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Soleil's Farm Social Media Training Course

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Social media course inspires “reel” joy of farming



When post-tropical storm Fiona swept through Soleil's Farm in Bonshaw, one of the tools Lauren King grabbed for the clean-up was her iPhone.

The result was a 90-second video, known on Instagram as a reel, that captured the storm's devastation but also showed the charity of neighbours, the strength of local communities and even moments of fun as the days without power dragged on.

“It received more than 15,000 views on our Instagram account,” says Lauren King, who co-owns the organic produce farm with Soleil Hutchinson. “It was our most-viewed reel yet.”

In an age of social media influencers, Lauren King and Soleil Hutchinson are among a growing number of Island farmers who are turning to social media to sell their products and to tell a story that defines who they are as a business.

For King and Hutchinson, it's their happy workplace.

They grow organic vegetables like carrots, broccoli, peppers, tomatoes, and lettuce on seven acres of land. Six plastic-wrapped, 100-foot greenhouses called high tunnels keep production going from May until December.

The work can be back breaking but King, Hutchinson and their part-time staff laugh a lot.

“In the reels, we try to show our playful side, to show that farming can be joyful,” says King. “We work hard but we also like to have a lot of fun together.”

That cheerful enthusiasm comes through loud and clear in the more than three dozen videos that King has posted on Instagram since May, along with a few more on Tik Tok.

Many of the reels play like music videos lasting just a few seconds to half a minute. King, Hutchinson and their staff sing and dance and smile as they do the hard work of growing and harvesting vegetables for the farm's retail and restaurant clients and members of their community supported agriculture model.

There is also a series of popular reels called What we did last week that, with a bit of humour, gives more insight into work and life on a small farm.

“It's the storytelling that really seems to engage people,” says King, who has taken on the role of the farm's social media manager,

The reels likely wouldn't have been produced if King hadn't taken a social media course earlier this year with funding assistance from PEI's Business Development Program under the federal-provincial Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

The 30-hour on-line course, *The Full-time Influencer*, showed King how to combine video, photos, text, music, and dialogue to create attention-grabbing reels.

The biggest take-away, she says, was learning how to convey the spirit of the farm.

"I needed to find our voice," she says.

It meant capturing the positive energy that King, Hutchinson and their staff bring to the farm.

Although King was no stranger to sites like Facebook and Instagram – "I'm in my early 30s and social media is part of my world" – it was the pandemic that really got her thinking about the potential of social media when it came to marketing the farm.

"Once we couldn't have people visit the farm and everyone was isolated, we really started to see social media as a place to tell our story and connect with our CSA members and all the folks who support us and our products.

"It felt like a good place to focus our energy and look at how we can become better storytellers on these platforms."

King credits the Business Development Program for helping her develop the farm's social media presence as a marketing force.

"Taking this course was an expense I would probably not have been able to take on," she says. "We are really grateful to have programs that recognizes the unique challenges that small farms face.

"Social media training isn't something folks would think an organic farm would use government funding for, but we don't have the advertising budgets of grocery stores. We have to find creative ways to stand out."

Although it is still early days, Hutchinson says the reels are already having some commercial impact.

"They are helping with our retail store sales, where it is leading our products to sell out more quickly."

The farmers are currently trying to ramp up production to meet growing demand for their organic produce.



Lauren King, co-owner of Soleil's Farm in Bonshaw, is creating videos on social media that not only market the farm's organic produce but also its joyful approach to the business. King learned her video production skills with training that was supported by PEI's Business Development Program under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

They plan to complete their CanadaGap certification by next February, which will allow them to sell to large retail grocery stores. They also have a partnership with other farmers to create a distribution chain to supply Island restaurants with organic produce.

“With the incredible boom in restaurants this year, we couldn’t keep up with demand for the entire season, so we have a lot of room for growth.”

While King shoots video content almost every day, she admits it has been tough to stick to her original schedule of one reel a week.

“Demand for our produce was higher than we predicted this year and we found ourselves short-staffed like most of the Island,” King says. “If we have 1,000 feet of carrots that need to come out or a huge order for lettuce, it’s hard to justify being in the office and editing videos for an afternoon.”

But she plans to up her video production during the slower winter months.

For any farmer looking to get into social media storytelling, King offers this advice – don’t try for perfection.

“If you do that, you’ll end up never posting it,” King says. “There are going to be glitches and you might try something that flops. It’s trial and error but you learn.”

King’s iPhone shows the wear and tear of her social media work. The glass screen has a spider web of cracks but the camera still works.

She thinks more farmers will become social media influencers.

“I’m always hearing from folks that marketing is a challenge,” she says. “But marketing is so important. The more you are known in a community, the easier it will be for customers to find your products.

“Being a known presence on social media is absolutely helpful.”