

Farm-Based Businesses Help Boost Incomes

“Secret” Recipe Results In Thriving Soap Business

Larry Wagner doesn't quite fit the image of a typical soap salesman. But the soap he's selling isn't typical, either.

Wagner's Maysville Soap Company sells soap that's 55 percent corn and 45 percent “something else.” His secret formula, developed by a former Ivy League university research chemist with roots in western Indiana, contains only four ingredients. Wagner insists that it cleans hands better than just about anything else on the market. It also cleans concrete floors, livestock buildings, laundry, and more.

Wagner is pretty much a one-man band, producing, packaging, and marketing Maysville Soap by himself.

The company is named after what was once a good-sized Northwest Indiana town centered around a packing plant. “It's where my great-grandfather and grandfather lived, but when the packing plant closed, the town disappeared,” he says. So even though he lives close to where the old town was, his address is Attica.

Wagner built the equipment he uses to make the soap. “The mixer is from a junked ready-mix concrete truck,” he says. “I mounted it in a building and power it with a Ford 306 industrial gasoline engine.”

He also uses a seed-grading machine and a corn cracking mill, both of which are refurbished antique machines.

Because the soap is a powder, rather than liquid or bar, it needs a special dispenser. Wagner designed one and builds them as he needs them.

Wagner has been in the seed cleaning business most of his life, so processing the corn to make his soap is second nature to him. Packaging and selling it, though, has been challenging.

“I started marketing it with a booth at a county fair,” he says. “I gave the Fair Queen a box of soap. Her dad operates a small shop on his farm. He liked the soap so much, he's buying about a case a month now, just to clean his hands and his shop floors.”

Last year, the Indiana FFA endorsed his product and actually invited him to sell it at their building at the State Fair. He's planning on being there again this year.

Other regular customers include farmers, repair shops, and restaurants.

He's pretty sure that once you've tried Maysville Corn Soap, you'll want more. “It liquifies immediately when you add water and doesn't leave a residue on skin or clothes, doesn't dry out your skin, and it's 100 per-



Larry Wagner built his own soap-making equipment.

cent biodegradable,” he says. “You wouldn't believe how good clothes look after they're washed with this soap.”

The soap is shipped in 2-liter wide-mouthed plastic containers. They sell for \$4.50. He says one container will last a typical household three or four weeks for normal handwashing. If you're using it for laundry or cleaning hands in the shop, you'll go through more.

Wagner hopes to expand the business by setting up distributor/dealers in other areas who will give customers the same type of

service he gives his local customers. “I don't sell in stores or on the Internet,” he says. “I leave a self-addressed postcard with customers when I deliver their soap. They just drop it in the mail when the supply is getting low. When I get the postcard, I make a delivery and leave another card. I call this my ‘e-mail’ ordering system because it's easy for them to do,” he says.

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Pasta Enterprise Thrives Thanks To Home-Built Machine

Duane Sporleder's part-time business grew out of his family's love for making and eating homemade pasta.

“We were given some home-made pasta as a gift 25 years ago. We really enjoyed it so we went out and bought a home pasta machine so we could make our own and also give pasta to others as a gift,” says Duane.

The Sporleders' pasta was so popular, they were eventually giving away a couple hundred pounds at Christmas time.

“Over the years, we bought three more pasta machines and wore them out,” Duane says. “The plastic gears wore out and we couldn't get parts for them anymore.” He decided to make his own machine.

With the help of a couple of talented friends, Sporleder built a machine that makes 15 lbs. of pasta at a time. It's made from food-grade stainless steel.

Since his friends refused to let him pay for their labor, Sporleder's machine cost less than \$500. He says he would have had to pay thousands of dollars for a commercial European-made machine.

Since pasta must be dried on a rack for at least 24 hours before bagging, they asked another friend to make them four large racks



With help from a couple of friends, Duane Sporleder built this machine that makes 15 lbs. of pasta at a time.

from white oak. They hold 15 lbs. each. “We usually make 75 lbs. of pasta at a time. Pasta making is very labor intensive, especially because ours has no hardeners or preservatives in it. It's much more fragile to handle,” he says. “The only ingredients we use are semolina flour (made from durum wheat), eggs, oil, water and salt. It's not like what you find in the store. We make different varieties like whole wheat, spinach and spicy - using peppers we grow ourselves.”

Sporleder says winter is the peak season for the family's pasta business, and they sell as much as 20 pounds a week during that



Pasta is dried on racks for at least 24 hours before bagging.

time. They've been supplying a local store with pasta for the past two years and say that people from 50 miles away come and pick up four to six pounds at a time.

They make fettuccine, spaghetti, linguine and vermicelli and charge \$2 per pound.

“Right now, we're using our pasta making

business as a fund-raiser for our daughter's upcoming Girl Scout sponsored trip to Europe,” Sporleder says.

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Prairie Seed Producer Learned On-The-Job

Dan Allen has 2,750 acres of crop land devoted to wildflower and prairie grass seed production. He learned his business on the job because when he started 20 years ago production and processing machinery couldn't be bought and markets changed overnight. His business was prairie seed, but the lessons he learned apply to any niche marketer.

“You have to be 100 percent totally committed to the idea, whatever it is,” he says. “At the same time, you have to be able to totally change direction the instant the marketplace tells you to change.”

The Winterset, Iowa farmer has seen the marketplace change many times since he

first planted a few acres to prairie grasses and wildflower in 1979. He had been looking for alternative crops for setaside acres.

“Native grass seed production seemed to go hand-in-hand with the government program at the time,” recalls Allen. “In 1982 we got our first crop. A few years later, when the CRP came in, the marketplace exploded. In four years, that market was gone, and people were getting out of the business.”

Allen survived by adapting to market needs. It is an ongoing process, he says.

“It is a discovery process,” says Allen. “Diversification is not an occupation, but an exercise in discovering niche markets.”

It's also been an exercise in learning what



Dan Allen and his family grow prairie seed and market it to 50 to 60 companies throughout the U.S.

it takes to make each species grow, not to mention producing seed, he adds. Then there is the machinery; row crop machinery has to

be adapted to shallow seeding and harvest.

“We harvest a lot by hand,” explains Allen. “It's hard to find and develop the right equipment to take the place of labor.”

Today, he and his two sons and two daughters market approximately 150,000 pounds of prairie seed per year to more than 50 to 60 companies throughout the U.S. as well as government agencies. More than 250 different species are grown and harvested each year at Allendan.

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