questions:

- What does it take to go from a great idea to a sustainable business?
- Where are the opportunities?
- Do I really want to farm as a business?
- Why am I making this choice?
- Can I really have both values and viability?
- What are my organic advantages?

The intended audience

- Those dreaming about starting a sustainable farm or food business
- Existing operations looking for new ideas, inspiration and tactics

Overview:

The choices made in the start-up phase can position an enterprise for long-term profitability and sustainability, control over its destiny and the opportunity for exceptional results. It is a universal truth for all businesses, but especially critical for people exploring ventures in the sustainable farming and food sector. There are many challenges to achieving profitability; global competition, centralized distribution, and price-conscious consumers detached from food sources and seasonality. These external factors, combined with the high costs of entry, long days and multiple skill requirements (production, finance and marketing) can conspire to derail even the most energetic, optimistic, idealistic and well funded start-up.

Leveraging your Organic Advantage is about capturing opportunities by maximizing the 'design' phase in your business. Good business design draws lessons from nature and sustainable production but also current and future trends and other successful green and ethical companies. Design is not only the first signal of intention, but critical to maintaining control of your business' destiny.

Good design begins with tough questions, self-reflection and real focus on you, your motivations, your family, what you bring to a start-up and what you want to get out of it financially. Those questions will help you determine if farming as a for-profit business, and as a full, part-time or hobby venture is right for you. Further considerations include your personality and aptitudes, career aspirations, community preferences and quality of life goals such as access to amenities and peer groups.

A good initial design can lay the foundation for financial sustainability and render irrelevant many of the challenges referenced above. Long term success is dependent on a commitment to innovation, sound management and an entrepreneurial approach.

Trend spotting is a critical skill to develop. Successful start-ups are surfing trends like the aging population, health and wellness, convenience, global tastes, pleasure and recreation, price consciousness, ecological awareness and information empowerment. Leveraging the trend into an opportunity requires the entrepreneur to take advantage of the pendulum swing, compete on value, shorten the distance between the consumer and the farm, provide meaning, solve problems, tell great stories and build relationships. www.Lunch4Kids.com from the Netherlands is a great example of connecting the trend

dots and providing solutions. Time stressed parents, who want to provide a healthy lunch choice that kids will actually eat, can bypass the cafeteria and purchase nutritious, fun packaged meals online that are then delivered directly to the child's school.

The ability to satisfy new, unoccupied niches, reinvent the business models and turn adversity into an advantage can lead to price premiums and solid connections with customers. It can also be essential to overcome start-up hurdles. For example, Donna Smith and Robyn Streeter of Portland, Oregon were recent graduates who couldn't find affordable, serviced land within a reasonable distance of the city. Instead of putting the dream on hold or accepting long commutes, they now operate their CSA out of their customers' own backyards. By locating the farm in backyards they not only solved their land challenge, but are building incredibly strong bonds with their customers. Their website is www.yourbackyardfarmer.com.

Many new entrants are drawn to organic agriculture as a way to act out their values. The benefits of sustainable, locally focused agriculture are numerous; providing access to fresh and healthy foods, developing community food security, contributing to a positive ecological footprint and climate change solutions and fostering social connections and Community Economic Development. The central challenge, however, is to "make a living while doing good". The good news is that it doesn't necessarily have to be a trade-off between ethics and reasonable profits. In fact, leveraging your social and ecological sustainability can directly contribute to your business and therefore personal sustainability. International and local Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) www.livingeconomies.org groups and the Social Venture Network www.svn.org provide examples, resources and potential alliances. Ben Cohen's (of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream fame) book Values-Driven Business: How to change the world, make money and have fun provides a great starting point.

There has never been a more challenging time, nor a time filled with more opportunities for sustainable agriculture and food entrepreneurs. Attention to your design and personal fit, surfing trends, solving customer problems, and learning from other values-driven businesses can help you live the dream, earn a living, make the world a better place and *Leverage your Organic Advantage!*

Notepad:

List one new idea you got from this workshop:

How can you apply/implement this idea in the short term?

Additional Resources:

New and existing farm entrepreneurs have a tremendous array of resources and tools available to help make the decision to farm as a business, identify opportunities and design their start-up. Here are a few key sites and guides:

OMAFRA Agricultural Business Management

www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/busdev/agbusdev.html

Preparing Business Plans: www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/busdev/facts/99-011.htm

NSDA Business Development and Economics

www.gov.ns.ca/agri/bde/

Preparing an Agri-Business Plan: www.gov.ns.ca/agri/bde/news/pdfs/AgriBusinessPlan.pdf

New England Small Farm Institute; Exploring the Small Farm Dream

(fantastic bookshelf and decision making guide)

www.smallfarm.org

SPIN Farming

(profitable and practical, sub-acre farming guides)

www.spinfarming.com

AAFC Canadian Farm Business Advisory Services

(Business Planning and Financial Assessment)

www.agr.gc.ca/ren

Canadian Agricultural Skills Service (CASS)

(Skills Assessment and Training)

www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/busdev/cass/index.html

Canadian Farm Business Management Council

(business planning, marketing, diversification, financial and human resource management tools, books, newsletters and conferences)

www.farmcentre.com

Building a Sustainable Business:

A Guide to Developing a Business Plan for Farms and Rural Businesses

www.sare.org/publications/business.htm

A Guide to Starting a New Farm Enterprise

www.agf.gov.bc.ca/scregion/NewInvestmentinAgricultureMar8.pdf

Evaluating a Rural Enterprise

attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/evalrural.html

Do What You Are

www.personalitytype.com/dwya/index.html

Trends and Innovative Ideas:

www.Springwise.com (worldwide scan of innovative business ideas)

www.Trendspotting.com (translating the observations into trends)

(Still) Made Here

www.trendwatching.com/trends/stillmadehere.htm

5 Trend Watching Tips www.trendwatching.com/tips/

Entrepreneur Magazine www.entrepreneur.com

A copy of this summary and the PowerPoint notes will be posted on gov.ns.ca/agri/bde/

Biography:

Jamey Coughlin is a Business Development Specialist with the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture in Truro. His focus is on fostering entrepreneurship, alternative food enterprises, researching new opportunities and working with new entrants. He serves as an advisor to ACORN (Atlantic Canada Organic Regional Network), Farmers Markets of Nova Scotia, the Truro Farmers Market and the Nova Scotia Food Security Network. Jamey's academic background includes an Honours B.A. in Geography from McMaster University and graduate work in Rural Planning and Development from the University of Guelph. Jamey and his wife Roxanne are entering their 4th season operating Salad Bowl Gardens, growing gourmet greens and other artisan vegetables.

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