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Business development coaching

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Canada

When Jordan MacPhee decided to expand his vegetable and microgreens business, Maple Bloom Farm, into year-round production and sales last winter, one of the first calls he made was to business development coach Pat Sebastien, founder of Sebastien Business Development Consulting.

Taking advantage of PEI's Business Development Program under the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership, MacPhee scheduled telephone calls with Sebastien every one to four weeks for a year.



"We had a lot to talk about," MacPhee says.

As a young entrepreneur, the 30-year-old farmer had established a solid business in five years.

In a production room in New Dominion, he was producing more than 40 pounds of microgreens a week, hand cutting trays of radish, pea and sunflower shoots grown under lights.

Most of the customers who paid membership fees in his community-supported agriculture (CSA) model were repeat members who enjoyed the choice in his weekly selection of microgreens and lettuce and vegetables grown on two acres in Grand Tracadie.

At his kiosk at the Charlottetown Farmers Market, his greens sold out.

And the feedback from chefs at restaurants that bought his produce wholesale was glowing.

MacPhee looked to build on that success.

"I wanted to see if there was enough demand in the retail market for local greens produced in the winter on PEI and I wanted to see if I could produce enough to meet that demand," says MacPhee.

Discussing his ideas with Sebastien, MacPhee launched an on-line store featuring 100 products from his farm and 20 other farms. He also offered a winter version of his CSA and added a hydroponics section to his New Dominion growth chamber.

"Pat helped me develop models and test assumptions," says MacPhee. "I had regular check-in sessions to see if I was hitting my goals."

He did and he didn't.

Originally capping his winter CSA at 100 members, MacPhee increased it by 25 members because of demand for his products.

The on-line store, coming on-stream just as customers were spending more time at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, was so popular that MacPhee found himself spending more time than he intended on administration and management.

The new hydroponic system, using 100 growing towers of food-grade foam, was producing 30 to 40 pounds of greens a week, less than the 100 pounds or more MacPhee hoped for, in part because he couldn't devote enough time to it.

"My belief that the customer interest was there turned out to be true but the other piece, being able to meet the production goal, ended up not being true. I was spread too thin to produce at the scale I needed."

But the fact that he is in good shape to re-tool his business plan and move forward also reflects the value of his coaching, says MacPhee.

"We thought in terms of the first smallest steps that would cost the least amount of time, energy and money to explore the merits of the idea and test it in the real world."

Today, MacPhee says he's adapted his long-term plan to build from the experience.

He does not plan to manage an on-line store this winter and will concentrate instead on building his hydroponic production which will be sold through the Farmers Market.

Sebastien says business development coaching is about giving clients structure and guidance as they work through their ideas.

"Coaching, in my opinion, is not about giving advice and not necessarily about influencing people," he says. "It's all about drawing out the conversation and helping them draw their own conclusions and insights."

Sebastien says he appreciates the deep connection farmers have to their work.

"Entrepreneurship is often deeply personal, and I find that small-scale and first-generation farmers in particular care a lot about what they are doing and the reasons they are doing it."

MacPhee agrees.

"The motto of our business is growing healthy food and communities," says MacPhee. "For most people, choosing food is the most important decision they can make for the environment and their health."

"I don't think we are selling vegetables. I think we are selling healthy lifestyles."

MacPhee says he will continue with business development coaching and would recommend it for any farmer.

"As farmers, I think we can focus so much on the business of growing food and selling to customers that we don't spend enough time working on the business itself and how efficiently it is running and how we are spending our time."

Pride can also be an obstacle, he admits.

"When I was a 25-year-old starting out in business, I thought I was doing great and that everything was coming easily to me, but it wasn't," says MacPhee. "I was fooling myself."

"Talking to a coach allowed me to admit I didn't know everything and that I could benefit from talking to someone with a different perspective and by being open to new ideas."

