

Growing New Farmers

Thursday, November 22nd, 2012
Georgian Room (9:00am – 7pm)

Workshop: FarmOrganizer.com: Organizing Your Farm Business Information and Documents

Speaker: PENELOPE TUNNELL, Co-founder of FarmOrganizer

Penelope specializes in helping people and organizations define, obtain and organize the business information they require. In recent years, her passion and focus have been on working with those involved in the local food movement. Her knowledge and experience come from many years in Information Technology in a variety of roles and mid career graduates studies, namely a MBA and a MSc Information Management.

Executive Summary

This session will take you through FarmOrganizer, an online tool that provides a simple yet comprehensive way for understanding all farm business activities. The tool allows farmers to identify, capture and organize all the information required for these activities, making it possible to create an up-to-date business plan or other types of documents at any time.

Detailed Notes

FarmOrganizer.com is a simple way to set-up and organize all info needed for starting and running a farm (**Slide 2**).

Slide 4 displays a picture of Penelope's 150 acre farm in Prince Edward County, Ontario. It still has the original house and barn. Here they grow hops and hay, and board horses.

In 2007 Penelope decided she wanted to make a living from her farm. She found that with all the training she could find there still wasn't a simple way to pull together all the complex information she needed. So at this point in time, she quit her job and started learning.

One of the first things she did was to seek an advisor from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, who asked her for a lot of information. Penelope started to do comparisons of profitability between hops and barley and found that she could make more with hops.

She also received some market research on this topic from the Ontario Minister of Agriculture but found that it was confusing and out-of-date, so she filed it away without ever really using it.

Penelope met Harris Ivens (**Slide 7**), the creator of the Farmers Growing Farmers Program at Everdale Farms and found that they had both come to the same realization: new farmers need all the operational data up-to-date first, then their business plan can always be updated easily.

Penelope and Harris then worked to create farmorganizer.com and spent some time touring around networking and making connections, while presenting their model. Harris is now teaching at Sir Sandford Fleming College in the Sustainable Agriculture program and Penelope is working on getting her co-op set up.

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Categorizing allows you to better analyze what affects different changes may have. The list of suggested categories on **Slide 9** is thorough and appropriate- in 4-5 years of working with it, Penelope has not come across anything that didn't fit within its' parameters.

Category 1: Planning, Monitoring, Control – decide where you want to go, monitor your route and take control measures if you are off path. This includes predicting and taking pro-active measures when needed. This category involves several steps (**Slide 11**), the first of which is the planning (**1-1**) required to become certified in farm planning. One must also consider all possible constraints (**1-2**); include all costs for certification when completing taxes. Also check if any insurance is required. The finances (**1-3**) are very important; consider all costs for certification and find out if any financial assistance is available for certification costs. Finally, performance evaluation (**1-4**) is key. Ask yourself; what standards should be met? What monitoring and data recording is required?

Category 2: Production- this is the reason for existing. Linking to the outside world and selling your products to others. You need to have all your product information so can plan all aspects. Have information on how to produce. Set and meet the quality standards. For example, on her Hops farm she does not sell hops in pelleted form. They are handpicked, which increases their quality and therefore value. Make sure to have a storage plan (**Slide 13**).

Category 3: Linking (Slide 15)

Intelligence (**3-1**), which Penelope defines as the exchange of skills and information. This is something that new farmers are always looking for. She cautions that you must have a filter though. Only seek intelligence on select topics and from select sources. You should also document everything you come across so you “catch all” the resources. It is suggested that you join COG.

Selling (**3-2**): some very critical information is marketing information, but be careful because there is often too much information and simply no way to sift through it.

Customers (**3-3**): you should develop a close relationship with your customers because their feedback is invaluable. Find out what your customers requirements are and make sure to confirm it. Be certain that you are on the same page with them. Then, ask them if they are satisfied. They will have ideas for you as well.

Contacts (**3-4**): Put all the contacts you have made into the same place. Keep comments about the people, the fees and their availabilities. Track your communications with important clients, this is easy if you cut and paste from emails.

Category 4: Supporting – this is all the activities that support the first three activities. These include resources in the following categories – Human Resources, Animals, Land, Buildings, Equipment, Supplies, Knowledge Base and Productivity. Keep an inventory for each of these resources (**Slide 17,18,19**).

Human Resources (**4-1**) - This includes the activities of hiring people, making contracts and training people. To maintain a high quality of work make sure to do performance appraisals. Pay attention to activities surrounding departing employees, especially the government regulations. An example of how this could be useful, is if you know you will need 100 hours of

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labour for a project, check your HR schedule and see if you have it. If not, you may need to hire more people.

Animals **(4-2)** – consider what animals go in what category, some could belong in multiple categories. For example a chicken can be placed as an animal or a product. She chooses to place it as an animal because of its multi-functionality on the farm.

Land **(4-3)** – Have a map for different fields, acres, soil, pests and weed control, or any other factor that could be useful to map.

Buildings **(4-4)**– This includes all buildings on the property, farm building and living buildings. You can claim parts of your living space if you use it to do administrative work for the farm.

Equipment **(4-5)** – This includes both farm and office equipment. Keep an inventory of all major stuff with the estimated value as well as maintenance and service records.

Supplies **(4-6)** – These include seeds, water, electricity, internet among others.

Productivity **(4-7)**– How are you going to make things better? Write down good ideas, write them down and keep it. Evaluate the feasibility when presented with many choices for how to do the same thing. Don't forget the intangible costs and benefits. For example, a farmer's market that is 20 minutes away vs. one that is 2 hours away. The tangible cost is the gas, the intangible cost is that driving can make you tired.

Knowledge Base **(4-8)** – Be careful not to lose stuff.

Penelope states: "if all you take away from this workshop is that there are 4 major categories to think about your farm business, then I will have succeeded." **(Slide 20)**

Organizational Framework – Each step has worksheets that you can work off of. It is best if you adapt them to your own purposes **(Slide 22,23,24)**.

Take a highlevel view. If you have no heading on your documents at least put a file name at the bottom of each page. This links your paper copy to your digital copy **(Slide 25)**.

Use a color coded filing system. If you have your operational data on hand and organized you can pull out all the pieces and make a business plan at any time **(Slide 26, 27)**.