

## Featured Guest Interviews

Robert Arnold (@pvfproduce, pvfproduce.com)

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**Robert Arnold:** [00:00:00] Hi, my name is Robert Arnold. I grew up in Argyle, New York, which is about 30 minutes from the Vermont border and Washington county, New York, or about 30 minutes from Saratoga and Glens falls, New York.

[00:00:12] My parents started Pleasant Valley Farm before I was born in 1988. And I grew up on that farm working day to day, harvesting, washing, packing, running equipment, helping run the business, essentially.

[00:00:28] And as I, later in my education, which I was homeschooled, I decided to go to college for technology. So I went to a local community college first and dual majored in networking and computer programming, and then transferred to Rochester Institute of Technology and finished out my networking degree there.

[00:00:48] Did some internships, decided that jobs in the technical field were a little boring compared to the kind of dynamic, day to day change of farming, and went on to merge those two with my own business, helping farms with technology specifically.

[00:01:05] So, by the time I graduated college in 2017, I was already helping my parents move to the digital world with iPads and Google sheets and wifi and sensors and cameras and everything that we needed around the farm.

[00:01:20] I took all of that and started my own business doing that for other farmers, actually all over the country, currently. But that's...I still live near the farm. I live in Southlands falls, which is just over the bridge from Glens falls. And I have been helping on the farm nonstop ever since, pretty much.

[00:01:38] Although, lately I've been trying to offload my roles to others as my business has grown and I need to sort of move that along, but that's pretty much my background in working on a small, four to five acre organic vegetable farm.

**Diego Footer:** [00:01:54] How would you describe, from your vantage point, the transition that you're seeing the sector in right now, going from the, I'll call it the old school, less technical, traditional way of farming to one that's becoming more high tech where you're seeing chip-based products appear in different areas all over the farm. Like you said, from record keeping the sensors. How do you view that?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:02:22] We, my parents have always been focused on efficiency and profitability. So technology, at some point, for our farm, falls in line with how do we make something that's as efficient as it can be manually more efficient, have better information, get more detail, get down deeper into why and how and what can we do better?

[00:02:48] And so I think technology is generally a progression that farmers take eventually. Size-dependent, but many move towards technology to help them figure stuff out. Technology

that we use has basically been around for give or take, 30 years and spreadsheets and things like that.

[00:03:07] And we're only just using enhanced versions of that to keep records and stuff. So I think it's been slow for most farms. Gradual, over the last 10 years implementing this and that is, they have workers that know how to do it.

[00:03:22] But it's...I don't think for... Certainly small scale farming, which I would consider anything under a hundred acres, probably generally a small farm, a hundred acres starts becoming fairly large, maybe medium-sized-ish, but considering the farms with thousands and thousands of acres, a hundred acres is small.

[00:03:41] But in my world, a hundred acres is a larger farm. But most of them don't have a lot of the capacity to install large amounts of technology to help them run things. And most of them care more about the direct contact with their crops and working with them directly instead of remotely.

[00:03:59] And that's how you make a small farm profitable is basically being involved as possible with your farm. So technology is more of a side help and assistance more than it is something that's gonna all of a sudden turn the farm into some robotic, employee.

**Diego Footer:** [00:04:16] Sure. Is there one area where you see technology or you feel that technology is being underutilized and you see the big future there? Beyond recordkeeping on a farm.

[00:04:28] Is it tracking data? Is it in high tunnels, like where you're at, and you're investing a lot of money in infrastructure, high-value crops in there?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:04:36] Yeah. So for sure, probably one of the most underutilized technology that isn't hard to set up, isn't hard to acquire, is monitoring technology.

[00:04:45] Most farmers, especially that I knew growing up, almost never had stuff. Some of the somewhat larger ones had like Sensaphone-type systems, which would basically call your phone if a temperature got low, but everything was all wired and stuff like that.

[00:05:01] And most wouldn't spend a couple thousand dollars on a system like that to protect their crops. They would just be there every day, checking out and then, and getting up in the middle of the night on the cold nights and sometimes every hour and walking out there and making sure things were good.

[00:05:16] And I see that sensors and technology like that can improve farmers' lives by not having to be so attentive at times that it's not fun to be attentive. And also keep track of that data and records, as you were saying, like knowing what is the actual temperature all over the place, instead of just what you can see or feel, or maybe have a manual temperature thing at, but a lot of farms, even today that's starting out, it becomes critical.

[00:05:44] A lot of them buy used equipment to run cooling systems and it's, you don't have to get starting to get going. And sometimes they just don't value that spending a couple hundred bucks or even a thousand dollars on a nice sensor system can save them sometimes tens of thousands. I get those calls fairly often.

[00:06:01] You know, I just lost a tunnel, the sides didn't close, or they didn't open and it got too hot and now a whole tomato tunnel is potentially not going to make it, which is often tens of thousands of dollars.

[00:06:14] And it would have been saved by really \$500 worth of sensors, but farmers are busy and they don't understand technology as much. So that's usually—it just becomes, oh, next year, I'll fix that next year. This year, I've got too many other things, which is how business goes.

[00:06:31] But that's probably one area that farmers don't put as much attention to. And there are farms that do. There's some big farms out there. I just listened to one on a podcast and yeah.

[00:06:44] It was an interview over for extension, I think in Vermont, but he had three systems cause he didn't want one. He wanted three. If one failed, the next one will take over. And if that one failed, the next one would take over because he couldn't afford to lose something.

[00:06:59] So you have to look at...it's insurance. That's all it is. You don't not buy insurance for your property. That's what sensors are, except they're a lot cheaper.

**Diego Footer:** [00:07:09] Do you think a lot of the, maybe hesitation to farmers uptaking that is the unknown? It's, well, I don't know what, where to start. And then also, they just assume it's going to be real expensive wherever they do start?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:07:27] Well... I think cost is probably a fairly major factor in not installing it. To a small farm, a thousand dollar expense, or even an 800 or \$600-800 expenses is a larger expense for something that doesn't necessarily turn out profit.

[00:07:46] It gives you information. It may protect you from something, but most farmers are there all the time. So they kind of view, if something goes wrong, they're going to catch it fairly fast, which is probably 90% of the time true.

[00:08:03] Sensors are often that they'll catch those fringe cases, but there's some things that can cost you a lot of money.

[00:08:09] For example, middle of winter, super cold night in our farm, the door to our washing station, which is a heated room in the middle of winter. It's kept about 40, 45 degrees generally because there's water pipes in there and all sorts of stuff.

[00:08:26] The door can get iced up around it with the condensation and water being present on wash pack days. And when someone closed at the end of the day, it didn't quite latch. And so when the wind picked up a little later in the night, it blew the door open, and we got a text alert at around 11 o'clock at night, just as about people were going to bed that the wash pack was, getting close to 35 degrees.

[00:08:52] And if we had just gone to bed and not checked that room, cause who would go down and double check you've closed every door every night? So all of your rooms, we would have had probably frozen water pipes, and we'd be digging through cement, but because we have a little hundred dollar sensor in there that texted us, that didn't happen.

[00:09:11] So we went down, found the door was open, closed it, nothing happened. And this was on like a, below zero night. It would have been that. Something simple that wasn't even crops.

[00:09:22] That was just a heated room that a door didn't quite shut, and no one notices it. It's dark after five o'clock in the middle of winter, so you can't just look out the window and see it. And you're not just making rounds like that when it's below zero for no reason.

**Diego Footer:** [00:09:38] And I know we're off in the weeds a little bit here, but I like where we're going. For people who are interested in maybe learning more about this, do you want a chance to plug your business?

[00:09:47] Yeah. Okay. All right. Let me ask you a question then it's a cleaner set of I'll edit that little, that part up.

[00:09:53] For people who are looking to add some more technology to their farm, maybe get some of their questions answered, looking for consultation, what type of services do you offer?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:10:02] So I'm a reseller for Monnit sensors, which are all wireless, battery-powered and in some cases, fairly low cost, but they run all over the board.

[00:10:10] You can get propane tank monitoring stuff, electric monitoring, all the way to all the full gambit of temperature sensors. So I help inspect, support, set up, install, and just give you ideas for basically all types of sensors.

[00:10:26] That's what I sell. I'm happy to help you out with whatever you got and configure stuff. It's... There's a classic thing where farmers purchase things, and then they sit in the shelf cause no one had time to install them. And sometimes you just need to call somebody, but there aren't a lot of people that actually install things as much as they are that sell them.

[00:10:44] So I do travel. I've gone as far as Minnesota, Missouri, to help farmers install systems, for all sorts of things ranging from control applications, fridge van controls, heater systems, anything that's electronic that helps you run your farm.

[00:11:01] I'm happy to help figure out and install. And beyond that, I do—my degree field and my training is all in networking. So that's anything related to wifi and the internet. I can help you extend, get to different buildings, which is critical in actually getting sensor systems and other automation tools to work, is having internet run directly.

[00:11:22] So I do a lot of remote building connections, getting things across large farm yards and all those kinds of things as well. And that's a pretty major part of what I do because there aren't people that really do that.

[00:11:32] They go out to farms and figure out those kind of weird, complicated ways to get internet to places that don't only have internet, which farms are always remote.

[00:11:41] And I also work with some irrigation automation, helping you with like fairly low-cost remote control set ups for irrigation. And then I do a lot of camera systems for farms as well for farm stores and just general security and almost record keeping. Our farm uses cameras for a lot of recordkeeping work.

[00:12:02] So you can go back, and you can see what happened. You can figure out cost of production by seeing how long it took someone to harvest something. And then you have an alert go off, but you don't know what the issue is exactly. But a camera can help you figure out, oh, the roll up sides didn't go down. That's why the temperature is going off.

[00:12:17] Now you can direct an employee more appropriately instead of just stabbing in the dark with someone who probably has no idea what they're looking for.

[00:12:23] So to reach me, my company name is Smart Farm Innovations. I have a website, it's SmartFarmInnovations.com. My email is Robert@SmartFarmInnovations.com, and either of those two ways, you'll find a way to contact me.

**Diego Footer:** [00:12:38] The brand of sensors you work with. Can you just spell that?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:12:41] Yes. So it's M O N N I T, Monnit. For saying monitoring.

**Diego Footer:** [00:12:48] Perfect, okay. Aright, great. Yeah, so we'll include that in there.

[00:12:50] Along the way of evolving beyond just sensors, you're seeing a lot of farms start to move online with their sales, and your parents' farm started before you were born.

[00:13:01] And I know they said they sold 34 straight years at the farmer's market without missing a market prior to COVID. From growing up on that farm, can you talk about what it was like to be a farmer's market farm from just a family perspective, having markets to go to, or sending staff or preparing for markets?

[00:13:24] What was that like? Just growing up on a farm that was market-based?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:13:28] Yeah. So just add a little bit of data to that, 90% of what we sell goes, went to farmer's markets directly. Wholesale was a top 10%. That was like a, Hey, if we have it, we'll sell it to a restaurant. We worked with a few local restaurants, but we weren't focused on that at all.

[00:13:45] There was always a way to get rid of excess in the farm, more than actually to make a profit. So growing up, the week revolved around when you go to markets and when you harvested and it was always, some markets you leave early, somewhere in the afternoon, some new harvest before the market and then go on the same day. So that's how the week went.

[00:14:04] And as you said, my family pretty much had a policy that you couldn't, we couldn't miss a market, and we never did. Rain or shine. We were out there sometimes, below zero with heaters and tarps.

[00:14:17] But you build up that kind of loyalty and customers come. We almost never had a bust day, even with weather. We'd always have the staple customers come, and we could always count on selling a certain amount of produce no matter what, and not of the weather.

[00:14:30] And of course, things moved indoors later on, and it became less issue with weather and cold. But we were some of the early people that helped push late markets into October and November being outside. And it was, it can be a challenge in the heat in the summer, of course, keep things cool, but.

[00:14:50] I was going to market since I could basically walk and helping out stocking tables, and then as I got older, helping customers directly with sales and those kinds of stuff, but it kept things humming and loading and packing trucks early Saturday morning, it was the weekly schedule.

**Diego Footer:** [00:15:13] Oh, I have kids, a lot of younger farmers either have kids or they're looking to have kids, and one thing that is the con of farmer's markets is it takes up Saturdays, a lot of time.

[00:15:28] And oftentimes it blows Sunday because a lot of people are so exhausted from Saturday. That Sunday becomes a recovery day and as great as farmer's markets can be, what did—what was your perspective being not the farm owner, but growing up in a household that every Saturday of your life, there was a farmer's market and having Saturdays be part of that, do you feel like you wish you didn't have to go to some of those?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:16:02] In some ways. Our farm, also, for most of my, I'd say, older childhood. So from like 2006 on, so in my teen years and on essentially, we only did three markets a week.

[00:6:15] One was on a Wednesday afternoon, and then two were on a Saturday. So I would say from my perspective that Saturday was necessary. It was the culmination of the week's work. And you had to go to market because otherwise, the week's work meant nothing.

[00:16:31] So it was something that had to be done. And in markets, in general, were fairly enjoyable. Ours was. We had nice markets. There's lots of vendors. I often hung out with other vendors, got baked goods, got all the other cool stuff you can find from locally made stuff.

[00:16:49] And then I personally don't mind working markets and selling things and that kind of stuff, but it most certainly, it's exhausting. Especially to someone who...doesn't gain energy from being with people. So it definitely, Saturdays are like, you get home from market, and it's like, you're done.

[00:17:09] And I could always see that with my parents. They were exhausted by it come Friday. My dad had to get up at 3:30 in the morning on Saturdays to load trucks and get ready after working all week, mostly long hours, especially in the summer, he'd be working till nine o'clock at night, usually, some years, depending on how many people we had helping.

[00:17:27] So I don't...it was the thing that just had to be done. There was no real, other good option. There wasn't as strong markets and any other day of the week. Of course, later on, the local area started having Sunday markets, but that just somehow seemed worse.

[00:17:45] And we never really wanted to do a Sunday market, but Saturday mornings, I guess now... I think we had a pretty easy.

[00:17:55] There's some farms that go to New York city on Saturdays. They leave at two, three in the morning, drive to New York city, and those are all day markets. So they don't get done until the evening.

[00:18:07] And then they have to drive home, or they have a hotel and stay overnight. I know the farmers got older, they started going towards the hotel route, but the younger ones, they drive back.

[00:18:17] And that's, that's a day. Like, our market's only four hours long and then they're done. So I always looked at that as man, I'm glad we don't have to do that because that's a lot of work. And I did, I rode with some farmers down in New York city when I was younger, I had some friends.

[00:18:31] Yeah. And we make a day of it. He didn't do markets, but he did wholesale drop offs, which was a bunch of stuff. And then we'd have some time. And, but that, I think, knowing that some farmers did that, made what we look, what we did, easy. And I didn't mind it.

**Diego Footer:**[00:18:48] You talked some farms are resistant to pick up hard technology, cameras, sensors, farms are also resilient to pick up software technology. And do you think being a farm that was so entrenched in farmer's markets and enjoying it, it sounds like. For all those years that if COVID didn't happen, you guys would have gone the route of setting up online?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:19:15] So we had... We had discussed things along these lines prior, in the last I'd say year or two before COVID. It just seemed, from my parents' perspective, 30 years going to a farmer's markets, interacting with the same customers almost every week.

[00:19:40] My parents, we did a survey recently, our average customer has been coming to the farmer's market at least monthly for about 15 years. That's the average customer we have.

[00:19:50] And we've had some that obviously are twice as long as that. Some have been going to farmer's markets their whole lives for 40 plus years, it's a local community. And we started seeing changes probably over the last five years where regular customers didn't come in as often.

[00:20:06] We had a lot of customers, the sales were steady-ish. Sometimes increasing, as of late, but the reliability of customers and when they came was very scattered, especially in the summer. It just seemed that people were busier.

[00:20:20] They had more trouble finding time on a Saturday morning to stop by the market as opposed to a grocery store, a different day of the week that was more convenient to their schedule.

[00:20:29] And we started to seeing more and more inconsistency. And in some markets were really busy and some were not, and it was hard to nail down. We started tracking market sales about the time we started introducing technology and we started taking credit cards.

[00:20:44] We had a point of sale basically on an iPad, and then not long after that, we started logging every sale on the iPad. Cash, check, doesn't matter.

[00:20:52] Our goal was to see how many customers we serviced and what the average sale was. And when they came during the market, which would help us influence how many people at the staff table. What, where are we, what's generally seen with that kind of stuff. And when did they come?

[00:21:06] And there's—there was definitely a pretty major shift on when people came. It used to be when market bell went off at nine o'clock on Saturday in Saratoga, the table would be three people deep all the way across. And we have a 25-foot table.

[00:21:20] That's a lot of people. That's like 20, 30 customers that are just there when the bell started to take care of.

[00:21:27] And we had to make sure we were set up. We had to make sure we had enough people, and then you just, you're just going. And then certain markets come in waves. Some are triples, some are like, you get slammed every 20, 30 minutes. And that just started disappearing. People just weren't there at the beginning of the day.

[00:21:42] They would come a little bit later, and some markets there'd be like, nobody there. Like the market would be almost empty. Some days when it used to be like packed around our stand at opening, even on the Wednesdays at 3:00 PM start, it started changing as well.

[00:21:56] And the Wednesday market really started to decrease in terms of sales.

[00:22:01] They used to be better. Some days were good, some days were not. It was really random, but a lot more people seem to be freer on like a Wednesday afternoon, sometimes on a Saturday, or at least it caught the same people because the market was in the same location.

[00:22:12] So we started seeing a lot more people flip-flop Wednesdays and Saturdays when they could and try to make it.

[00:22:18] And then, so we started discussing. Wouldn't it be interesting if we could get almost pre-orders from customers and just say Hey, I'm busy. This is what I want. Can you just bag it and keep it there? And then I'll drop by and pick it up some time Saturday morning?

[00:22:33] Or I'll send somebody. Because now I don't have to actually be there to pick stuff out, the whole wife sending the husband thing, and then him coming back with the wrong type of lettuce, which is fairly common. I know husband's on the phone talking like, oh, which type, oh they don't have that type. What about this?

[00:22:48] So we were always like, how can we get customers to be more consistent that they want to be there, but their lives just get in the way because the market's scheduled to these four hours, and there's no way to change that effectively? Because it really isn't a better time, that is the best time of the week.

[00:23:07] So we discussed that. I don't know if we would have moved to that. We certainly would never have moved to that that quickly. That was a forced move. I think it would have been a slower adoption. I think it would have taken more effort, marketing, talking to customers, walking them through, getting on the system to think about doing it.

[00:23:28] And then I don't know if the, if it would have been as effective, COVID forced customers to basically move online without us doing anything. All we had to do is create a website and say, here you go.

[00:23:40] And then they wanted to figure it out. They had a reason to. And they had nothing else to do. And they didn't really want to go to a grocery store. So all of a sudden, like we were basically handed a perfect storm, you might say, in terms of moving to this kind of situation.

[00:23:55] And it has resulted in exactly what we had originally talked about where customers put in exactly what they want, and then they come pick it up, or we deliver it to their house.

**Diego Footer:** [00:24:07] Do you think that three deep wall at the beginning of the market, that the dissipation of that over time was that customers aging? So you had hardcore customers, and then you didn't replace it with, and not you probably, this is probably a whole market phenomenon, your booth, but—d

**Robert Arnold:** [00:24:28] Oh, sure. This is not local to just Glens falls, Saratoga.

**Diego Footer:** [00:24:31] Did, was it just not new people coming in? They were the busy ones, and you had this hardcore culture that was really in the local, you know, way pre-internet, so there wasn't another option. There wasn't even the Amazon big boxification that we have today. So they were just used to doing this, but eventually those people get older, they do less.

[00:24:52] And you got to replace those customers with the younger generation who are doing more stuff on Saturdays, who are busier, it's easy to just to get delivered. You think that might've been part of it?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:25:01] Yes, that was definitely part of it. However, we saw steady, consistent customers that started to become...they're less often, just the same as anybody else.

[00:25:12] But I think it was certainly the younger generation was generally busier there. Yeah, that definitely is a factor. The older generation that was consistent in there every week, they started passing away, moving away, moving to retirement homes in different states, whatever the case may be, but that's definitely, we had that transition.

[00:25:33] And we started seeing newer, younger families coming, but not as often. And there was a dip, overall in the whole local food movement. Some who are close to 10 years ago, I want to say, and we started...like, sales started to dip in general.

[00:25:53] Like, we were getting a little concerned about like, oh, it's not as popular as it used to be, but at that point, we were riding this pretty big wave of resurgence at the time. And so we're like, it'll even out.

[00:26:06] And it did, but then... And we had local stores started out that focused more on local, organic food, in general, like fresh produce. They tried to source from local farms, but the stores—

[00:26:21] So initially, we actually saw a reduction in customers that left the market to go to these big stores that had—these stores were essentially saying they had the same stuff as the farmer's market.

[00:26:32] And some of them did for a time, but they didn't treat farmers very well. And they just didn't manage the situation correctly. And over time, customers started coming back to the farmer's market because they learned that all the best stuff wasn't really there, that the quality wasn't up to par, or the prices were high.

[00:26:52] And they—the market also was growing a bit more at the time. There's more vendors and more stuff. And so we actually saw, and then there was a lot of... There was a lot of stuff about local, healthy food being propagated around the country with articles and journalism, and all that kind of stuff.

[00:27:09] And we saw a bit of a resurgence, which I think really captured that next generation, as you were saying. And we saw a lot more interest in it.

[00:27:17] It was always, whatever article came out, but people would come around and ask me for, there was a time when like cat grass and stuff was a thing. Like everyone wanted to make these like horrible-tasting smoothies that were supposedly healthy.

[00:27:31] And so people—farmers were growing this stuff because it was an in demand and people were buying it because it was like the “in” thing to do.

[00:27:39] And, but I think that in general, people found that there's high quality stuff at the market, it tastes better. It's better for you. And it's a nice environment. You go and you see all your friends and neighbors at the market, and it's this real social thing.

[00:27:50] So I think that kind of refueled a lot of the success over the last 10 years. And then we just started seeing that was starting to crumble a little bit because of how busy people were.

**Diego Footer:** [00:28:02] And what are your thoughts now being an online seller primarily? I know you still do some wholesale, but selling online now versus having to go to all those markets? Having done this for a year plus, what are your thoughts?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:28:18] My thoughts are, from the perspective of what I see and where my parents are at with their career and eyeing a sort of retirement, which basically means slowing down, they want to get the farm to a manageable location where they don't have to rely on as many people, and it's easier, and they can choose...

[00:28:39] There's a lot more flexibility I think in what we're doing now, but I see the systems we're doing now is a lot easier to essentially rinse and repeat, have people, other people do it besides yourself as the main farmer. Some of the, I'd say the major differences, farmer's markets were always, for us, more successful if a family member was present at the market.

[00:29:02] It was amazing how much difference it would make. If we left the vacation, we left workers in charge of the markets, you could pretty much expect there'd be a decrease. Maybe 10, 20% in sales just because we're not there.

[00:29:14] Not because of a change in product, not because of change in anything, but just because one of our—of the four of us, my sister and myself, or my parents were not at the market present, talking and engaging customers.

[00:29:25] But this online platform has taken that, and it's somewhat unfortunate, but eliminated that need to have one of us necessarily be there for it to be successful. We could answer an email from anywhere, and the customer feels like they're connected to us.

[00:29:41] So there's that, and I think our longer-term strategy for this is to have on-farm events to get people to come out to the farm and interact with us there and make it feel like they're part of something.

[00:29:54] As opposed to on the week to week, it's a little more flexible. You can hire someone to do the delivery drives, to drop stuff off. You can hire someone to be at a pickup location, and that kind of thing.

[00:30:03] And then on the farm, a lot more stuff happens on the farm. You don't have to leave as much, all the packing, everything happens there. And then there's only one person that goes out to do it, delivery driver job, or to do the pickup location.

[00:30:16] So it's created a lot more flexibility, and it's kept my dad on the farm a lot more, which means that things can be better taken care of. So that's where I see things that are now. There's definitely a learning curve with the technology and running the sales platform and we're seeing sometimes incredible consistency from people ordering week to week because it's easy.

[00:30:38] And it comes to their door, or they just go to the pickup location. It's already done. They can send a friend, and we offer more on our store than we ever have before. And we buy and sell stuff from other local vendors to round out the offerings and make it a place that you can get almost all of your weekly groceries at right from our store.

**Diego Footer:** [00:30:57] What have been some of those challenges that you guys have tackled moving online?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:31:06] I think one of the biggest ones that's always on my mind is customers were used to being able to pick stuff out directly on the table. They look, they'd see stuff. They go, oh, I could use that.

[00:31:24] You get some of that with an online store. In some cases, more because there's no social pressure from the guy standing next to you to pick up your stuff quickly and leave so that your spot becomes available at a table.

[00:31:36] I definitely think we've seen increased sales because of that particular thing where people don't feel the pressure to choose and leave when there's a lot of people at the stand. Because it's online, they can take their time and really look through stuff and go, oh, interesting. Cool. I'll try that.

[00:31:51] And it's a lot easier to click a button to, the same online shopping thing that everybody experiences where people do tend to buy more because it's easier to buy more.

[00:32:00] But beyond that, for me, it's about making sure that the quality is always there. Because when someone clicks that button, they're not clicking that actual thing they're getting necessarily like they would at a farmer's market stand where they can look at the lettuce heads and say, okay, that size is bigger this week.

[00:32:20] I like the looks of that. When someone's picking out lettuce heads, you'd be like, what do you think? Oh, what about little bit—yeah. Okay. That one. Exactly. And you can't get that from an online store.

[00:32:30] So having and working with the crew and maintaining quality is, I think, is paramount and there's—you need to do whatever you have to do to ensure that whatever goes in that customer's crate is the best of what you have.

[00:32:44] At the expense of harvesting too much or not using something that just isn't quite up the quality because they have to sight unseen purchase produce, which is probably one of the most volatile things you can sell online sight unseen.

[00:33:00] And we've always had a high quality standard at the farmer's markets. That's a key in my parents' success is making sure that there's consistent high-quality stuff that you know, that the customers can trust.

[00:33:15] They can send someone to pick something out and know that whatever they're going to get, it's going to be high quality. But I think the online game is you have to up your game for that because people don't see it, and they're not going to buy it again if they get a bad one.

**Diego Footer:** [00:33:31] Is part of relaying that crop, since it's not in front of them, they can't pick it out like you're saying, have you found like that there has been some significance to, okay, we got to use this type of picture.

[00:33:42] We got to have this type of description to convey what it is to help them make that choice. Obviously, love what you said. Hey, we gotta put quality in the bin at the end of the day.

[00:33:53] But on the front end, I don't have a bunch of produce to look at. So I'm looking at his words and pictures on the screen.

**Robert Arnold:** [00:34:00] I think that's something that we intend to probably talk to customers about. I don't have a good answer to that question, and it's something that we probably need to move towards as a sort of next step in our online game is really working on photography and descriptions and what really helps.

[00:34:19] Descriptions do help for sure. I...putting information in how to cook it, there's a huge opportunity here to be able to convey far more information than you can in a 30-second transaction at a farmer's market when there's other customers waiting.

[00:34:32] Like, you standing there and explaining how to cook something to one customer when there's 10 waiting, it's just a bad move. Unless the other customers are actively engaged, and that's often the case.

[00:34:33] When you get three people standing around and then, whatever it may be, and you're explaining how to cook something, they're all listening. Like they're all interested. But you can't explain every one of the 20 crops that they just purchased at the farmer's market.

[00:34:52] There's not enough time. But online, you can include links to recipes and descriptions and extra information and background on the crop and all those kinds of things. So there's a much greater opportunity to pass information along.

[00:35:06] And I think that does help certainly, first things and having a photo, we try to make photos representative of what they're actually going to get as much as possible.

[00:35:15] There's some things that you just, you can't get a good photo of, or it changes weekly, like the salad mix, the size of the leaf will vary a little bit every week. So it was like, you just got to have an average photo.

[00:35:27] Also, I would say that most majority of our customers on the online store were customers at the farmer's market. So this past year, we have been relying on customers that know what a basket of potatoes means without even a photo.

[00:35:47] So we come from a place where our customers actually know how we package stuff because they've been buying with us for 15 plus years, and we don't, haven't been as concerned about that.

[00:36:00] But I think as we're trying to attract new customers or keep people or just time passes, people forget, things change. And I think we're needing to focus on that a little more, but I, photos are definitely important.

[00:36:11] Like, you can't get away with not having photos and then descriptions are also helpful to help do that. That, make that last decision, okay, this is what you can do with this. And they go, oh, okay. And then, that helps them purchase it.

**Diego Footer:** [00:36:25] And you seem like a systems guy, efficiency guy. What have you found has worked well in terms of here's when the store is open? One approach is it's open 24 7, and we have pickup dates this time, but then that runs, it turns into kind of an inventory management challenge.

[00:36:44] What have guys arrived at that works in terms of here's when we open our store?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:36:48] Yeah. So hands down the most impossible task in the world with running an online store with a farm, at least the way we do it, is knowing what to put on the store for availability.

[00:37:00] You harvest strawberries, and you pick baskets on a Thursday or Friday, and the store opens on a Monday. How many baskets are you gonna pick? Like, there's almost no way to know exactly what you're going to get of how many crops by the end of the week.

[00:37:14] Some—so my dad had to change how he thinks, essentially, and how he grows and what, where, what is he thinking about for availability and how much is needed.

[00:37:25] That's, for sure like it's a near impossible task to be accurate at that kind of job. And it definitely takes experience. So anyone just starting out, I would—you're going to have to low ball the numbers to a certain extent.

[00:37:41] Probably have a 10, 20% margin in your numbers just to make sure you don't oversell things by the end of the week. For us, we do, the store opens late Monday, probably. We try to get it open Monday afternoon at some point.

[00:37:57] And then we send out the note that, Hey, the store is back online. Here's the new things for the week. Here's the sales, here's whatever. And then the deadline is Thursday at 9:00 AM.

[00:38:07] And which is a bit of a soft deadline. So we really take orders until 10, but the 9:00 AM is the one that we put forth. And you cannot do this without reminders to customers. Because of the nature of it, because they don't really know what they need even on a Monday for what they need for the week for food, because they're still eating stuff that they just got two days before on a Saturday.

[00:38:30] All of our deliveries are on a Saturday, although we do leave orders in stores that we have drop-off locations in coolers so that they can drop by on a Sunday, Monday, or

Tuesday, depending on location and pick those orders up if they weren't available on a Saturday.

[00:38:47] So we try to accommodate people with changing schedules and a lot of customers have appreciated that and taken us up on that. We've kept a-hundred-dollar-a-week-customers by having a Sunday option, and that just helps cause the goal...

[00:38:59] Almost the goal for us is to keep the consistency in the summer and to keep the customers so that in the winter time, when they have nowhere else to go, they're going to us every week. So our sales from way back have flipped.

[00:39:13] Wintertime is our busier sale time, and we have more sales every week, more customers with consistency. And in the summertime, things wane a little bit, which I think for us is actually better.

[00:39:26] It gives us more freedom in the summer to grow and spend time on the farm. And then in the wintertime, we just have to rinse and repeat each week, and it's not growing as much cause it's just inside high tunnels and stuffing it in the cellar.

**Diego Footer:** [00:39:38] Cool. Question in terms of your sales, I've had some vendors who I've interviewed say this as, Yeah, same thing. We open the store on Monday. We shut it off on Thursday, 90% of us, our sales, come before we shut it off on Thursday.

[00:39:53] Do you see that same distribution or is there a pattern there? Do you actually see a nice kind of blend throughout the week?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:40:00] We were just looking at that with the data. And just to jump back a little bit and actually answer the original question a little more.

**Diego Footer:** [00:40:06] Sure.

**Robert Arnold:** [00:40:08] We chose this schedule because we found Saturday was the best day to handle deliveries and drop stuff off. There's customers that aren't available on Saturdays. There's customers that preferred us to actually do deliveries on Thursday, which last year, we did home deliveries on Thursday because we replaced the Wednesday market with home deliveries.

[00:40:30] And just to make things work with the crew, but the crew unanimously decided that it was too much work to harvest twice a week because of the work it takes to wash and pack and then pack orders, there's a lot of setup time involved.

[00:40:42] So we moved to just doing that one day a week, and we actually harvest most of Thursday and then harvest the remaining stuff Friday morning and then do all the wash-pack work and final bagging of stuff that needs to be done Friday morning.

[00:40:57] And then Friday afternoon is when we actually pack all the orders. So it used to be just a one day pack, wash-pack for Saturday, but because of the extra needed time to pack orders, we had to back into Thursday, which meant the deadline got pushed to the Thursday for orders to be done by so we could harvest.

[00:41:13] Otherwise, if we were able to get it all done in one day, then the deadline would be Thursday night. So that's what's dictating the times and why it's so early on a Thursday. That's what we need stuff by. Vendors have to have time to get stuff to us and they need the order some Thursday to get to us on Friday, anyway. So that's how that's dictated.

[00:41:30] And we don't open on Monday because we don't have time between Friday and Saturday to figure out what we have available for next week until Monday morning and running around and checking things, counting stuff as leftover, figuring out what might grow, looking at the weather reports, talking, those kinds of things, and double checking with a couple of vendors here and there.

[00:41:49] So that's what it's come down as it gets pushed later on Monday is figuring out all these information. So it's we are—we have given customers as much time as possible to order from our store every week as we can without cutting into our ability to actually update numbers and run it.

[00:42:06] So we see a lot of our customers know that if they want stuff like sugar snap peas, they come in short supply sometimes. It's a short window of time when they're harvested, like strawberries. And if you want to get it on that, you better be ordering when that alert goes out on Monday, that the store is open.

[00:42:23] And we tell customers that they're welcome to edit their orders anytime up until nine, 10 o'clock on a Thursday and change stuff as stuff from new stuff, whatever. We're open to anything up until that deadline.

[00:42:35] And then after that, like your order is locked in, we've already sent orders out to our vendors to supply stuff. So like you can't change that after that. We do, we... For awhile, we took late orders. Customers had to learn when the time was, when to remember.

[00:42:50] We had some chronic late customers, it's pretty funny. We'd be, we have to call them, stuff like that. But we do a combination of email and actually text reminders to some customers.

[00:43:00] Between—we do send out another reminder about six, 7:00 PM on a Wednesday night and says, Hey, don't forget to order. The deadline is tomorrow morning at 9, 10 AM. And then if there's anything that's changed in the week, we included them too.

[00:43:13] So I think the majority of our orders...about half of our orders will be in by say, Wednesday night by 7:00 PM. About half of them will come in. And then after that, a half to three quarters somewhere in there.

[00:43:26] And then after that, you get a bunch of them after you send that reminder out and then the remaining that's coming in Thursday morning. And then we send another round of emails to anyone that has an ordered still. So the other two blasts go out to everybody.

[00:43:43] Everybody that has already ordered and hasn't ordered. And then Thursday morning at seven, 8:00 AM in the morning, we send out a final email and text reminder to people that have not ordered yet and say, Hey, deadline's at X time.

[00:43:56] And some of this comes from asking customers, do you want to be reminded Thursday morning because you haven't ordered yet. And they all, a lot of them say yes,

absolutely. And pretty much every week, there's a couple of customers that send us a thank you note for our reminders.

**Diego Footer:** [00:44:10] So you send text reminders, too?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:44:12] Yes. I have an integration with one of our pieces of software we use that sends text reminders out to two people, and it's fairly low cost. And then you're talking about a couple cents to send someone that may place a \$50 order.

**Diego Footer:** [00:44:28] Yeah, what's that software cause I'm sure people would be curious to know?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:44:31] So just to give a brief rundown, we use Local Line for our online store system. We use Google Sheets for kind of the general stuff, like the harvest sheet essentially is a Google sheet so that everyone with an iPad can go in and input in what they've harvested, or they can look up what needs to be harvested.

[00:44:51] And then that's where we do stuff on the Thursday is sent—the picklist, essentially, gets put on a Google Sheet from Local Line. We download it, put it in a format on a Google Sheet, and then it's all there for people to work around the farm.

[00:45:03] From there, the actual store admin stuff that like I would do and base everything else off of is done on Airtable, which is an online database software that's sort of like a merging of old school, like database stuff with Google Sheets, so it's in the cloud.

[00:45:21] So you, essentially, you link tables of information together. Like a customer is assigned to an order and an order assigned, order records, or order items. If you buy a beet, it's in a list of all the items you've purchased in one essentially spreadsheet.

[00:45:36] And then another spreadsheet is all the orders and another spreadsheet's all the customers, and they'll link together so that it's—it can expand and contract as you need. And then you can draw reports from it.

[00:45:46] So from there, Airtable supports integrations with a lot of cloud connections, like a lot of cloud software that you can connect things together. So that if that happens, then this, so we have a cloud connection to, oh, what's that company called?

[00:46:10] It's...you probably have to edit this, I forget the name of it. It's a...hang on.

[00:46:19] I forget the name because we almost never talk about it.

**Diego Footer:** [00:46:23] Is it Twilio?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:46:25] Yes, yeah. Yes. So through Airtable, there's an integration with Twilio so that you can assign an account to it. And then from there, you basically use a filtered view of Airtable records to then say, Hey, I want to send the text messages to all these customers.

[00:46:42] Cause I've imported the order list from that week at that time, early Thursday morning. And then it filters out only the customers that haven't ordered yet that are usually consistent. And then it sends them all a text message that says, Hey, deadline's this time, here's a link.

[00:47:01] If you didn't need to order this week, have a great week. Some people order every other week. And then, yeah, that's pretty effective for some customers more than an email and I...

**Diego Footer:** [00:47:12] I going to ask you on that, in terms of text versus email. For me a reminder, I much rather get a text than an email. Do you find that has really helped having that feature?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:47:23] It's really helped with the people that are chronic, chronically forgetful for the deadline, which is a hard thing.

[00:47:32] It's a hard thing to remember to put a deadline in for a produce order every week by a certain time. A lot of people at Thursday morning is, you're always pushing to that Wednesday to remember. And then if you forget Wednesday because you're busy, so it!... I think it's a pretty big deal for people to have that.

[00:47:49] And the reminder in text messaging, we've certainly seen a much greater reliability from certain customers if we send a text reminder. And many of us thank them for us—thank the, thank us for the alert every week.

[00:48:00] And we haven't done a very good job of, I think, really polling people and asking if they want to be added to that, but what happens is if someone doesn't order, and then they say, Hey, I forgot to order last week.

[00:48:13] I say, do you want to be put on the text reminder list? And some would go, oh yeah, that would be awesome. And then, you know, that kind of thing. A few would say no, some just like the emails.

[00:48:22] We generally cater to, I would say, an older generation still. A lot of our home deliveries are retired, older folks, and emails are fine for them. They're checking their email once or twice a day, regardless, usually early in the morning. And that works.

[00:48:42] I would definitely advise you to know your customer, know what type of customers they are. And if you have a more younger crowd, text messages are going to be far more reliable than email reminders are.

[00:48:55] They work well for us, but not everyone has the same customer group depending on how you market. And, I think if you were a CSA farm, you're generally working more with families, and then text messages are going to be more important than necessarily emails are.

[00:49:11] I think emails are good to give information out, but text messages are great a way to remind people and Airtable costs, for an account that we run, 20 bucks a month. And then the text messages are pretty inexpensive on top of that.

[00:49:25] And even if you do a lot of them, you're only talking about maybe five bucks a week to send a whole lot of text messages. Like, we're talking like a hundred or more. So it's a fairly low-cost, reliable way and easy.

[00:] I just click a couple of buttons, and the text messages are sent. I have a pre-configured note and I just click, click, done.

**Diego Footer:** [00:49:47] Pretty tile, then it sounds like, in terms of the data side of things, and this is one area where people struggle with online stores. Versus a farmer's market, you harvest, throw it in bins. The bins go to the market. You put on the table, done.

[00:50:00] Customers pick their own stuff out. You get a hundred orders. You get 200 orders that come in a week. Now that's all on a spreadsheet. You got all this produce that now has to get matched up. No two orders are alike.

[00:50:13] What system have you guys arrived at to say, okay, we have the orders. We know what each customer's getting. How do you assemble the totes for each order in an efficient way?

**Robert Arnold:** [00:50:31] Heh. It's been over a year process working that out. And as we work things out and figure stuff out, we, of course, are increasing. We're adding more vendors, more products, more things to the stores.

[00:50:42] So even what we were doing in the beginning was efficient for what we had at the time, but then as you add more things, you have to find better ways to handle more stuff. So, I would categorize what actually we do if it were to be explained in its full detail, to probably massively complicated.

[00:51:03] But because Airtable is essentially a tool you build out, and then once you build it out, it's, that's the way it is. So when I download all the order information on a Thursday or Friday morning, and I import it into Airtable, I have preset filters and tools and reports and all that stuff that just all of a sudden gets auto-populated.

[00:51:28] All I have to do is change the filter date to this week, and then I have the information at the ready to make labels, to download for delivery route planning, to give a certain type of picklist for the crew for certain stuff.

[00:51:42] For example, certain things they like to know what are duplicates of, and they'll pre-make the duplicates for those orders, such as cucumbers. If someone wants one pound of cucumber, then they make up that one pound for the customer in a basket. And then they make up, 20, 30 of them, whatever.

[00:51:58] And then they want to do doubles. They put the doubles in a basket. So we call them like the duplicates list, but there's a couple crops that the crew actually does the amount for, based on how many are ordered in doubles or triples, quadruples, whatever.

[00:52:14] Strawberries, they pre-made bags of five strawberries or four strawberries or three strawberries to the number we've actually sold exactly, so that when they're packing out, that stuff is pre-done.

[00:52:23] You don't have to grab, remember to grab two cucumbers, you already grab the double that's already made. So those kinds of reports are built into the system.

**Diego Footer:** [00:52:31] Okay. So let me just pause you there to recap, to make sure I'm on the same page. So in the harvest crew, they'll get a list of unitization, I'll call it, of a particular crop.

[00:52:42] So let's just say there's 10 customers. There's five singles, two doubles, and one triple. They have five singles on the table. They have the four doubles and the one triple all sit in there.

**Robert Arnold:** [00:52:55] Yes.

**Diego Footer:** [00:52:56] Okay. And then, okay, so now we're at that stage, we've packed it all. We've divided it up now.

**Robert Arnold:** [00:53:02] Yeah, so the crew packs everything to the exact quantity that's required for the store in crates. They get put on rollers, the crates are labeled. We have a tagging system. And then it goes in the cooler throughout Thursday and Friday, everything gets packed that way.

[00:53:20] And then there's...we have set up, within our system, a pack order. So when it comes back out of the cooler, into the wash pack area where we then pack the orders, there's a very specific order to every single crop that goes out.

[00:53:40] And then, every order has that same order of crops on it as to how it gets packed and handled. You could say, for example, this is alphabetized, so then carrots would come before potatoes.

**Diego Footer:** [00:53:57] Right, so carrots come out of the cooler, and carrots are also first on the pick list. So that way you go through all the carrots, divide them up amongst all the orders, and then you pull the next crop.

**Robert Arnold:** [00:54:08] So everything then gets brought out of the cooler, and it gets laid out in its entirety as much as possible. If you have one—if you have 10 crates of a certain crop, you're only putting one out at a time, like a farmer's market table where you lay everything out and then you stock from back stock.

[00:54:23] In this case, though, everything is counted exactly. So everything is laid out in a great big circle for all of what we have to do for the store. And then that includes all the vendors' items, and everything else like that.

[00:54:35] We keep this—we have to be careful about how long we put stuff for because of temperature and stuff. But the wash station's generally kept cool. And then we'll bring stuff out of the cooler as needed to restock.

[00:54:45] But there's a very specific pack order because when you pack a crate, you have to put the heaviest stuff in first, and then it has to move towards the lightest stuff so that you don't crush things when you pack stuff.

[00:54:58] So preset in our system in Airtable, we have a number of system, that ranges from, I think it's...I forget if we started at a hundred, and then we go up to a thousand or 999, and then everything is mixed in between and separate groups.

[00:55:17] So all other things that has to go on the bottom is first, the lower numbers, and there's separate groups for different categories. So as we add crops and root crops during the year, there's numbers in there, and we can tweak stuff.

[00:55:27] That's preset, pre-done, everything is pre-ordered by that number. And then there's a view that is given to them that they would print off or view on an iPad that shows them exactly what order they need to lay stuff out in the wash station as from start to finish.

[00:55:41] So someone will be there and be like, all right, give me this crop. And then they get that from the cooler, and they roll stuff out, and they go that's first, that's second, that's third. And they just keep going along, lay it all out.

[00:55:51] And then from there, they're ready to essentially start packing into our crates some bins to go to home deliveries and customers and pickups.

[00:56:03] At that point, we have labels made for every bin or crate or bag, which is basically just our own internal number. The delivery route has been set, which influences the order that's packed.

[00:56:19] So, we packed the deliveries first, which is one through whatever, can be up to 80 deliveries, and we pack them in order of the delivery. So everything is packed from the first drop point, the first person we drop an order to based on the delivery route, that sets is packed first.

[00:55:37] And then stacked into the cooler such after the crates are packed. So then when you load into the truck, it's already to go and it's in the right order for drop off.

**Diego Footer:** [00:56:47] Reverse order so farthest away is going to go in the truck, in the back of the truck.

**Robert Arnold:** [00:56:50] Right, because if you pack the first order, first it's in the back of the cooler. And then the last order you deliver is first. So when you pack the truck, the last order you deliver goes into the truck first, and then you're going to countdown to one, essentially.

**Diego Footer:** [00:57:02] It makes sense.

**Robert Arnold:** [00:57:03] Yes, and different problems have different ways of doing it. We number and keep track of stuff very specifically, simply because we do different stuff. Some farms I've seen, that do deliveries, like have a method.

[00:57:18] Like boxes are always stacked left to right. Boom, boom, boom. And that same thing goes into the truck exactly that way. And they don't even have labels and stuff. They just always move boxes in the exact same way. So the order never changes.

[00:57:32] We focus on labels more and making sure things are visually correct. More so than having a process like that. Just because we—things get weird. You add an order in here, you changed something, we couldn't do that without having screw ups. So that's our methodology for that. And then—

**Diego Footer:** [00:57:49] What about on the packing, the boxes? So let's say you—

**Robert Arnold:** [00:57:51] So the packing, the boxes, we have generally four to five people working, and one person carries the crate.

[00:57:59] One person picks the stuff and then one person reads off the screen what is supposed to be harvested per order. So on a screen, I have another Airtable functionality, is a pre-made document, you could say, or a slideshow of all the orders.

[00:58:16] And some things are packed later. Even at time of drop-off or delivery such as frozen items, fresh fish, and a couple of like flowers or things like that. Things you can't pack in the crate at that moment, either because of cooling or because of how fragile they are, or because of when we get them, like you just can't throw a bunch of flowers in with the crate and not have it be destroyed, or not fit in the crate.

[00:58:40] So there's certain things we have to drop off later as an extra, and we have a whole tagging system for those kinds of things.

[00:58:46] But basically there's a great big screen in the washing station and people have iPads and they can read off that. And that's to ensure that there's double checks and balances in place.

[00:58:58] So the person reading says, put two of this and put one of that in. The person carrying the crate is keeping a second eye out for what the person that's picking from the table is putting in, making sure there are no errors made.

[00:59:11] And so there's at least two people keeping an eye out for what's going on every crate, because we have upwards of 200 different items that go into the bins each week. Generally, around 175, I think is probably more common.

[00:56:26] And so that's a big deal, making errors. And every week, there's always one thing. One or two things that get missed or there is a wrong count in the washing station. There's a lot of double counting we do, but, that's the process.

[00:59:38] They go around, and they pack a crate, and they pack the next crate. And then there's someone that receives that crate, puts any other items that need to go in that crate from a separate list in the crate there, packs it in the cooler.

**Diego Footer:** [00:59:50] So essentially, if one customer got all 175 items, they'd be all listed on your, on their pick list in the order you set, which is based upon really weight by heaviest stuff at the bottom, and then matching that exact list in the pack room.

[01:00:07] You'd have those 175 items laid out in that line. And the picker would just move down line. They're carrying the box. The products are fixed in one location, and they're just going from crop or item to item down on the line. And then that's it.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:00:22] Yep. It's in the exact order on the screen that it is in the actual layout of the benches.

**Diego Footer:** [01:00:26] How do you factor in the doubles? So somebody has already prepacked a double strawberry, a triple strawberry. If you have three totes or three trolleys of strawberries, where do the doubles go, on the first one?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:00:42] Some of these things that are doubles are done in paper bags. So strawberries go in their own paper bag, and then the bag would have a number put on it. Two, three, whatever, when it's made up.

[01:00:53] Sweet potatoes are the same way. People buy 1, 2, 3, 4, or five pounds of sweet potatoes. It's written on the bag. And so there'd just be two boxes. One has all the singles. One has all the doubles. One has all the triples, and then in the other random ones.

**Diego Footer:** [01:01:05] Got it.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:01:06] But it would be numbered. There are certain things we put in baskets. Open top, like plastic baskets, and the person picking just has to know which bin contains the doubles, which bin contains the singles.

[01:01:21] Maybe they'll put a note on it. And then some things you can tell by looks. And then you get into things like there's medium cabbage, large cabbage, small cabbage, and then it's just a sizing thing and usually lay it out, big to small to big, however they want to do that in the pack order. Usually that's, at that point, based on alphabetical, medium, small, large, that kind of thing.

**Diego Footer:** [01:01:41] What's an average week in terms of total orders fulfilled?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:01:44] In the wintertime, we can, we pushed—pushing over 180 a week is common.

**Diego Footer:** [01:01:51] Okay. So let's say you had a 180. How long does it take a crew to go from, I arrive, and like, nothing's been done. Nothing's been pulled out of the cooler till everything has been pulled and put back in the cooler.

[01:02:05] How long is that time to do 180?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:02:07] Probably for hours.

**Diego Footer:** [01:02:08] For three people?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:02:09] For four. There's usually less people setting up than there are actually packing out. Two to three people can easily set up the whole system, pull everything out of the cooler, lining it up. Any more becomes chaotic.

[01:02:23] Cause you really just...one thing after the other. You're just moving around in circles. So you don't really need a lot of people to set that up. At that point, people are probably finishing up stuff in the wash-pack.

[01:02:33] That has to be done before orders are packed. So they'll be gathering things around the farm gathering wherever. If we have some stuff stored, like we have soap and honey and syrup in a place on the farm from different vendors.

[01:02:43] So they'll be gathering what's needed for that. Bringing that in double counting some of the stuff from vendors. Meanwhile, two people are probably putting out the produce all lined up.

[01:02:52] And then once the actual, everything's all laid out, ready to go. That's when you have the four to five people there, depending. Sometimes you have two people helping with the packing side of stuff.

[01:03:03] And then two or three people in the center, actually packing, and one's reading. So the actual pack-out, which is what we call it, once people start packing the crates, is probably an hour and a half to two hours at the most to pack 180 orders.

[01:03:20] In terms of dollars, we figure it costs somewhere around 75 cents to a dollar in labor to pack an order.

**Diego Footer:** [01:03:32] Do you raise prices at all to account for that? I've talked to a vendor who did, like they said, okay, Hey, it's going to cost us 75 cents. So we raised every item a dime or something.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:03:41] So we have always been focused on making the farm more efficient and not raising prices. We have a farmer's market worker that recently moved on to a full-time job someplace else.

[01:03:57] She started when she was as young as you can be to work at a market stand. I forget, 14, 15, somewhere in that range, even. And she's been working with us. She worked with us for 10 years, 11 years, I think?

[01:04:11] Growing up until she basically graduated college and started a career, and she, we asked her, we said, how many prices have we changed since you started working with us 10, 11 years ago?

[01:04:22] And she said, two. We raised salad mix and spinach 50 cents in that time period once, and we've raised root crops, 50 cents once. And we have not really raised—we raised potatoes a little more for the online store, but that was a more necessary thing, more so than this thing.

[01:04:44] But we have kept everything as exactly the same with pricing and how we do stuff from our farmer's market to our online store. Every order, there is a dollar fee tacked on.

**Diego Footer:** [01:04:56] Got it.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:04:56] Doesn't matter if it's home delivery, doesn't matter if it's pickup. It's all, it's just a dollar. So that's why I say 75 cents to a dollar.

[01:05:02] And from there we don't charge the customer anymore. Even for home deliveries, there is no extra fee for a home delivery versus a pickup. That's all just included in the cost of running the system.

[01:05:14] To put it in perspective, have you ever been to a farmer's market where a farmer charged you to walk up to their stand to buy from them before you even bought produce?

[01:05:25] No. Does it cost the vendor nothing to be at the market?

**Diego Footer:** [01:05:28] No.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:05:29] So why would we charge for home delivery when it's the same thing as going to a market and paying someone to set up that stand, paying someone to man it, paying for the booth, which can be expensive depending on the market you go to, paying for the truck, all that stuff was already built into the cost of the produce and running the farm.

[01:05:46] Home delivery, we just had to make sure it was as near efficient in terms of costs as the farmer's market was. So we ran numbers, three months, calculated everything. And it came down to the fact that with a little bit of extra resold goods added on to the store that we sell, which is about 30% of the gross usually, because it's built up over time.

[01:06:07] We have 15 plus vendors now supplying things, that the extra, the real extra cost of running the store was not the home delivery. It wasn't the packing, it wasn't the pickup locations or paying for the labor. It was simply the administrative work of running the store. That was the extra cost compared to doing a farmer's market.

[01:06:28] All the reports, my work, which is sometimes 10 hours a week of managing the digital aspect of everything, making sure the store was updated, adding photos, changing systems, building stuff out, making all that stuff work.

[01:06:40] And that was more than covered by the extra profit from reselling items on the store, which in turn help keep the consistency of people ordering every week because of the variety on the store.

[01:06:53] Our vegetable sales remained constant versus the farmer's market. The only difference being we sell to, in some cases, a quarter or a third of the customers we did before. They just buy more.

[01:07:05] The average sale used to be nine to \$11 per customer. And we'd see, maybe three, 400 customers at a farmer's market on average. And now we've moved to 130 to 180, depending on the time of year.

[01:07:22] And the average produce aspects sale is more like 25 to \$28 per customer. So they're buying more produce. Less customers, and then they're buying all the resell goods on top of that.

[01:07:40] So we don't—we do tips. Our thing on the store, we have an item on the store, that's a tip. And if people want to leave a tip for the home delivery or the pickup, they are welcome to. It's not required.

[01:07:52] We just tell them that one dollar is the fee, that's the labor, packing fee, that we normally would not have had, and the supplies that go into that, the bags and the labels and the all that kind of stuff.

[01:08:03] So that's the only fee we do is a dollar because that's the thing we felt that was like the addition. The convenience of us pre-packing the bag for you as opposed to the farmer's market.

[01:08:12] And even then, I don't know if we really actually need the dollar or not to remain profitable. Probably not. It's not a, it's not a huge deal. The tips do add, average a couple of bucks per order, probably across all customers. Some leave tips, some don't. Some add a lot of tips.

[01:08:28] We had one customer who would always do 20% in tips, no matter what. It didn't matter if he had a \$50 order or a \$200 order, it was always 20% and tips were added on. That's just what he did. Everybody does their own thing. And we don't require any of that, though.

**Diego Footer:** [01:08:45] Hearing what goes into this, do you think this is a fair statement: running and managing and fulfilling orders for the online store, it's probably the same amount of work as the farmer's markets. It's just different work?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:09:04] Yes, it is different work. So that's why I go back to saying that the benefits that we decided for this system were that we'd be on the farm more. It'd free my dad up more being on the farm. Wouldn't have to go someplace necessarily. We'd be flexible, right?

**Diego Footer:** [01:09:26] Assignable, more assignable. It's you're not as key person dependent.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:09:29] Not as key person dependent, but also not as dependent on we have to be at a market at this time.

**Diego Footer:** [01:09:38] Yeah.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:09:39] We're late for delivery, we're late for delivery. If a giant blizzard occurs on a Saturday, we'd deliver on a Sunday. You don't lose any sales, everything gets moved around. You can change and morph with what your customers want.

[01:09:54] You can do exactly what your customers want, the time that it comes, there's no... We're now in complete and utter control of our entire system from when we plant the crop to when it arrives in the customer's doorstep.

[01:10:08] And they have that freedom and flexibility of that—they don't have to be home when it arrives. They can put a cooler out with ice, or they can have a neighbor come by and grab it, or we could deliver to their neighbor, or their son or daughter in a different part of the town. And then they get it later.

[01:10:23] So lots more flexibility, lots more, easier for us to leave and go away on vacation, my parents to leave and leave people in charge of running the system because it's just something you've got to rinse and repeat, and the customers are used to it.

[01:10:38] And it's all digitally managed. I've set up this system, train someone how to run it. It's a rinse and repeat. They didn't really have to understand how the system was created or what went into all the thought and processes behind why and how they just have to do the work.

**Diego Footer:** [01:10:53] Like you said, they don't have to be a family member that had to go to market, that's affecting sales. Like, that all doesn't matter. You become a little bit faceless.

**Robert Arnold:** [01:11:01] Right. And I would say that we definitely don't treat it like it's faceless. We—emails come from my mom or myself pretty much to customers. And we interact with them. We call on the phone, we're referencing each other and other team members.

[01:11:13] And then also, and Kim goes to the pickup location, my sister, herself, and one of them, so that there is a family member there to see people. And the other one was a longtime worker.

[01:11:23] But we sometimes just go occasionally and just be there when customers arrive, to greet them and say hello. And we have very personable home delivery drivers that customers really like to interact with each week as they see them.

[01:11:37] And you don't really see many of them when you're dropping off and delivering, but we maintain a very friendly, interactive and engaged digital front, I would say.

**Diego Footer:** [01:11:47] Yeah. So, a farm thinking about this, hearing you, this is my impression: you need a couple of roles that you wouldn't have had previously. You need a technology manager, the person who's going to manage the online store, all these systems.

[01:12:05] And then you need a key person who's like the packing point person, because that seems like an area that you absolutely don't want to screw up. Would you say that's fair?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:12:18] Yeah. It's... That's the part I think I struggle with is that this is all quite complicated to set up. And my role has been required.

[01:12:32] And most farms don't have someone that can work through all the digital space and making sure that a system is made that fits the farm in the style of harvesting and washing, packing that farm requires to ensure that whatever a customer orders gets in their bag.

[01:12:50] That's probably not a common skill. A lot of places have, especially for the variety. Of course, you would tailor your farm to the skills you have available and what you offer. And if you can't do everything that we do, partner with another business or another farm and say Hey, I grow this, you grow that.

[01:13:13] Let's find a bunch of people and then combine resources and sell together as a group. There's a large co-op farm called Three Rivers Alliance, over in New Hampshire. And it's three farms that were larger wholesale farms that got together and said, Hey, let's create a wholesale distribution that we run.

[01:13:32] So we don't have to rely on another company. So they have facility, they have all the trucks, separate staff, and then they pull from farmers beyond those three kind of founding farms and then have a direct wholesale distribution that turned into, last year, full home delivery, to almost a thousand customers a week.

[01:13:55] Direct retail. They totally flipped the business and went direct to customers instead of wholesale because all the restaurants and all that industry dropped out. So now that business is pulling from all these different farms, has its own staff, its own...everything. The farmers don't have to do anything other than harvest, wash, pack, and deliver what's ordered.

[01:14:17] And then this company manages the rest of it. So that's...you know, teamwork helps with that kind of thing if you can't do all those things individually on your own farm. And also I think there's a lot of benefit to having just an on-farm store, bringing people to your farm.

[01:14:35] And we've seen a lot of farms with a lot of success doing that and becoming more engaged with their customers to drop out to the farm, building sometimes state-of-the-art facilities to have that store in.

[01:14:48] And depending on your location, proximity to your customers, we're at a location that it wouldn't work that well for that, which is why we haven't. We'd really need to get a separate facility closer to town because we're 30 minutes out in a way that people would never really travel. And this is probably too far for someone to drive every week just for fun.

[01:15:05] 15 to 20 minutes is okay, but beyond that, it starts coming too far. So that's what I would go with that. Does that answer the question?

**Diego Footer:** [01:15:14] It did, I think it's a great answer. And to close this out, last question. What do you think about farm life now from the perspective of you and your parents? Not business, but just farm life now that the farmer's market transitions been made and you guys are doing this all online?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:15:35] There's definitely been...there's been less stress in some areas, more stress than other areas. But I think it's the kind of stress you can work out so it goes away.

[01:15:47] That stress of having to go to a market every Saturday morning and make sure everything was ready and get in that truck, and you have to be there at a certain time because they won't let you into the market.

[01:15:58] That was something that I think as my parents got older, was starting to drain them, and they didn't want it. My mom didn't want to do them as much anymore 'cause it was a lot of physical work. I

[01:16:09] It's demanding if it's hot, it's more difficult. If it's cold, it's more difficult. So now there's a lot of areas of the farm I'm seeing where things have become smoother. There's less, less pressure.

[01:16:25] And we're making the same amount of money. Customers are happier than ever. And it's easier for us to get away. If they need to leave, almost everything on Saturday happens without them doing it, besides loading a truck in the morning.

[01:16:40] They have their entire weekend to themselves now. There's a push on a Thursday and Friday, yes. But now they have essentially a two-day weekend where before they had a one after being exhausted. And I think for them, it's made a remarkable difference in their quality of life.

**Diego Footer:** [01:17:01] Okay. One last thing. This isn't really for the interview. Do you do consulting on setting up all that database stuff?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:17:06] Yeah. I'm happy to help farms out with that kind of stuff.

**Diego Footer:** [01:17:11] Okay. Let me ask you that then to give yourself a plug.

[01:17:14] One thing you mentioned that's really tough to do on this is set up all the technical side of things, the database management. Is that something you consult on and help farms with?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:17:24] Yes, I have definitely helped and consulted, given advice to many farms, I'm part of some Facebook groups. I'm always chiming in on stuff as I can. I consult, I help people set stuff up.

[01:17:38] The challenge is always that every farm is entirely unique, and size is unique. Us spending a hundred dollars a month on software is sometimes too much for some farms, and some of them have a different process or a different thing, a different deck, but I definitely, when it comes to software, I'm happy to assist and consult and help you build a platform for that.

[01:18:00] I have limited time, of course, being a one-person company, but I, if you need help, I'm happy to give it or direct it or connect you with farms and maybe do what you do similar and help you find a way to overcome some of the challenges to make your system efficient, profitable, and easier.

**Diego Footer:** [01:18:25] Can you say your contact info again?

**Robert Arnold:** [01:18:27] Sure. So you can reach me at [Robert@SmartFarmInnovations.com](mailto:Robert@SmartFarmInnovations.com), and my website [SmartFarmInnovations.com](http://SmartFarmInnovations.com), which has a contact form on there.

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