

## Featured Guest Interviews

Sam Bellavance (@sunsetlakecbd, sunsetlakecbd.com)

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**Sam Bellavance:** [00:00:00] So my name is Sam Bellavance. I am a former dairy farmer for Sunset Lake Farm. We're a dairy farm that produces for Ben and Jerry's ice cream in Vermont.

[00:00:12] In 2018, I diversified the family farm and started growing hemp and started a CBD hemp business called Sunset Lake CBD.

**Diego Footer:** [00:00:23] If you look at dairy farming and transitioning or adding onto the farm with hemp, what was the catalyst for doing that?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:00:34] Yeah, for me, it was really, like I said, getting out of the commodity system and really being able to forge some independence for us as a farm. Like I said, if you're a dairy farmer, you're not setting the price of your products, someone else is.

[00:00:54] And for us with the hemp, it was a way to grow a little bit of independence for our farm. And a lot of dairy farms do this, by the way, this is by no means unique. There's a lot of dairy farms that will grow pumpkins or grow some kind of side crop as a way to supplement themselves from the market.

[00:01:13] For us, that was part of it. And then part of it for me was the opportunity to implement some pretty ambitious, sustainable goals doing no herbicides, no pesticides. That was something that I always wanted to try to do on a crop.

[00:01:29] And with hemp, it gave me that opportunity as well as our soil, as you can imagine—and I know you want to talk about like soil nutrients—is incredibly rich when it comes to phosphorus because of all the manure spreading that we do from the dairy farm.

[00:01:45] One of the things that's really important for hemp, especially for cannabis flowers and flowering development is a high amount of phosphorus. So our land was actually perfectly suited for this crop.

[00:01:58] So it seemed like a good fit, and we took a shot at it, and thank God it worked. Here we are. Yeah, here we are.

**Diego Footer:** [00:02:05] Sure, sure. So Sunset Lake CBD, your company. When you look at the options you had out there for taking some independence back for your farm economically, you have, all right, one, is it a fit for the land. And then you also need a market fit. Why hemp from that side of it?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:02:26] That's a great question. And just to clarify for a lot of listeners, too, I think people, they think of hemp, they think, oh, like rope or like clothing.

[00:02:34] Well, hemp is a plant that can be used for a lot of different things. There isn't a super viable market in the US yet for hemp fiber or hemp clothing. It's growing rapidly, and I

think it's really exciting, but for us, the market opportunity that was there was for CBD, which is an oil you can extract from the flowers of specific breeds of hemp plants.

[00:03:00] And for us, we were seeing other kind of leaders in the space such as Sunsoil, which is a big hemp company in Vermont. They pioneered the Vermont hemp industry in 2014, 2015. So by the time we got into things in 2018, we had seen it working from them.

[00:3:19] Okay, they're growing, they're hiring people. Seems like they're selling this stuff all over the place. They forged the market, and then we hopped on.

**Diego Footer:** [00:03:29] When I look at hemp, at least from...CBD, from an outside perspective. It seems to me is one of those products that went from something like very few, basically, nobody heard of to all of a sudden, it's everywhere in everything.

[00:03:46] And you have all of a sudden, a lot of people growing it. You have a lot of oil, likely of suspect quality, being imported. Why choose that market, or how do you go in with a plan to say, okay, if we see an opportunity on our land, we see what another local company has done, a party has gotta be thinking like, damn, this market's crowded already.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:04:13] Yeah. Diego, you're hitting the nail on the head because in 2018, when we decided to grow hemp in Vermont, 3000 acres were planted. And I'll tell you this year, in 2021, 300 acres were planted.

[00:04:30] So what happened was everyone was, oh my God, it's a gold rush. Oh, it's not a gold rush. It's a green rush, man. We're all going to get rich. And everyone planted.

[00:04:40] And it got to the point where it was kinda, I knew dairy farmers that were selling their herds of cows, taking that cash, and then growing hemp with zero cannabis experience. No experience in growing any type of cannabis, no plan to dry it.

[00:04:57] Just, I'm going to throw it in the ground. And surely someone will show up to my farm with the dump truck full of cash and buy all of my hemp. Well, it doesn't work that way.

[00:05:08] So when we got into it, the prices actually crashed for raw hemp, our first harvest. And that was the catalyst for us, Oh my God. I'm in the same kind of market dilemma that I was in with dairy.

[00:05:23] And that kind of stress and anxiety is what pushed us to build our own brand. And we recognized that we had a unique opportunity, because like you said, there's a lot of uncertainty. There's a lot of, oh, we're going to get rich quick, do the cheapest possible products.

[00:05:38] We thought for us, let's be like the craft brewery of CBD. We have full source traceability because all of the CBD in our products is from our farm, so that's a level of transparency that consumers like.

[00:05:53] And we can produce stuff at such a high quality because it's not going through customs and going through...it's not being transported all over the country in hot weather, cold weather. Everything is right here, localized.

[00:06:07] But like you said, it was anxious that first year because everyone jumped in and the people who didn't hang in there and build a brand are no longer growing hemp.

**Diego Footer:** [00:06:18] For people who aren't aware, is the hemp industry, does it have that commodity side and the boutique side? If I think dairy, you think, okay. The commodity side is you sell milk to whoever buys it, and then it just gets branded under whatever it gets branded.

[00:06:33] And then you have a company that's like Fairlife who do a great job at branding their own product, creating protein shakes and ice creams and doing other things that okay, they've diversified out of the commodity market. They're still selling the same thing that could go into the commodity market, but it's different. Is hemp the same way?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:06:51] Yes and no, it was first. And that's why I say like in 2018, when the commodity price for raw, dry hemp was very high, the thing is what happened is you had these labs in particularly in Kentucky and in Colorado that took that raw hemp.

[00:07:10] And these were from people doing like 500 acres and chopping it down with combines. And just for perspective, we grow 30 acres, and we're harvesting stuff by hand. So it's a whole different scale.

[00:07:22] The thing is, they were so successful at getting that product and creating either bulk CBD oil, picture 55-gallon drums full with CBD oil. That's enough to make tens of thousands of tinctures, millions of gummy bears.

[00:07:39] And then in 2019, they had all of that bulk oil and isolate stored in storage in warehouses. So there was like, why would they go to farmers and pay them a premium for their dry hemp? They don't need it. They already have enough oil they need to fulfill their contracts.

[00:07:59] So that was at the commodity side, what caused the crash. And when I say that raw, dry hemp, that's typically referred to as biomass, which is just the shredded hemp buds once they're dried.

[00:08:13] That crashed, and then people moved into that, like you said, the boutique space where it's about creating a connection from the farm to the consumer, focusing on quality, trying to build a brand identity.

**Diego Footer:** [00:08:27] And I love this story because you're doing this in real time. You're seeing the market go all over the board from gold rush to bust. And you're trying to carve out a niche here. When you first thought about building your brand, how did you start to conceive, this is what we want our brand to be?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:08:51] Yeah. I think the first thing is just trying to make it authentic. I think one of the things I do that might seem silly is consume our products almost constantly. I try to have at least one of our products every day, because my philosophy is if I don't enjoy them, if I'm not feeling authentic benefits, then why would I expect our customers to?

[00:09:13] And I think that's a really important thing for people. Just because you can sell something doesn't mean you should. And I think that is a way you can lose authenticity. If you don't personally believe in it, and it's not your passion.

[00:09:29] 'Cause ultimately, the passion you give to it and that energy, you're throwing, people are gonna pick up on that. And if they—if you're posting on your Instagram constantly,

okay, we're out in the field, we're spreading out beneficial insects for our plants. We're pruning.

[00:09:44] Here's a fun new product we spent all week working on. People will pick up on that passion and say, oh my God, these guys really do care. They really are nerds when it comes to the CBD stuff. I want to try what they're having.

[00:09:58] And I think that level of authenticity is definitely something that we rooted ourselves in. And the connection to the farm. I think the fact that we are farmers, we're not an investment banker saying, oh, CBD is a hot product right now. Let's start 2 million dollars, make a cheap brand.

[00:10:17] We'll take some isolate, we'll throw it in vegetable glycerin, put a label on it, off to the shelves. We are actually growing this stuff and seeing it to the point where literally the seeds are hand planted, by us.

[00:10:31] So we have an emotional attachment to the plants and then that carries over to the products. And I think that's something that's makes our brand stand out.

**Diego Footer:** [00:10:41] So you have the enthusiasm, and I can see it as you talk about it. When you think about creating your brand, what was your target market for this? Because CBD in 7-Eleven and gummy bears and you see it at bougie, we'll have dispensaries out here that are like really like Louis Vuitton store look that nice type dispensaries.

[00:11:06] And there's that whole spectrum in between. Your brand has to align to who you sell to and appeal to that audience, the visuals, the text, the font, all of that. Who are you targeting when you went to sell this product?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:11:22] That's such a good question, Diego. And I'll be honest with you. At first, we had no idea what we were doing. And we were like, okay, we see CBD in gas stations.

[00:11:33] Let's get our stuff into gas stations. And then you realize, okay, we're on this treadmill to create products as cheaply as possible to sell them for as little as possible to distributors.

[00:11:48] And then you reached that point. You're like, okay, to compete in that market, we're going to have to cut back on some of our quality standards just to get their price. And we just didn't want to do that.

[00:12:00] So we pulled back from the gas station CBD model. And again, it works for some companies, I'm just saying what worked for us. That didn't fit. And what we moved towards more was doing advertising on podcasts, endorsing our local NPR affiliate and getting into that.

[00:12:22] Typically, our market is between 35 and 65. It skews a little bit female, but it's pretty 50/50. For someone who wants to really get a product that's going to be something that's a little higher quality and they know where it comes from.

[00:12:41] So I would say the craft beer market is a really good analogy where we're not necessarily—we want to be as affordable as we can, we don't want to obviously overprice our

products, but we also, for us, we're competing on quality more than just on price. So more of a craft beer in that sense.

**Diego Footer:** [00:13:02] What about brand appearance? You're selling it that higher end, above the average of where stuff is. How do you create a brand visuals that resonate with that market?

[00:13:17] Because there's this assumption, when a consumer buys something, between how it looks and how it's going to perform, and that's tied to price. The better it looks, the better I think it's going to be, the more I'm willing to pay for it, and then vice versa, on the downside. What was your thought in creating the look of Sunset CBD?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:13:40] Yeah, I think for us, we, and again, I do all the graphic design for our labels, which is a crazy learning curve going from. And again, I think a lot of small business, people listening to this show can understand, you have to wear a lot of hats at first.

[00:13:56] So I would go from being on the tractor, rototilling a bed, to going inside, sitting down doing a Photoshop tutorial. How can I actually design these labels, and it was a huge learning curve.

[00:14:11] And for us, I would say, the big thing was getting consistency. I think at first, a lot of our products, the labels, look wildly different. And that is something where, if you want to establish a quality brand, there needs to be some level of consistency across the logos and across the label design.

[00:14:31] Using icons is really important, and you'll see really good brands do this successfully, whether it's an icon for... And some of these are ubiquitous icons, no animal testing, you'll see that leaping bunny, like that's a really big icon, especially in the topical scene.

[00:14:50] But for us, like working to create some of our own icons, pesticide free. We created one for Vermont-grown, creating our own branding there. So that's—as you get into that quality market, figuring out, okay, here are the signifiers that people already understand, and we're going to adopt those. And what are our own unique signifiers that we can work into the label?

**Diego Footer:** [00:15:16] One of those signifiers you use, I'm looking at your site, is the word, “Craft.” And then I think this is a good example of how one word being there or not being there can make a difference. So you could say Sunset Lake CBD. Sunset Lake Craft CBD.

[00:15:34] And if I just hear craft, and I don't know what you do, I'm already assuming smaller, more boutique, probably higher quality, probably there's some nerdery gone into producing it. And just me would be drawn more to that. Was there intention behind using that word? I'm assuming there was.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:15:55] Oh, 100%. Yeah. You hit the nail on the head, Diego.

[00:15:58] That's yeah, you got it. Cause it's definitely...when you're designing, especially a logo, you're going over every single inch of that thing. It took us probably three months to decide on that.

[00:16:11] And, do we want to do handcrafted? Do we want to do artisan? Do we want to do...? And eventually we stuck with craft because us being in Vermont, we're really embedded in the craft beer scene here.

[00:16:24] A lot of really big, craft beer brands, whether it's The Alchemist, Hill Farmstead, Zero Gravity, they all came out of here. And I think that craft term carries a lot of weight because of the craft beer scene.

[00:16:41] And we want to piggyback on that whole philosophy and take that same approach with our hemp. Yes, it was very intentional.

**Diego Footer:** [00:16:50] What about when you go to sell it online, imagery? It's not a product that's visually appealing. What I mean by that is I can sell a tool, and I can show it working and doing what it does.

[00:17:04] Like, people want to watch that type of stuff. Where if you have a glass of milk or a carrot or a bottle of CBD, you can't make that necessarily so exciting because it's just a thing. It doesn't—it's inanimate.

[00:17:19] It doesn't do anything. It doesn't perform a physical function. What have you found works in terms of selling product through visuals when you don't have a product that inherently has motion to it?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:17:33] It's such a dilemma, Diego, because on one hand, you need product photos. Like you need that nice photo of your product with a white background, because that is the standard for all e-commerce.

[00:17:46] That being said, those aren't the most captivating photos. And we have some really interesting statistics, not necessarily from our website, but from our Instagram, of photos where it's one of our employees in the fields working with the plants.

[00:18:02] Or let's say, it's someone in the warehouse, jarring up flowers for some of our hemp flower jars. Those photos get a much, much higher response than just a standard product photo.

[00:18:16] And so I think that's really an interesting thing that we've picked up on really in the past six months are bringing our team. And I think that's a cool thing small businesses can do. If you have an enthusiastic workforce is leveraging them.

[00:18:33] Hey, what's your favorite job to do? Oh, I really like making pre-rolls with the pre-roll machine. Cool. We're going to have a photographer come in, and we're going to take some photos.

[00:18:41] Or I really like pruning the plants out in the field. Cool. We're going to take some photos of that. And that's something we started to implement, but I actually want to implement that more on our website with the products.

[00:18:53] So that's an interesting little dilemma and something we're working on is getting that more interactive human imagery.



**Diego Footer:** [00:19:01] What are your thoughts on using professional photography versus doing it yourself? You jump off the rototiller, you do your icon, and then you go snap the photos with your iPhone.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:19:08] Yeah, it depends. It's...for some things, for a quick Instagram post, sometimes the iPhone photo is perfect, and it gets the job done. But if you want to do a really high—and this gets back into what you're saying, like creating that quality brand identity.

[00:19:26] If I'm having something where it's on that shop page, and I have a tincture bottle with a white background and a customer is about to spend either \$40, \$50, maybe even \$90 on a tincture, that photo better be crisp, and it better be really well edited.

[00:19:45] So for those product photo situations, that's when I always want to bring in a professional. For some of the live action farm shots, those are very much a do-it-yourself situation.

**Diego Footer:** [00:19:58] What about the wording that you guys have selected? And I'm nerding out on this because I think a lot of these details are important.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:20:06] Sure.

**Diego Footer:** [00:20:07] The way you list some of this is X milligrams, full spectrum CBD oil. So it's not the flavor. You have the flavor there in parentheses. It's not the size of the bottle, it's at the end in parentheses, but it emphasizes that many milligrams.

[00:20:25] I'm not up on CBD, so me as a newbie, I'd say, I'd look at that. And I go, I'm not quite sure what that means, but I'm sure there's a reason you've listed it like that. When you just look at your product name, why have you done it the way you've done it?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:20:42] I think it's mostly based off of experience with our consumers. And this is something that any small business owner has to—you have to be really humble, especially your first year or two in business, because you're going to get complaints about your products, but that's okay because that's how you get a lot better.

[00:21:00] And our first thing was, okay, we learned, when someone gets CBD, and this is a problem really for the whole CBD industry, they have that one opportunity. I'm trying CBD. Will I have a good reaction or a bad reaction?

[00:21:17] If they don't enjoy CBD the first time they try it, it's going to be a hard-fought battle to get them to spend their money to buy another CBD product. So for us, getting an accurate and good dosage is really key to that first consumer experience.

[00:21:35] Flavoring, we've been very little flavoring because it hasn't been a big thing customers have asked for. Mostly it's, okay, I want to know how much CBD am I getting? I don't want to have to do math between milligrams and milliliters.

[00:21:52] And we say it's either 25 milligrams per dropper because people can see, okay, is the dropper full or is it not full? Or 50 milligrams per drop. Because then once you get into, again, most people have a hard time with doing okay, I have to convert milligrams per milliliter.

[00:22:12] People don't want to do math when they buy it. Make it really simple so they get a good dose that first time they use your product. And if they enjoy it that first time, you could have a customer for the next 10 years. But that's really the key thing for us.

[00:22:26] Rather than advertising a flavor, or...then you get into—it starts to feel a little less authentic for me. At the end of the day, what we're a CBD company, not solely a flavor company. Flavors are good, but at the end of the day, you're selling CBD, and that's what the customer expects.

**Diego Footer:** [00:22:47] Yeah, I think that's really well said and thought out. Thinking about that, it's as though, not as though.

[00:22:54] You're selling to an educated audience, or you're trying to educate them to be in your audience. So I'm not just oh, I want fruity pebbles or whatever blueberry or whatever. That sounds cool.

[00:23:07] It's okay, here's what I'm trying to do. Here's what I have. I love the fact that you simplify it down for them. When you look at your, a store like that, do you find that you've catered your page to one of these two? Or is it some sort of blend like, or what's the percentage?

[00:23:28] People who already know they want to buy from you, and they're just coming there to buy, and then they need relevant information so they can purchase the right item. And then category two is, yeah, I heard this interview. I saw it on Instagram. I'm not really into CBD or I don't know about it. I'm going to check it out. I'm going to learn from it. Do you—where do you think your customer split is?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:23:52] I would say probably 75% the former. I think most people who visit our site are looking for CBD. But they don't necessarily know what to get. And that's our big thing is creating that sorting.

[00:24:06] And one thing when we launched a new website was use of the visual tiles, whether someone wants an oil or they want an edible product, or they want something for their pets, the pet CBD market is huge.

[00:24:20] I think it was \$2 billion in 2020, which is just wild when you think about that market not even existing eight years ago. So for that, making that sorting really easy was big because a lot of people who come to our website, they know that they want CBD.

[00:24:38] They like our brand because they've heard about it on a podcast, or they've heard about it on social media, but they don't necessarily know what product's right for them. So that's really, it's more catered to helping sort.

**Diego Footer:** [00:24:51] Do you think it's fair to say that the function of your website is to help people make the right decision not convince them to buy CBD in the first place?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:25:04] I would say that's fair. I would say that's a fair...it's mostly to help people get it.

[00:25:09] I think for people to buy CBD in the first place, that would be more like in the about us, the blog section, that's more of our story telling part of the page. But that being said, I'd



say it's ideally both. If I'm being honest, ideally, we want it to do both, but it's probably more of the former.

**Diego Footer:** [00:25:31] That's the trick, right?

[00:25:34] So somebody goes to sunsetlakecbd.com. When I go to that page, and I'm looking at it, there's that landing page. And there, the fundamental based principle of web design is put. Your main objective, very clear, right at the top.

[00:25:49] What do you want them to do? And you've got to make a decision on this. It's learn more about CBD or it's buy CBD. And yours is farm to table CBD, handcrafted CBD products sustainably grown on our family farm and shipped to your door, shopped—shop craft CBD.

[00:26:07] So right there, it's Hey, if you want to buy, and then they can obviously scroll down or click around the page if they want to learn more, and then you have it find your CBD.

[00:26:15] Looking at this, it tells me like, Hey, people are coming ready to buy, and you're just trying to assist them in buying. And I don't mean that in a bad way.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:26:25] Yeah, I'd say that's definitely the case.

**Diego Footer:** [00:26:28] One thing you include on the page, and I really like this, is somebody who, again, who's not immersed in this market or really familiar with it, are the quality tests. Why did you include those on your page?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:26:43] I think first off, legally—and this is something people should know—your hemp has to be tested to make sure it doesn't have higher than 0.3 Delta nine THC. If it has higher than that, it's marijuana. And it's illegal and you cannot sell it as CBD or hemp.

[00:27:01] So though that testing is required, what's not required in Vermont, and again, I'm not an expert on every state's regulation, but in Vermont, it's not required that you put those test results online. It's not required that you include them with every product, but we do.

[00:27:21] If you go on there, you will find the test results for our products, and when we ship you a product, we'll actually include a hard copy of those test results in the shipment. And for us, I think part of it is a sense of pride.

[00:27:35] We spend an enormous amount of money on these test results each year because first off, and you hinted at this at the beginning, there's a lot of consumer uncertainty. Is this CBD actually going to work for me?

[00:27:49] Are there, is this one of those brands that's playing fast and loose and there is not actually the appropriate amount in there? For us, I think our best way to cut through and combat any suspicion was just a full transparency model. Hey, here are the test results.

[00:28:07] Here are batch numbers that we started putting on all of our labels, and just open the doors and say, here's what we're seeing on our products. And then having a regime of continual testing and trying to keep things updated as we develop new products,

**Diego Footer:** [00:28:25] Do you have anything on here and it'd be hard for me to find live during the interview, but our CBD, their CBD comparison?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:28:34] We don't, and that's something we've talked about.

[00:28:37] And maybe you'll have some interesting insight on this. It's a tough thing with I think we stand out from a lot of competition, but there's a lot of other good CBD brands that I really respect.

[00:28:50] And there are some places I think that are maybe playing it a little fast and loose, and do we want to start taking shots at other companies? I don't really know if I want to be in that business of calling people out and getting into a tit for tat with another company.

[00:29:09] For me, it's been more positive-oriented on highlighting the good things about our products rather than poking at the competition. But maybe that's a strategy that's...maybe that's a little too soft and friendly farmer of me, but that's where my head's always been at.

**Diego Footer:** [00:29:26] Yeah. And I don't think it's bashing. I'm, again, I'm an uneducated buyer in this market, and it's great that you say your quality tests, but how do I know the quality tests don't apply to the whole market, and are you different than the gas station CBD?

[00:29:41] And it's not to say that they're bad, but it's just here's what we do. Here's what they do. This'll help you decide if we're the right brand for you, and if it's worth paying more for.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:29:52] Yeah, I think that's a big thing. Yeah, that's definitely good feedback. One thing I will say too is it's not, I would say in terms of pricing, we're very much in the middle of the market.

[00:30:04] There are plenty of brands selling stuff way higher prices than we are, so I wouldn't say—I think we're a premium brand in terms of quality, but I think we're very middle of the road in terms of price.

[00:30:16] So that's been something there, and it's also a dilemma we've noticed too, to be transparent, like sometimes you, and lower the price of a product thinking, oh, we're making it more affordable, but a consumer might see that and say, oh, it's cheaper, it must be lower quality..

[00:30:35] And I think a good analogy is with like, wine. Like, a lot of people make their, oh, is it good wine or bad wine based sheerly off of the price. And that's something we've encountered too, with, okay, we're going to release this product, this new product, and we're going to make it cheaper than anything in the market.

[00:30:55] Well, a lot of people will look at that and say, okay, it must be lower quality. It's not, it's just more affordable. So that's a dilemma we've had to hash through with assumptions around price and quality because we want to make things really affordable.

[00:31:09] We don't want to hurt ourselves by people then. Oh, it's cheap. Therefore it must be lower quality.

**Diego Footer:** [00:31:16] I know you don't do craft dairy, but you have this background in dairy. Your family has a background in dairy. What are your thoughts on quality testing or nutrient analysis?

[00:31:32] For other sectors in agriculture, on the boutique level. And here's where I'm going with that. Again, it's not to bash customers, but if you're trying to sell a local dairy product, it's one thing to advertise it's local, but if you could test your average grocery store milk.

[00:31:50] And you test your milk and say your milk is higher in omega-3's on some lab tests, like, I would want to hang my hat on that. I would want to publish that and put that out there. Do you think that concept translates to other parts of agriculture? Because not a lot of people do it.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:32:10] No, I think it's a great idea. I think it's something where you have to look at. The average dairy farmer is in their mid to late sixties, and they're working, between 60 and 80 hours a week just to keep their farm going.

[00:32:27] So getting into the world of marketing and branding, I, in my generation, and having the opportunity, really, the privilege to go to college and learn about a lot of these concepts, I had the chance to develop them.

[00:32:41] But I think a lot of small farmers, they might recognize the wisdom in doing that, and I'm sure they would, but they physically don't have the time and resources to do it. So that's when, I think a lot of organizations that are trying to promote agriculture and promote a more sustainable agricultural system.

[00:33:05] I think one way they could really benefit farmers is that level of testing, branding, marketing expertise. And hopefully that's something we'll see over the next couple of years.

**Diego Footer:** [00:33:18] In your brand, you've done a great job of representing online on the bottle, but the brand extension also goes through the purchasing process, post-purchase. How have you tried to make the best experience for the buyer at purchase, after purchase?

[00:33:38] So they don't just fall in love with that picture or the story on Instagram, buy your product, and then they're disappointed. Just beyond quality of the product itself.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:33:49] I'll give you a silly example. And I know it sounds silly, but I can show you the hundreds of emails. It very much resonates. We have handwritten note in each and every order.

[00:34:00] Every single order that goes out the door, every box, and it doesn't matter if it's a \$10 order. It doesn't matter if it's a \$400 order. There's a handwritten note saying hello to their name and then one or two sentences.

[00:34:14] So if it's a fun place we know, Hey, like one of our employees used to live in Los Angeles, so he'd say, Hey, oh, I used to play ultimate Frisbee near your neighborhood. Love that place. Thanks for supporting us.

[00:34:26] Or even Hey, thanks for the great order. We appreciate you supporting our local farm. We get so many emails and so many messages about how much people appreciate that handwritten note.

[00:34:38] And keep in mind, Diego, a lot of our customers are in their sixties, seventies, eighties. And I think that older generation, and this is something my parents would attest to, they love, they—they're constantly lamenting that the letter writing has gone away in our society.

[00:34:54] And I think for people to get a handwritten note, it just resonates, like such a personal connection between them and our farm. And that definitely has created a lot of return customers for us.

**Diego Footer:** [00:35:08] Yeah, I love that personal touch. Like it just, again, it goes back to here's what we do. We're different. We're hand seeding these plants, we're hand harvesting these plants, we're hand packing and we're handwriting this note, it all fits together nicely.

[00:35:25] Not for the interview, but I'm just going to stick on branding the whole time and we'll just stay here and I'll start wrapping it up.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:35:31] Okay.

**Diego Footer:** [00:35:33] Just given your experience, what advice would you have to a vegetable farmer—that's a lot of people listening to this—who are moving online, trying to sell products, maybe they're new farm, about creating a brand that matches what they do, who they are, and who their customer is, and what their customers want.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:36:01] I would say, and again, I'm not a vegetable farmer, so I'm going to make some assumptions here, and please don't come at me, vegetable farmers.

[00:36:08] I think the first thing would be creating some type of value added product. Again, for us with hemp, none of the stuff that comes straight out of the field goes to the customer. There's some level of processing, whether it's turning into an oil and then turning that oil into an edible product, or even with the flowers, trimming them up, doing a really intense quality control.

[00:36:33] If a vegetable farmer can do some type of unique, Oh, okay, I'm going to make this unique chili sauce, or I'm going to make this unique—some type of process with their vegetable, or maybe even it's like a sun-drying.

[00:36:48] That's going to be really important because with e-commerce, all of—to do e-commerce successfully, you need some level of shelf life and some level trans—it needs to be easily transported, in a mail or in a box. So I think creating that more refined, less perishable value added product would be really key for e-commerce.

**Diego Footer:** [00:37:14] What about in terms of look? How would you advise somebody to say, here's how you find the brand that represents you?

[00:37:24] 'Cause there's a lot of directions you can go in, right? Like you could, I could just see what you're doing and say, okay, I'm going to copy that, but that might not be who I am. I can see what Starbucks does, and I might copy that. And that's not who I am.

[00:37:35] I can look at someone like these soil producers in the hemp industry, like Frogsong Farm and stuff that have these crazy like psychedelic bags and everything. And I could go down that route, but if that's not who I am, it doesn't work.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:37:49] Yeah. And I think for us, like you said, who are you? That's, they have to ask themselves, who are you, and what is your unique trait you're bringing things?

[00:37:58] For us, there was a lot of temptation at first. Do we want to do that super psychedelic stoner imagery? Not really. That's not really who I am. I'm more of a farmer than like a cannabis connoisseur.

[00:38:11] Obviously, I work with cannabis a lot, but that's not really my identity, that is in that authentic farmer, former Ben and Jerry's associate. For me, asking myself those questions was a really key part, and I would advise anyone else.

[00:38:28] Like, they have to create a brand that really resonates with you personally, because you're going to be talking about it, and you're going to be putting it out into the world every day for years to come. So if it doesn't resonate with you personally, and you're not passionate about it, people are going to pick up on that and you're going to see failure.

[00:38:48] So I think that's more important than copying someone else's success is figuring out what really resonates with you with your heart and your soul, and then taking that and pushing it out into the world. As cheesy as that sounds, I really do believe that.

**Diego Footer:** [00:39:06] No, I think that's, I think that's really accurate because one thing you said that's important is you got to talk about it, and you have to be enthusiastic about it. So it's like, what do I do are believe and identify with then that I can maybe play with in a fun way?

[00:39:18] Because you got to want to do the work too, right? Like you work the hard day in the field and then you got to update the website. If you hate that part, at least make it interesting for you.

[00:39:28] And again, the Sunset Lake CBD. I like what you've just said that we're going off craft, like that's our word. And I think where farms I see get into a lot of problems is it's we're low-till, regenerative, micro-farm that doesn't use pesticides.

[00:39:44] It's like this word salad that they try and put out there and it's just pick one. You can identify or put the other details out there in your copy. But if the consumer can't really understand who you are in a quick snippet, then it's really hard.

[00:40:03] So you guys have the craft. Hey, we're a craft CBD company. I know what that is. I can put craft CBD on every bottle and every product it's not too wordy. But if I have Vermont-raised, craft CBD, no pesticide, regeneratively grown, people start losing it.

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:40:20] Yeah, no, Diego. You're so right. Because for me, one of the things I'll get really nerdy about, and I love, is our use of beneficial insects in the field.

[00:40:30] That being said, if I put on our labels, we use trichogamma wasps to combat the European corn borer instead of spraying our pants with pesticides, people will say, what the hell does any of that mean?

[00:40:44] What does it have to do with CBD? So, I think a lot of that's you want to be passionate, but also understand that the things that you're specifically passionate about and your other farming nerd friends really care about might not be—

[00:41:00] Your consumers might care about them, and it is on—it's your job to educate them. But you can't assume that they know all of these things. If you're going to make no-till part of your brand, you better do a good job of explaining what no-till is and why it's important.

[00:41:17] Because you can't make assumptions. Most Americans are completely divorced from any type of agricultural life other than their eating. A lot of these practices that obviously you and I know about—and you probably know more than I do—we can't assume that everyone else knows what we're talking about.

[00:41:34] So I think that educating and keeping it simple, and the way I think about it is like a pyramid where maybe the craft is the top, maybe an iceberg's a better analogy. But the craft is the top, and if people are passionate about it, they can go and venture forth more in there and learn more.

[00:41:53] What does that really mean, and they can do that digging themselves, but I'm not going to throw too much at them right at once.

**Diego Footer:** [00:42:00] I think part of that is putting our own egos aside, like we're into what we're into, like you said, insects or whatever, soil and that doesn't mean other people are. And what we could be really proud of, Oh, look what I've done, and really it's about what does the consumer care about?

[00:42:18] What I care about...it's important, but it's not as important from a sales standpoint as what the consumer believes to be important. That's not to say to mislead them or to be dishonest, but sometimes it is just checking ourselves at the door and saying, it doesn't matter what I think. What do they think?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:42:35] Exactly. And it's okay, you have—so for our tincture bottle, I have 1.75 inches by 4 inches. I can—it's not a question of honesty or dishonesty. It's, okay, I have limited space to put on this thing.

[00:42:50] What are the things that are most important for them? Not for me, for them. And I think you're totally right. It is an ego check moment.

**Diego Footer:** [00:42:58] All right. To close this one out, just in a fun way, looking through your website. Interesting products for people that try, who have used CBD before.

[00:43:08] What's something you'd recommend for people who maybe have just used tinctures, but they haven't tried other things?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:43:15] Yeah. I would say for us, the CBD coffee is really interesting, and I think what makes that unique is we actually roast the coffee locally, and I met up with a coffee roaster.

[00:43:28] And we go over to his place, and I infuse the oil into the beans during the roasting process, took us about five months to figure out how to do it, but that was a really fun method. And it came from a customer saying, Hey, every time I dropped the CBD oil into my coffee, I have this kind of oily film on the top of the coffee. I wish it mixed a little better.

[00:43:51] So for us trying to get the oil into the beans, so when they do the roasting, it's more amalgamated into the coffee, was a really fun project. So that would be one I'd really look at. And then other than that, and I know you said other than tincture, we did just do a melatonin tincture, which has been very popular.

[00:44:12] And... That's the other thing too, is the smokeable products. I know a lot of people aren't necessarily, smokers, but I think we've seen a lot of folks, especially in older



generations, say, Hey, I actually like the CBD pre-rolls, because with cannabis being legalized, so much of it has become so potent.

[00:44:33] That people say, I just want to, I want to relax a little bit at the end of the night. I don't want to get super intoxicated. The way I talk about our pre-rolls, or our flower, think of us like a Corona light instead of a Jack Daniels.

[00:44:48] Like it's a much more light, subtle experience, and that's been something that people have really enjoyed and it's one of our most popular products are the pre-rolls.

**Diego Footer:** [00:44:56] From a curiosity standpoint, what's the net effect to a person, via different delivery mechanisms? So I take a tincture, and let's say I use that. Whatever went into that tincture, I smoked it. What's the difference I'm going to feel?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:45:13] The difference is going to be in time and potency. So if you smoke CBD, you're going to feel the effects of it within five minutes because it's going through your lungs and then through your lungs directly into your bloodstream.

[00:45:26] But the tincture, it's going to take about 45 minutes to an hour, depending on how much you've had to eat, because it's going through your gut and then through your liver and into your bloodstream. For tinctures, I would say you'd get a stronger effect, because it's going through your liver.

[00:45:44] You're getting a more complete and pure—not pure, sorry, efficient use of the CBD. Whereas with smoking, a lot of the CBD is just burning off. So if you want to get as much CBD into your body as quick—as efficiently as possible, I would say the tincture would be your bet.

[00:46:02] If you want immediate results, then a smokable would be your bet.

**Diego Footer:** [00:46:07] Right on. Thanks for sharing everything that you've learned on your journey with your CBD company. For people that want to learn more, try some of your products, try the coffee, try the smokables. Where can they go?

**Sam Bellavance:** [00:46:19] Yeah, go to a [SunsetLakeCBD.com](https://www.sunsetlakecbd.com). We have a bunch of different products. So there's definitely something for everyone there. And again, that's [SunsetLakeCBD.com](https://www.sunsetlakecbd.com).

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