



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 145

Corinna and Kurt Bench of Shared Legacy Farms on Creating a Marketing and Retention System on the CSA Farm

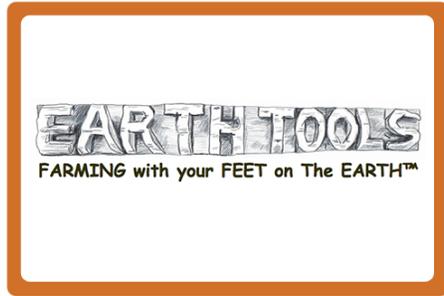
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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, Episode 145, and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Corinna and Kurt Bench raise a little under 10 acres of certified organic vegetables at Shared Legacy Farms in Elmore, Ohio. With 400 CSA shares and a 78% retention rate, Corinna and Kurt have created a value-spaced business on family land that is supporting them in their 10th year of business.

Chris Blanchard: We take a deep dive into how Corinna and Kurt create a connection with and market to their CSA members. A system that has resulted in them being 94% sold out seven months before their CSA program starts. We get some great insights into their focus on just five delivery sites. The customer research they've done to identify the mindset and the practices of their long-term CSA membership. And how they've used that information to create a marketing system that attracts dedicated and highly qualified prospects to their CSA program. And then, we've learned how they've created a system for new and renewing members with a roadmap to CSA success. We also discuss the transition to full-time farming after years of splitting Kurt's attention with an off-farm job. And how they've created and continue to create more down time during the season to rest and rejuvenate.



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- Chris Blanchard: Corinna and Kurt Bench, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.
- Kurt Bench: Afternoon, Chris.
- Corinna Bench: Thanks, Chris.
- Chris Blanchard: So excited that you guys could join me today. I'd like to start off by having you kind of give us the lay of the land there at Shared Legacy Farms. Where are you guys located? How much are you growing? How are you getting that product to market? And where are you marketing it?
- Kurt Bench: We are in northwest Ohio in the Toledo metropolitan area. So, on the east side of Toledo, southeast side of Toledo. And we started in 2008 with the CSA program, primarily vegetables, and we have grown to roughly 400 half shares or 400 members through our CSA program. We grew double our size every year. So, we went from 12 to 24 and just doubled ourselves up every year, and went full-time in 2013. We grow on some pretty good sandy loam soil here in northwest Ohio. The farm itself is about 25 acres. And we farm just roughly about seven to 10 acres of vegetables every year with rotations. The rest being CRP ground or whatnot.
- Chris Blanchard: And how did you guys end up growing vegetables in Elmore, Ohio? Is that a popular vegetable growing area?
- Kurt Bench: There use to be a lot of canning products growing here. So, canning tomatoes in Fremont and a lot of surrounding areas. I grew up on, I'm third generation farmer, so I grew up on a sugar beet farm, canning tomato farm, and pickling cucumbers. And my grandparents also had a roadside fruit stand, which my parents took over. So, yeah, vegetables were pretty heavy back in the day, back in the war years and thereafter.
- Chris Blanchard: And really something that's in your blood Kurt.
- Kurt Bench: Yep. Yep, I'm the farmer.
- Corinna Bench: Yeah, I did not grow up in a farm family. I was a suburb's girl and met my husband outside Chicago 10 years ago, about 15 years ago now. And when I moved out here after we got married and had our first child, I really didn't know anything about vegetables or the farm life at all. And so it was a really big learning curve for me. So,



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part of what I love to do now is kind of relive that journey with some of our CSA customers who frankly resemble what I use to be like.

- Chris Blanchard: Nice. I like that. So, are you guys farming on family land, or did you strike out on your own?
- Kurt Bench: We are. It was in the family, not for centuries or whatever, but it was in the family a couple years ago. And it's sort of been one of those things that was always set aside for me when I came back. I was in Chicago for seven years. And Dad sort of held onto this small piece of property, which is adjacent to one of his. And just would have been one of those things that when Kurt comes back it's gonna be his little baby and be.
- Chris Blanchard: With a little bit under 10 acres in vegetable production then, tell me a little bit about how you're farming that because that's kind of an awkward scale. You're too big to really do things that JM40A or Curtis Stone super-intensive market garden way, but it's also kind of hard to mechanize up at that scale of production.
- Kurt Bench: Yeah, you're right. We're right in between stage where we, I do about an acre of Eliot Coleman style 30 inch beds for crops like carrots or leafy greens and radishes something that need a lot of attention. And I do a lot of the big stuff out in the big fields in 48 inch beds. These are sixty-inch center beds so it's up all tractor cultivated stuff.
- Kurt Bench: So we do ... for our acre of Eliot Coleman and the rest yields six to eight acres out in large tractor production. So, it's a lot of potatoes, tomatoes, brassicas, like that.
- Chris Blanchard: Doing that combination, I assume that everything that you're doing Eliot Coleman style on the 30 inch beds is all or mostly hand work or BCS work and not four wheel tractor work.
- Kurt Bench: Correct, yep. We've got a little Grillo, a 30 inch Grillo tiller. And I've got a little Troy-Bilt, my first tiller, I put up beds with that. It's a pretty good system for us. We can crank out a lot of production in those small beds. So, that were certainly good for us, and I can watch it close. It's close to the packing shed. So, it's stuff that I need to watch every day and it's for weeding purposes or watering purposes. It works really well.
- Chris Blanchard: Whereas then for those, it sounds like larger seeded crops and transplanted crops you're really able to manage that stuff with more of a tractor cultivation system?
- Kurt Bench: Correct. There's more leeway too, with water and whatnot so they don't need that direct attention every day. Yeah, we've got three tractors. We've got a 140 cultivating tractor. We've got a, what is it? A Hydro 80, I believe or 86. And we just recently bought a Case, a Case 1394, a mudder kind of tractor, Deere type tractor, for front end assist.
- Kurt Bench: And so we've worked our way up to this point now where we have, we always worked to build the infrastructure up, had the ideal infrastructure, equipment, and whatnot to run. And we're at that point now where we can just hopefully the machine just runs now.



Chris Blanchard: So, you mentioned infrastructure. What do you guys have in the way of infrastructure for managing 10 acres of vegetables?

Kurt Bench: We have a 20 by 40 propagation house, a 20 by 48 cool house for acclimating transplants, a couple high tunnels, we're not really big on season extension, we need a little bit of extension. We've got a 30 by 40 packing shed. We've got a 50 by 30 lean tube behind our big barn for a lot of the wash bay areas. It's all concreted. We've got a pickup truck for delivery with a 14 foot trailer. We're pretty low scale machinery wise. We don't have anything that's really fancy. We don't have a really big box truck or we don't have a lot of fancy equipment just things that I've shared with my father because they run a conventional operation as well. Conventional operations we're able to share. But, I've built, I've bought, we've got Buckeye equipment. We've got sun flow and rain flow equipment. Little bits and pieces here and there. Every year you buy something new to try and fix that weak link. So, we're just about there.

Chris Blanchard: Now, Elmore, Ohio how far are you guys from Toledo where you do most of your marketing?

Kurt Bench: About 20, 25 miles.

Chris Blanchard: How nice is that.

Kurt Bench: Yeah, it's ideal. We live a really good life.

Chris Blanchard: Well, and I think that does make things like transporting your produce in a 14-foot trailer not needing a refrigerated box truck a little bit easier because you're not spending all day doing deliveries when you head to town.

Kurt Bench: Correct.

Corinna Bench: Right.

Chris Blanchard: So, you guys actually came to my attention on the CSA discussion group when Simon Huntley made a comment about the marketing that you guys were doing of your CSA shares. And that was back in October about how you guys were working on getting your renewals in. And when I went and looked at what you were doing, I mean, I was really struck. There's a lot of things that seem to be going on with your farm that are really different from a marketing perspective than what I see on most of the vegetable farms that have been on the show, and most of the vegetable farms that I've worked with or been a part of. And one of those, just right off the bat, is you guys are delivering to the Toledo suburbs, but you guys only have five drop off sites for 400 CSA families.

Kurt Bench: Correct.

Chris Blanchard: Can you tell me a little bit more about how that works because that's a lot of people at each one of those sites. What kinds of locations are you guys delivering to?

Corinna Bench: Well, we have a couple of really big sites, Sylvania and Perrysburg. And those are the wealthier suburbs of Toledo. Those are kind of our, the big guns. And then we have one that's right outside our own front door right here in Elmore. And then we have a



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community on the lake, Port Clinton. They tend to be wealthier communities that we've attracted.

Corinna Bench: And of course, I think it's important to mention that this has been a 10-year process in slowly building this clientele. And so when we started, we made a commitment to one another that we didn't wanna be a farm that was running around doing delivery sites every day. We really wanted to hold the line there and keep the number of sites down to an absolute minimum because I'm sure that many of your listeners would agree, we wanna be on the farm farming. We don't wanna spend the majority of our week sitting at a Farmer's Market or a delivery site.

Corinna Bench: So, we really wanted to try to control that somehow. So, we just made a conscious decision that we would never make it more than these five sites. And there have been times that we have thought about dropping one of them just because it's maybe a smaller number. We always watch the return rates and kind of pay attention to how many people are there. And what makes it worth it for us to go, but we kind of look at it as if there's a site and it only has 20, 25 people, we can find those 25 people and funnel them to another site. And that saves a whole day, a whole half of the day where we don't have to travel then to a pick up site and set it up.

Corinna Bench: So, that was just a conscientious decision on our part early on that we weren't going to go that route. We were gonna keep the number of sites low. And I think one of the things I've learned in marketing is that if you know who your target audience is, who your ideal customer is, and where they are you can find them. You can find more of them. It's just a matter of knowing how they talk, how they think, and then delivering those words, and those ideas, and those, it's like a speaking to their mindset.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. So, when you say those words, "talking to people in their language, reaching into understanding their mindset," two things occur to me. One, that seems like something that we've all been reading about in marketing stuff for decades, right?

Corinna Bench: Right.

Chris Blanchard: But then, it also strikes me that this is very similar to, I'd almost say it's textbook for what you read in any kind of online marketing that says, "Get the words of your customers, and then use those words to describe what it is that you're doing." I mean, not being dishonest about it or anything, but really trying to adopt their language so that you're reflecting back to them the kinds of things that they've said that they need or value. But, that always sounds, I don't know. It sounds easy, it sounds kind of pat, but I know from experience that it's not. How have you gone about that?

Corinna Bench: I guess it's the number one principle of marketing is that you have to know who your ideal customer audience is and I think when we first started this CSA, we just would take any warm body to fill a spot. And over time, we watched the results of that decision. Our customer retention rate wasn't what we wanted it to be. And I know that's a struggle for every CSA farmer out there. We have that struggle too. And I finally just said, "I wanna deal with this retention issue." I wanna figure out how do I increase my retention rate? It used to be when we started out it would be in the 50's. I think 2016 it was 66%. And I just wanted it to be in the 70's. I'm like, "It would be so great if I didn't have to stress out so much to find new customers." And so, how do I figure out that problem, or how do I solve that problem?



- Corinna Bench: And I decided that I needed to figure out why people were leaving, but perhaps more important I needed to figure out why the ones who were staying, were staying. And so that's what began this journey for me into the online marketing space, just actually start studying marketing. I didn't know anything about marketing. I was just along for the ride with my husband. And about two years ago I began to actually kind of look into these marketing principles.
- Corinna Bench: And so I started to call. We did a really great customer survey at the end of the 2016 season. And I think I just ask them really terrific questions. Sometimes, I think the power of our surveys are the kinds of questions we actually ask. And I just happen to pick some really good ones. And one of them was why did you choose our CSA? What problem did we solve for you? And the responses that I got, when you have 400 members and about half of them write back you get a pretty good cross section of what they probably think.
- Corinna Bench: And that one question alone was super helpful for me to see, I saw patterns. I mean, the top three or four answers helped me identify why people kept coming back. And then not only the survey, but I did interviews. I decided that I would call, I called them my CSA masters. The people that I knew who were really good at CSA. And we all know who those people are. They're the ones that light up when they see you, and they talk on your social media pages a lot, and you see them cooking amazing meals.
- Corinna Bench: And so I did 45-minute interviews with over 30 of my customers. And I ask them different kinds of questions, really to try and get into their heads. And to figure out why is this working for you? What were some of the problems that you ran into when you started this CSA? How did you overcome those? What were the hacks you used because I wanted to try and figure out how I could help newbies into my system. In the future, move faster along the journey so that they wouldn't feel those pain points. They wouldn't bump into those obstacles. And then they wouldn't drop out.
- Corinna Bench: And so all this information was so valuable, and I just wrote it all down, and I saw these patterns. And out of that a couple of really big ah-ha moments surfaced. And probably the most important one was that we essentially developed this past winter before the 2017 season, I was able to develop kind of a curriculum. I call it my blueprint or my roadmap to CSA success. And I taught that as a sort of course within my private Facebook group to my members.
- Corinna Bench: And so I was able to teach them these are the things you need to know first, these are the things you need to know second in order to succeed. And I think that, that first piece was really instrumental in helping our retention rate this year because our customers self-reported and actually, helped themselves grow.
- Corinna Bench: But, the second part with all of that research in terms of marketing is that like I said before, it gave me the word that my ideal customer was thinking. I didn't really pay too much attention to the few negative comments. I mean, you always have those and you try look for patterns there too. But, I was really dialing into what are my superstars saying about my farm because I want to attract more of those kinds of people. If I can get those people who love me no matter what I do, we're gonna succeed at this because it's easy. Then, they're gonna stick around. That's gonna save me a lot of time down the road. So, I was looking at their phrases. The kinds of stories they would tell me. The kinds of things they said they valued. And then when I started



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my marketing campaign, I used, sometimes I listed those very sentences out of those interviews or out of the surveys and post them on my sales pages, or in my emails. I really tried to resonate with those prospects that were coming in the door.

Chris Blanchard: Corinna, I loved what you did with those survey responses. So often with something like a CSA survey, we take all of the negative responses and try to respond to those. I got too many tomatoes, so we grow less tomatoes, or I got too much kohlrabi, so we grow less kohlrabi. And I love how what you did was to really focus in on why people wanted to be part of your farm and what they felt was successful about your farming operation.

Corinna Bench: Yeah. I really think that, that was one of the reasons why our marketing has been so successful. And I can't really take credit for it. It was kind of a fluke, but when you know who you want in your CSA. I mean, if I can choose the type of customer that I could work with, who would that look like? And that would be my challenge to all those CSA farmers out there right now. Who is that ideal person that you want to work with?

Corinna Bench: And then do whatever you can to figure out how they think, what they value, what their mindset is, and then create advertising and marketing that speaks to them. Stop trying to get everyone to join your CSA, or love your CSA, or wanna stay in your CSA, because we all know that CSA is not right for everyone. It's just not a fit no matter what you do to get them there. There are just some people that it's not gonna work for. And so I think we need to stop trying to turn everyone into a CSA convert. And instead, identify the characteristics of our ideal customer, and do whatever we can to attract them.

Chris Blanchard: One of the things I love on your website is, you've actually got a page that's titled, Why Would A Person Consider Signing Up For A CSA? And it's six reasons why you really might or might not want to join a CSA farm.

Corinna Bench: Yes. And a lot of those reasons are taken right from my interviews and my survey responses. Those were some of the patterns that I saw. I don't know if those would fit absolutely every CSA farmer in the nation, but in my niche here in this particular area of Toledo that's what we have found to be the case in our customers. And that particular blog post was one of my more viral ones. And when I saw how it took off and people really responded to it I thought, well, I'm gonna post that in a prominent place on my website. So that, when a person comes to my site, and they want to look into my CSA, let's make sure that they go to that page. So that, I can almost qualify them as a lead.

Corinna Bench: I kind of want people who are thinking about joining my CSA to read that page because if they get to the end of that article and they still they wanna join, then I know they're gonna be upset if they pause at any point and say, "I don't know," then I've just given them permission to back away. And that actually helps me in the long run too because then I don't have to end up replacing them two years later when they decide they don't like it.

Chris Blanchard: And I love how right on that page you say that, "CSA customers who come back year after year are a certain kind of customer. Not a better kind of customer, just a certain kind of customer."



- Chris Blanchard: And it sounds like this is research that you actually did. This wasn't you going to one of the many CSA retention studies that have been done by universities, or by various CSA membership management entities. This was you guys figuring out what worked for your CSA. Not copying and pasting this from somebody else's work.
- Corinna Bench: Right. Although, I do have a feeling if other CSA farmers went and looked at that some of those things would probably jump out at them as well. But, for our style CSA, we have a kind of CSA where you get what you get, and you don't get upset. We prepack the boxes. We don't have a lot of choices. And so, that's not what every other a lot of other CSA farmers are doing. So, given that fact we've also learned some things about what kind of a person would like our style of CSA. So, I think that's also an important distinction to make.
- Chris Blanchard: Right. That you're not just guiding them to or away from CSA in general, that you're guiding them to or away from Shared Legacy Farms, CSA.
- Corinna Bench: Right, right.
- Chris Blanchard: There's some other things that you've done with your marketing that again, matches up with a lot of what I've seen promoted for online marketing. And I guess, I don't often times think of CSA farms as doing online marketing, but that's effectively what you're doing. That's the primary way that I think CSA farms now get the word out about what they have and what makes their offerings unique.
- Corinna Bench: Yeah, when we first started, Chris, 10 years ago our idea of marketing was to put something together on a flyer and go to Office Max and photocopy it and pass it out at the farmer's market. And then we kind of graduated to a more professional looking brochure that we would still pass out whenever we could. And then more and more we've moved into kind of the digital age where we're using our website.
- Corinna Bench: But, a couple of years ago when I wanted to figure out this problem of customer retention that's when I started studying online marketing specifically. So I started following some of the big moguls in the online marketing space. And I mean, I binge listen to podcasts every week and still do. There's just four or five people that I follow. And after you listen to them for a year. You listen to all their back issues. You start to hear the same kinds of things.
- Corinna Bench: And I thought, you know what? I'm just gonna try this because I think this could work for our farm business as well. And I had to modify it a little bit, but I found that it was highly successful. And it may be that because a lot of my customers are online. A lot of them are trolling through the social media channels. And so learning some of those techniques has been a big game changer for us.
- Chris Blanchard: I mean, I see that even on your website as soon as you get there, there's a popup that comes up and says, "Free vegetable storage guide if you enter your first name and your email address." Have techniques like that been successful in converting people to members of your farm?
- Corinna Bench: Absolutely. Yeah. I know, it sounds silly. Like I said, a couple years ago if you had told me that email was important, getting someone's email address was important I would have laughed at you because I thought email was going away as a dinosaur.



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That's what we all think. But, about a year ago when I switched over to a new email service provider I had 456 emails. And today I have just over 1,500. So I've grown my list by 1,000 emails in just 12 months.

Corinna Bench: And that's been predominantly through the use of these what you just described, which is called the lead magnet when you create some kind of content that's so valuable that people would probably pay money for it, but you provide it for free on your website. And so they'll exchange their email address for it. So I created several of those documents and it took me a while. It took me several weeks to put those together, but again, I kept looking at it as an investment. Hey, this is gonna help me find leads so that I don't have to work so hard to find new customers the way I've always done it.

Corinna Bench: And you have to kind of I think remember that a person, our customers, are on a journey. And they enter our sphere of influence in different places. And so I have to create. I look at it as I wanna try and create many different entry points into the customer journey. So there might be people that are really clueless and don't know a lot about vegetables at all. Just something like an A to Z Vegetable Storage Guide would be really helpful. They wanna learn how to store vegetables, and how to handle them, and freeze them.

Corinna Bench: And then they get automatically subscribed to a drip campaign that I've created. It's 10 emails that drip out at a certain rate throughout the next three weeks. And each one gives them additional content, "Hey, I'm teaching you this. Here's a quick way to store raspberries so they don't get moldy," or, "Let me tell you about green bags, they saved my life." I write these engaging emails that teach them things instead of sell them things, just teach them things. And so then by the time they get to that, they've established a relationship with me. They see me as someone they know, like, and trust. And so then when I come in later with a sale, and I start talking to them about, "Hey, if you wanna subscribe to my Farmer's Market preorder list or do you wanna think about joining my CSA," they know who I am, and they see me as someone who's added value to them. And I think there's a little bit of reciprocity going on there where they say, "I wanna. I'll take a listen. I don't mind hearing a sales pitch here for a little bit."

Corinna Bench: So all of that is part of this online marketing strategy where you create a system, a huge machine that includes these lead magnets to pull people into your funnel. And then you journey along with them. You nurture that relationship with a weekly consistent email or blog post or something that adds value to them. And then occasionally, throughout the year you have seasons where you might have launches and you sell things, but you don't constantly try to sell to people. So that's the strategy that I've adopted and it's been working really well.

Chris Blanchard: And it seems like that's something you do also with your current members as well as people that you're hoping might become a member in the future. That you really work hard to provide them with value on a weekly basis that goes beyond just the vegetables that are in the box.

Corinna Bench: Yeah. So that's actually, I'm glad you brought that up because I think when we first started selling a CSA, we just saw it as a box of vegetables. And then you might get a newsletter, and you might get to come out and do some farm events, but now I've actually, the value, the content, the teaching that I do inside our private Facebook



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group, and can only do two or three videos a week sometimes. And I'm making PDF cheat sheets like formula for a perfect pesto, that they can download and put into their little binders.

- Corinna Bench: I mean, providing that kind of stuff has actually created this additional value to our membership. So when I came to the end of this year and I had to put together my offer to get people to renew, I didn't just say, "Hey, you get a box of vegetables, and a newsletter, and some farm events." I talked about those things that have added additional value to them in the Facebook group. "Hey, you're gonna miss out on learning more things. Think about all the things you learned this past year. You're gonna miss out on that next year."
- Corinna Bench: So we talked about the value of the private Facebook group, community-based feel when they're in there. The access they have to all the other foodies in Toledo through that group. And the way that they're learning and growing. So yeah, we've kind of created a huge content creation engine within the CSA that helps us create this idea for our customers that they're getting additional value beyond just the vegetables.
- Chris Blanchard: That seems to be working. I noticed on your website this morning that it says you've only got 24 spots remaining for your 2018 CSA.
- Corinna Bench: Yeah, it's pretty crazy. I couldn't believe the results myself. When we started, we decided to do this early bird launch season. This year we began on October 1st. And our season ended October 21st. So I just kind of made that the natural ending. I gave people three weeks. And I got a 78% retention by the end of October 22nd. And then I opened it to the public. And I did a very similar kind of email launch campaign to my CSA leads that I had amassed over the last year. And I filled it up. Now, with the map we're 95% full, which is crazy. And it's a huge relief because I can go into the winter. I don't really have to create a marketing plan like I did in the past. And I have this immense freedom for the months of February, March, and April, or I can be working on some other projects instead of figuring out how to find 125 members.
- Corinna Bench: That email series was really instrumental for us in pulling in these new customers. And a lot of that stuff was put together based on just these tips that I've learned from online marketing, but also I mean, I took an email copyrighting course, and just applied a few of those principles. And learned how to make a basic offer. I thought about how can I create scarcity and urgency. And put all those pieces of the formula together. I think it was nine emails that I sent out over the course of the three week period and those were the results I got.
- Chris Blanchard: It's really fantastic. You're here sharing this on the Farmer to Farmer Podcast and it makes me wonder if are you concerned? I mean, right now you're the people that are out here on the leading edge of this online marketing and really using these tools that are more prevalent in other industries. Do you feel like your sharing this information with other people that are gonna be marketing CSA's into Toledo. Do you think that, that's gonna have an impact, or is it that these are things that just work, or is it things that work because you're the only person out there doing it right now.
- Corinna Bench: Kurt, I'd be curious to hear what you think about this because it's not just that I wrote really great emails.



- Kurt Bench: Yeah, part of our whole package, Chris, is that we built a really good brand. And part of that is we're an integrity driven farm. We are, Corinna and myself are at each drop off site. So we are seeing each of our customers every week. They're like family to us, they're extended family.
- Kurt Bench: So we're knowing what they're thing in life's going on, what they're kids are doing. And we're poking around making fun of each other all the time. So we're in this for the long haul. And we're trying to get those right kind of people that are in for the long haul with us as well.
- Corinna Bench: But, I do think that when you grow somebody, if you're responsible for helping someone develop there is incredible loyalty that forms there. And so I guess I don't worry about losing the customers that I have right now. I think that they are so excited about learning how to make their own vegetable broth from vegetable scraps. I mean, that one tip alone just made people so excited in my CSA.
- Corinna Bench: Or, teaching people how to make a pesto. They had no idea that you could use the tops of carrots to do something. I mean, just teaching people and growing people in the kitchen has created a big brand loyalty for us. And as far as am I worried about what other farmers are gonna do, are they gonna move in on this territory. I hope they do. In fact, I'm trying to teach this stuff to farmers. I have a private Facebook group that I started for farmers to study CSA marketing where I do videos and I talk about the things that I'm doing. It's small, but I'm hoping just to share this information with people because it has been so ground breaking for me.
- Corinna Bench: When it was happening, I kept going to Kurt and saying, "I can't believe this is working. All this stuff is working." And I wish that other farmers knew about it because if they could use these principles and techniques in their own marketing and their own farms, wouldn't that be awesome? We could all help one another. So I kind of operate out of a spirit of service and generosity, and I'm all about trying to help other farmers get better at this.
- Chris Blanchard: All of this must take an incredible amount of time. I mean, Kurt, you just mentioned something that takes an incredible amount of time going and staffing each of your five drop sites. Not with just some random delivery driver, but with you or Corinna.
- Kurt Bench: It's a big deal, Chris. That's pretty serious. And we have people that help us out, obviously, not just me and Corinna, but when we're there that's when you see people light up. They are there to see the farmer too. And that's a pretty big deal for a lot our customers.
- Corinna Bench: Chris, I also wanted to say that in those surveys that came back and in my interviews with customers, the number one reason why people chose our CSA or joined the CSA was the relationship with the farmer. They wanted to have a relationship with a local farmer. And so when you hear that then you know I have to deliver on that. I can't just be a face virtually. I have to show up and shake their hand. People wanna shake the hand that feeds them.
- Corinna Bench: And so just having that information, knowing that, that's what our customer values, knowing that's what it takes to keep them loyal and happy. Well then, we make some intentional decisions about making sure that we're at every drop off site. We also take



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photographs of the customers at the beginning of the season. They're holding these little whiteboards with their name on them, kind of like a mugshot. And then we print those out and we study them. So that we learn their names. And that was an intentional mechanism that we had to put in place. And yeah, it took some time, but after you learn their names holy cow, I mean, that gets crazy buy in from your customer when they show up three weeks later and you know them by name. That you've just stroked that need they have to connect with a local farmer.

Corinna Bench: We hear these things from our customers. We wanna have a relationship with the farmer, I hear that as a business owner. Then I need to build some mechanisms in my business to make sure that, that happens. And in our case, we show up at the sites and meet everyone and we learn their names.

Kurt Bench: Now, the second thing too, Chris, is you said being off the farm that's one of the things for me personally is that I get my batteries charged when I see my customers going crazy over my food. When their kids open the box and they're like, "Oh, we got carrots again this week," or they're just going crazy over something like that. That to me makes all the hard work that I'm doing every day and night so worthwhile when I see they really enjoy and appreciate what I'm doing for them.

Corinna Bench: Yeah, and I think there's also a feedback loop that's present when you're there seeing them every week. You pick up on some of the signals, some of their body language. And then that kind of comes back into Grand Central Station here where we figure out how to solve problems as they surface.

Chris Blanchard: It's a positive feedback loop for you, but it's also an early warning system for you about any potential problems that are beginning to crop up.

Corinna Bench: Yeah. Chris, I want to go back to your comment about how it seems like this takes a lot of time. And so Kurt's really responsible for all of the production piece and growing things. I can't grow a single thing. So thank God, he's the farmer, but he's definitely got his own list of things to do every week. And he's on top of that. And yeah, we do have to set aside time to actually go to these pick up sites, but I told you earlier we put a line in the sand and say we're only gonna do five because that's all that we can handle.

Corinna Bench: But, then the piece that I work on it sounds like it's a lot of work. And it was on the front end, but now that I have the lead magnets in place, and I've built the sales page, and I know how to use some of these technology tools that make this easy, or I have these rituals in place. Every week I write one email to my list. Those disciplines really have made, built this machine that kind of works itself now. And I feel all I have to do is touch the proverbial flywheel to keep it spinning every now and then to keep that momentum going.

Chris Blanchard: I think that's a really important point. It actually, I mean, that's what a lot of farming is about anyway. You put a lot of effort into building a packing shed, then you have a packing shed. What you're talking about is a similar thing of having a marketing system that you've built, and now you've got the marketing system. And what you need to do now is to run customers through the marketing system that you've already created.



- Corinna Bench: Right. And I think that the big hurdle to overcome, which is probably a hurdle for most farmers is that you don't even know where to begin when you want to. I think that most farmers want to get better at marketing, but they don't know how to start. They go to conferences, and their trying to find the marketing workshops. And a lot of it seems to be the same thing over and over again. And I just feel like that's the big hurdle. And marketing needs to be something that farmers commit to studying. And not every body wants to do that. Not every farmer gets excited.
- Corinna Bench: I know Kurt tells me, "Thank God you're in charge of that because I have zero interest in learning how to write emails." But, I feel a strong business needs to have somebody who's the product champion for your marketing. And if it's not the farmer then someone else who's just taking that by the reins and trying to figure out a way to get in front of their target audience. And build that system to capture leads and move them through the marketing funnel and nurture them on their journey. Our commitment to doing that and building that system is probably one of the reasons why things are now turning and working. But, it took time and it took a commitment on my part to learn it. And I feel now I kind of know the four or five things that a farmer probably needs to learn if they wanna get good at online marketing.
- Chris Blanchard: So you've said two things that I wanna follow up on. One, a lot of people don't know where to start. So where do you start? How do you, I mean, if you're ... I'm thinking back to my time as a CSA farmer and kind of muddling my way through the marketing. And we had a website. We had a newsletter, but there was just a lot of I don't know, we didn't have a system. We had a bunch of different ways that we were marketing, but it didn't all fit together in to one cohesive whole. And I think that really limited its effectiveness. Where does a farmer start getting into this online marketing piece?
- Corinna Bench: I think first, a farmer needs to claim their niche. And figure out what is it I'm gonna stand for, what is it that I'm good at? We tried at first to be a farmer's market farmer, and a wholesale farmer, and a restaurant farmer, and a CSA farmer. And when we finally embraced that we're a CSA farm, things got a whole lot clearer. And so I think step one is just drawing a line in the sand and figuring out what is it that I'm gonna be known for. I can do a lot of things as a farmer. I can do all those outlets, but what's the one thing that I'm really good at and that I wanna be known for?
- Corinna Bench: Geico sells a lot of different kinds of insurance, but what do we know them for? We know them for car insurance. So it's the same kind of thing for us. We have to figure out the one thing. And once you figure out what that one thing is, then you have to figure out who is my ideal customer? And so there's kind of a process that I walk people through to identify your ideal customer avatar. I'm really getting into their heads. What are the kinds of survey questions that you should ask? What are the kinds of questions you should ask when you do interviews on the phone? I have a discipline where I try to call two customers every month of the year with these questions even though I kind of know the answers already, but I just feel it's a good discipline to keep my finger on the pulse of our business.
- Corinna Bench: So I feel it starts with knowing what you're gonna be all about. And then figuring out who your target audience is. And then from there you start the process of working out your messaging. People I think, buy products. People don't always buy the best product, they'll buy the product that's the most clear and the least confusing. And so



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if you are confusing, when people come to your website and they're confused, and there's volumes of text and they can't figure out what you do. And they get to that and then they're burning brain cells. They're gonna leave. If they find a website where it's step one, step two, step three. You just put stones in the creek for them and made it really easy. Then they're more likely to stick around and follow that path of least resistance.

- Corinna Bench: So messaging, strong messaging is all about clarity. It's all about lack of confusion. And that's why it's so important to know what is it that we are, what are we gonna focus on, and then figure out who is the target audience for that product and really zone in on that so you can speak to them in your marketing.
- Chris Blanchard: And this is really what you guys do right on your home page. So when you land on the Shared Legacy Farms home page there are these very brightly colored flags that say, "What Your Farmers Do In the Winter, Only 24 Spots Remaining for the 2018 CSA, Access Our Recipe Database, and How to Order Veggies Through Our Online Store." And then there's the popup that allows somebody to get your free vegetable storage guide.
- Chris Blanchard: So there's a number of different entry points, but it's also you're not overwhelmed with choices, and you're not overwhelmed with information. Right at the beginning kind of choose, which path you wanna go down.
- Corinna Bench: I think it's funny because you're referencing our website, and I would actually argue that I think our website is not super clear. And I'm actually rebuilding the website this winter. So that when someone comes to it, it's very clear that we're a CSA farm.
- Corinna Bench: When you go to see the blueapron.com website for instance, I know we all secretly despise Blue Apron because they're stealing our market share, but they have got this messaging down to a pat. And I think we can learn a lot from their lack of confusion. They make it very simple. And they're speaking to you. Look at the words that they put on the page. They are speaking to the needs of their target audience, and their wants, and desires.
- Corinna Bench: And so I think we can go there and even as we're shooting darts at the page we can also appreciate the brilliant messaging that's going on there. And try to copy their methods and put it on our own website. So this winter, we're actually going to be rebuilding the site so that it's a giant picture of a customer happily using our product in their kitchen. And we're gonna have one bold headline along the front that has whatever our tagline on it. I don't know what that is yet, but it'll be very clear what we are. And there's gonna be one orange buy now button in the middle, and maybe one next to it that we're sending to a lead magnet. So it's gonna be really clear this is a CSA farm.
- Corinna Bench: And then if they wanna figure out that we're at the Farmer's Market, they can scroll down to the bottom and find us down there on a menu item. But, I'm just gonna get real superstar clear about CSA. That's where we want you is CSA. And then I have those, I talked about the, but I also have my other key lead magnets is that blog post.
- Corinna Bench: But, I actually have it as a lead magnet. The six questions you should ask if CSA is right for you. I have that as a form that people can fill out, give me their email address, and then they get that as a PDF. And what I always tell people is that if someone



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downloads that particular PDF, I know they're interested in CSA. They wouldn't download a whole page about CSA's and if it's right for them unless they were thinking about it. So the kind of lead magnet that you create really matters in terms of qualifying your leads and getting the right people into your funnel.

- Chris Blanchard: And you might even have a different funnel that you would use for somebody who chooses that guide versus somebody that chooses the vegetable storage guide?
- Corinna Bench: Right, right. So the A to Z Vegetable Guide actually channels people into a drip campaign for the Farmers Market because that's at the top of the funnel. Those are when people first enter my they're kind of just dabbling in our produce at the Farmers Market. And they get nurtured, and they get taught things through that sequence. And then sort of towards the end I introduce them to the word CSA. And I ask them, "Do you wanna know more about this click here." And if they click that button then it starts another drip campaign that's all about teaching them about what CSA's are about.
- Corinna Bench: So yeah. There's different ways to move people through your system and segment them so that you can speak your message very clearly to a particular audience. And email service providers will do that for you. I mean, people have MailChimp, there are certain email providers that are more robust than others. I use ConvertKit, but I know that MailChimp is another really good one as well.
- Chris Blanchard: Corinna, you mentioned that there were four or five things that you recommend that farmers look at for getting their online marketing program up and running. And you mentioned a couple of them, what else should farmer's be looking at?
- Corinna Bench: Well, if you wanna follow the online marketing methods I think another thing you really have to do is get a really great email service provider, also known as an ESP for short. And there are several out there that are kind of beginner level, then as you grow your list and get more sophisticated there's kind of an intermediate level, and then the really big time social media moguls are using very robust engines like Infusionsoft, which are more expensive and complicated.
- Corinna Bench: I started out with madmimi.com. I know that a lot of people use MailChimp's, that's another really good one, but the one that I graduated to about a year ago is called ConvertKit. And I really like this one because for my stage in the game, it really segments my audience really well. So it will tag people based on their behaviors within my emails. And I just find it to be a very user friendly interface.
- Corinna Bench: So I think if you're gonna study this online marketing method and try to utilize email you've gotta get a tool that's strong and that's gonna be able to do the heavy lifting for you. So much of the sales really revolves around nurturing that relationship with your customer through email. And if you don't have a good tool, that doesn't have good open rates or deliverability rates or that doesn't interface with your store for instance, or that doesn't interface with the Facebook pixel to give you your stats for your sales then it just makes it hard to make good business decisions.
- Chris Blanchard: Right.
- Corinna Bench: So that would be I think, step three. So I think the next step is you have to study the art of copywriting. And that means you have to really embrace the reality that we



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sell with our words. Words are important. And so you need to know how to put words together. You need to understand that in beyond my marketing space actually in any selling space there's a formula that works for moving people along the funnel. Moving people along the journey, getting them into that emotional place where they're ready to buy.

Corinna Bench: I like to talk a lot about the taxi cab effect with my students because I feel when people are ready to buy they wanna buy now. And their taxi light is on. They're ready to go. And if you don't have something ready to sell them or if you haven't prepared them then the taxi light goes off. And you might try to sell to them six months later and they're not interested.

Corinna Bench: So buying is a very emotional decision. And so you need to tap into that. You need to be ready to grab people. You need to get them so their taxi light goes on. And then when it's on you need to be ready for that call to action, and get them through the doors. So these are all techniques that you learn when you study copywriting.

Corinna Bench: There are things like how to write a great headline, just a how to open your email in the first place. There's different methods for getting them to continue to scroll down your email, and we all have read really bad emails that bore us to tears. There's a reason why we don't open certain people's emails because we know they're boring. So if you learn how to write well, people will want to open them because they'll know you're either gonna give them something valuable, or funny, or it's to the point and what they need.

Corinna Bench: So these are all techniques that you learn when you study copywriting. And when I took this course, it's probably the single most important thing I ever invested in for my business because we can grow all the vegetables we want, but if we can't sell them then we're up a creek without a paddle. So learning how to use words to sell I think is really important.

Corinna Bench: And there are some tricks to the trade that are really simple and quick to learn that you can start implementing right away. Not just in your emails, but on your sales pages and your website. And they go, they have a lot of mileage.

Chris Blanchard: So those copywriting techniques, the things that you learned in that online course. Let me ask another question first. How much did your online copywriting course cost?

Corinna Bench: I spent \$999.

Chris Blanchard: Oh, my goodness.

Corinna Bench: So I was the ... I'm a great example of how I was pulled in by an online marketing business. They cultivated and nurtured my lead. So I've been following them for six or seven months learning from them a little at a time. Finding great value. I liked her teaching style. And then when this offer came through it was actually two courses in one, how to do launches and how to do basic copywriting. Normally, they are \$1,000 each and so when the offer came in two in one as a bundle, and then I saw the countdown timer on the sales page, all these elements that I'm now learning how to use. They were working on me.



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- Corinna Bench: And so I bought them. And yeah, I binge watched them in three weeks, and started using them. And they worked.
- Chris Blanchard: And I guess, I mean, \$1,000 sounds like a tremendous amount of money, but with the kinds of results that you've gotten out of that seems like a good investment.
- Corinna Bench: Absolutely. I mean, Chris, when you think about as farmers our time is our most precious commodity. And so I may have spent that \$1,000, but I just learned a life skill for my business. It's gonna save me oodles of time in the future. I feel now I know how to write website pages that cause people to convert. I know how to write emails that aren't boring. So my email open rates are higher. I know how to move people along the journey so they're actually ready to buy.
- Corinna Bench: I mean, I just opened up February, March, and April of next year where I'm not gonna have to create these elaborate schemes to try and attract leads. Now, I can just work on other things so I can spend time with my kids. Yeah, so to me it was totally worth it. Plus, it's just energized me. I think I'm like everyone else in my CSA, when I learn something new I got excited. And I felt alive. And so I'm loving it. I don't regret it for a second.
- Chris Blanchard: So you've talked about the importance of the copyrighting and how you have used that on your farm. Is there a place where we can see an example of the way that you have used what you learned in the copyrighting course?
- Corinna Bench: Yeah. Actually, before this podcast I put together a swipe file of the email campaign that I used that got me a 78% retention from my current members. And a swipe file is basically just a cut and paste of all the content, all the email content of that entire campaign.
- Corinna Bench: And so I have that. You guys can download it at sharedlegacyfarms.com/emaildownload. And just you'll have to give me your email address and then you can access that PDF file. And it will show you the exact emails that I use. And you can kind of pay attention to I guess, I don't want them to just list that and use that for their own CSA's, but more pay attention to the strategy and what was going on, and how I structured it to see an example of how one puts together copy.
- Corinna Bench: And if you download that you'll also get invited to join my private Facebook group. You'll get the link that you can click on to come on over to my group. And pay attention to the videos on there and the online trainings that I provide in there free.
- Chris Blanchard: Thank you for that. With that, we're gonna stop here, take a break. Get a quick word from a couple of sponsors. And then we'll be right back with Corinna and Kurt Bench from Shared Legacy Farms in Elmore, Ohio.
- Chris Blanchard: Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company. Makers of living potting soils for organic growers since 1992. You know, most of us didn't get into the business to make the most money in the fastest possible timeframe, and neither did Vermont Compost Company. And the funny thing is this organic farming thing doesn't really work that way anyhow. Organic farming works best when you use the discipline of business to guide your investments in the



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future. And that's what Vermont Compost potting soils do. Without glitz, without glamor, but with the art and the science that creates an ideal living matrix where your transplants can thrive. Setting the stage for success throughout the year. And while it's not all about the money, Vermont Compost Fall Prebuy Program can help you get what your plants need at the best price with the best shipping options. Don't miss out. Vermont Compost Fall Prebuy Program runs September 21st through December 21st. Taking care of growers by taking care of transplants since 1992, vermontcompost.com.

Chris Blanchard: Support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is also provided by High Mowing Organic Seeds. When your livelihood depends on the quality of your seeds, you need to be confident in your investment. And when you grow organically, you need to know that your seeds were selected to perform in organic conditions. High Mowing offers professional quality seeds, grown by organic farmers, for organic farmers. Purchase your seeds from High Mowing before December 21st and receive a 10% discount through High Mowing's community supported seeds program. This program is just like a CSA, customers purchase seed shares supporting an independently owned organic seed company. And as a thank you, you receive 10% off the value of your share. Shares can be purchased in any amount. For details, visit HighMowingSeeds.com/save, or call 866-735-4454. You can also request a free copy of the 2018 High Mowing Organic Seeds catalog.

Chris Blanchard: All right, and we're back with Corinna and Kurt Bench from Shared Legacy Farms in Elmore, Ohio, not too far from Toledo. I feel like when I bring up Toledo there should be a joke about Toledo because isn't Toledo ... Well, I don't know. I'll probably get in trouble for that.

Kurt Bench: Holy Toledo. Jamie Farr.

Chris Blanchard: So I'm really interested in how you guys made this transition in 2013 from farming part-time, or maybe even farming full-time, but Kurt having an off farm job to going full-time with the farm. Was Corinna working off farm in 2013?

Corinna Bench: No, I was not. I was a new stay at home mom and we made a commitment as a family to have me at home so that I could raise our boys before they got to school. So I was really disengaged from the farm operation for the first, what would you say? Five years, Kurt?

Kurt Bench: Define disengaged. Yes, you weren't a full-time employee.

Corinna Bench: Well, I guess if you look at how I'm an integral part now of the marketing machine, I was certainly nothing like that. I wrote the newsletter, and I took photographs, but that was essentially what I did. But, it was the beginning of I guess, the branding and the messaging piece that would eventually bloom into what it is now.

Chris Blanchard: And Kurt, you were working off farm, what kind of job did you have when you started the vegetable operation?

Kurt Bench: Funny story. I worked for the enemy. I worked for ADM Grain there for five years. I worked at the elevator downtown. I loaded the vessels, the rail cars, and trucks, whatnot. But, it was a great job because it allowed me flexible hours to work the nine to five thing, and then still come home and be able to farm. The pay was awesome.



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The pay was hard to leave, but that allowed me to pay for our living expenses. And we were able to, whatever the farm made, those profits went right back into reinvesting in the farm, and infrastructure, and tractors, and whatnot.

Chris Blanchard: So it really allowed you to capitalize the farming operation before you went full-time with the farming operation.

Kurt Bench: Correct. And it was hard, Chris. I mean, when we came back from Chicago I had been to most a couple times, and there's a couple CSA farms out in Chicago area. And I was ready to come home, and gung ho. We're gonna start a CSA farm. And Corinna's, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. You have no job right now. We're moving the family. We're gonna have a baby. There's too many other things going on right now." So I'm glad that she pulled back the reins and we took it step by step. And we started small. We started with 12 customers. It was basically a big garden pretty much. And we just slowly worked it from there. But, we were also fortunate to where halfway subsidized my parents. They have a conventional roadside fruit stand kind of garden operation next to us. So I was able to barter my time with them for use of equipment, and land, and whatnot. That was the lean years. That was huge, huge, huge to get us in where we are now.

Corinna Bench: I'd also like to mention there was a lot ... We were playing the long game here too. I think when we first began that journey it involved a lot of self-discipline, a lot of self-control. We wanted to buy all this equipment and put ourselves in debt, but we said, "No, let's do this smart. And let's double in size every year. And let's figure out what that magic number is before you can step away."

Corinna Bench: And every year we added something new piece by piece. And I think that, that self-control was really instrumental for helping us make some good, to set us I think to being nimble so we could kind of see what was working what didn't work before we put this huge investment of our time or our finances into something and we just find out it didn't work. So that was a really good, looking back, a really good strategy to not just jump right in and throw everything into, but little by little to build the system and build the machine. So that we knew when it was time to leave ADM, we were pretty confident that we could scale up because we had the machine in place and we just had to turn the key.

Chris Blanchard: And how did you know that it was time to leave ADM?

Kurt Bench: I came home one night I said, "I can't work here anymore." It's a tough life. When you're loading vessels you're loading vessels for 14, 20 hours at a time and just when you have young children and you're trying to farm. So when you come back from that you're on the farm with a headlamp trying to get the rest of everything harvested or planted or whatever. And it just was getting to the point where I was getting pulled too many times in both directions. And something had to give.

Corinna Bench: Yeah, and as the wife when he told me I can't do this anymore and he was really serious, we gotta stop. I immediately started thinking numbers. I'm, "That means we have to sell 125 more shares." And to me that seemed like a huge number back then. And I think, Chris, at some point as a farmer when you get to that place you just have to take the leap of faith. If you feel like you've done your due diligence and built the system, at some point, it's never gonna be if you're waiting around for it to be super easy and for the fear to go away, that's never gonna happen.



- Corinna Bench: There was fear, and we stepped into that fear. And we sold, it was, "Okay, well, we better sell those 125 because we got to." And we figured it out, and we did. As for people who are in that situation right now, I would say if you feel like you've done your due diligence and you built that machine and you're still waiting for that fear to go away, you're gonna wait forever. There's always a bit of risk, and a little bit of, "Oh, my God. Here we go," if you make that step.
- Chris Blanchard: When you made that step, did you already have other people working on your farm, or was this just the Kurt and Corinna Show?
- Kurt Bench: No, we... you probably know Mike Bollinger. He had come to our farm probably our third year, our second year, for some consultation. And he gave me a really great bit of advice saying, "If you want to grow your operation," we told him our aspirations that we wanted to be a full-time farm. He was, "If you wanna get there, you're gonna need to hire some folks and duplicate yourself." And he's, "Make a list and write down the things that only you can do Kurt. And write down the things you can delegate." And that was a pretty powerful thing for any guy farmers you wanna do everything and be a part of every single step of the process. So to delegate things, it was a hard thing, but we hired our first employee I think, in our second year. We had a high school college student. And from that year on we just added employees thereafter. We paid hourly employees, we had Workshare employees, and now we have three to four possibly five seasonal full-time employees during this production season. And we have anywhere from 15 to 20 work shares in the season as well.
- Chris Blanchard: And how did your life change when you went full-time on the farm? Were you able to scale back in the total number of hours you were working, or were you still looking at 14 to 20 hour days, but just on the farm instead of doing it for ADM?
- Kurt Bench: It was probably the same amount of time. I was here. So I would be able to take lunches, and to see my kids, and to play around, and to do those cool things. And to get away for an hour here or there. But, those first few years the farm owned me, I didn't own the farm. And we're just getting to a point now where we've got the right amount of labor downstyled I think to what the work is, but we're trying to streamline our processes and our expenses where we walk away more. And to own the farm again and not to have it own us.
- Corinna Bench: We just had a business meeting yesterday where we walked through and evaluated our last season, and tried to identify where is the energy on the farm right now? Where's the natural momentum moving? What gets us excited? Where do we want to spend more time? And then, also where are those pain points? Where are the things draining us? And really trying to make some of those hard decisions about does this really add value to our operation and to our brand? Is this something we can cut because we're looking for white space. I think every farmer struggles with that. You always want to keep growing your operation and getting bigger or adding more value to your customers, but there's a price to pay for that. And so how can we better manage that so that we have some white space, we have downtime in the off season, or in the heat of the season so we're not killing ourselves.
- Chris Blanchard: What kinds of changes are you actually making to create some more white space?



- Kurt Bench: What was it, two years ago, Corinna, we gave ourselves a vacation. When we first started the CSA the goal, we tried to follow goals from the Wisconsin area of midcoast of the 20 to 25 week CSA. And we started 18, went to 19, did 20 one year I think, and then it was, "Why are we doing this?" We're funding mother nature too much. So we went down to 19, I think in 14, and then 15 or 16 we decided to give ourselves a vacation. So we decided, we told our CSA customers we're moving down to 18 weeks. And we're going to at our will take a week off during the middle of season. And that worked out awesome. That was one way we did that.
- Chris Blanchard: Wow. So tell me about how that actually works from a marketing perspective because that's a lot of people that you have to communicate with, and make sure that they actually get the message that you're not delivering boxes one week during the summer.
- Corinna Bench: Yeah. We have to communicate that in a lot of different ways. I don't just for something like that, I don't just rely on the email that comes out the week before. You have to set the expectations with your customers at the beginning of the season, "Hey, heads up. This is gonna happen." And then we sort of had to identify that week pretty early on. We had a couple of two or three weeks leave time. So we could begin to broadcast it in all our different channels. We were doing emails. I had high open rates on those ones just because I paid attention to the subject line that I wrote to get them to even open the email. I would put it on our social media, we have a really active private Facebook group that a lot of our members are a part of, and so that was the place where we placed it as well.
- Corinna Bench: And then we even did reminders at the pick up. We did a verbal reminders, we had a little cheat sheet for our staff who's passing out the boxes. And that was kind of the trigger, "Hey, every time someone picks up a box, you have to say this." So that they were getting it three different ways to make sure. And even then I think we had two people that still showed up for their box, but we could say, "Well, we tried." We could point to three or four ways that we had very actively tried to campaign and let them know that it wasn't happening.
- Chris Blanchard: And only two is a wow. That's a really small number.
- Corinna Bench: That's pretty good. Yeah, that's pretty good out of 400 members CSA. That's pretty good.
- Chris Blanchard: Well, and I like how what you just said about how you did that process really kind of comes back to one of the benefits of having the face to face communication with your members every week. It really does give you just one more opportunity to say, "We're not gonna be here next week," or to relay whatever else needs to be relayed in that.
- Corinna Bench: Yeah. Our private Facebook group has been just absolutely incredible too. I don't know if how many of your listeners who are CSA farmers have a private group. I know most people probably have a business ad page. But, we have really leveraged the heck out of our private group and just about everyone is on there and checking it. So that's, see, almost ... I was getting people telling me when I was doing this email campaign for renewals. I had some people saying, "I don't check my email can you



just cut and paste the email right into the post in our group?" And so I started doing that too. I was, "Oh, I guess that makes sense."

Kurt Bench: So we have made some tougher decisions, it's not made in stone yet, but we're like I kind of said when you're a new farm or medium-aged farm you're looking for any live pulse to sell to. And we're now coming of age, we feel we're a mature business that we're able to sort of take a step back and go, "Hey, are we really making money on that and do we really want to be making the money? Is it more important that we're here home more time wise with the kids at this point and time in our life."

Kurt Bench: So we're taking a really hard look at some Farmer's Markets that were, "Yeah, we made really good money there, but it doesn't fit our current hedge hog or our CSA system." So it's sort of out of whack for us to man those or to rent a vehicle or whatever it is to do that. So we're looking to cut those down, or cut those out of our system and create some more open time for us to be on the farm more or less, but then it creates more plan time for us to sit down on the calendar and actually plan out some days where we're just gonna be, "Hey, we're gonna go on a vacation periodically throughout the growing season as well."

Corinna Bench: That decision was really freeing for me because I am one of the people that stands at the market all day long and tries to sell vegetables. And we were making, there were some weeks we were doing pretty well, but most of the weeks we might be just bringing home three or four hundred dollars. When you're sitting there all day long and that's all you have to show for it, that's really discouraging. And especially when that's not my skill set. So I kept thinking about, "I'm a teacher, I'm a content provider, that's where I'm adding a lot of value to our brand right now." And there's an entire day in our week where I am, I felt trapped at this market.

Corinna Bench: So once we made that decision, what if we did it? And we just said, "What if we didn't go to that market where I have to sit there. What would that look like?" And what value could I add to the business and the brand with an additional day? That's in my skill set. So really trying to take a look at our strengths. And I think that we as a business, you're gonna produce the greatest fruit in your strength zone. So as much as you can hang out in your strength zone. That's where you're gonna get energized. That's where you're gonna produce. It's gonna be easy to produce stuff. And you try to delegate the things, or get rid of the things that drain you. And I think we're at the place now where we're able to identify those things and start actually doing them. Having the courage to just try it. If it doesn't work, I guess we'll go back to the market the next year, but we're gonna give it a shot.

Chris Blanchard: And I suppose this is one of those places where the kinds of effort that you have put into marketing, the CSA and the kind of confidence that you've been able to build with that I would think it would be pretty easy for you guys to say, "Well, we're going to be able to make up that income some place else."

Corinna Bench: Right. Yeah, and in fact one of the ideas that I'm kind of working on right now is developing the CSA course a little bit more. So all that research that I did of our CSA masters and figuring out what was the roadmap that most of them walked through to get really good at CSA? They didn't all start out that way, but after a few years they were awesome at it. What are the skill sets? What are the things that you wish you'd known earlier? And kind of identifying that track and that roadmap so I can replicate it. I can share it with a newbie, a CSA rookie, and duplicate those results faster.



- Corinna Bench: That system is really something that I'm excited about exploring and developing so that I can sell memberships through our Facebook group for instance, so that other people, anybody, could join the group. And have access to the training library, and the eBooks for every vegetable, and learn that information. So that's a great example of how I can create an information product that sells. So I can be doing that instead of sitting at the Farmer's Market once a week all day long.
- Corinna Bench: So I can be using my skills and my strengths to build a new product that fits, what we're known for, fits our brands.
- Chris Blanchard: With that we're going to turn to our lightning round, but first we're going to get one more word from one more, well it'll be a couple of words, from one more sponsor. And then we'll be right back.
- Chris Blanchard: This lightning round and perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is brought to you by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractors are real farming equipment for real farmers. And with PTO driven attachments like rototillers, flail mowers, rotary plows, power harrows, log splitters, snow throwers, even the utility trailer and the new water transfer pump, you've got the tools you need to get jobs done across the farm and across the homestead. On my own farm we went through a number of so-called solutions for mowing and tilling before we finally got smart and bought a BCS. Even though we owned a four-wheel tractor to manager our 20 acres of vegetables, the BCS tackled jobs that we couldn't do with a larger machine for mowing steep slopes and around trees to working in our high tunnels. Plus, they're gear-driven for years of dependable service. Check out bcsamerica.com to see the full line up of tractors and attachments. Plus, cool videos of BCS in action.
- Chris Blanchard: Corinna, what is your favorite tool for marketing?
- Corinna Bench: My favorite tool for marketing? If I had to recommend something, I would say people need to start looking at some podcasts and listening to people who are really great at online marketing. So amyporterfield.com, she has an incredible podcast called, Online Marketing Made Easy. And then Social Media Examiner is another great podcast that you all need to listen to because I guess those were the catalysts for me that gave me the tools to start becoming a great marketer. So I feel if people started there, they would start getting introduced to a lot of these concepts and teachings that are going on in the online marketing space. So I feel podcasts, listening to podcasts would be my favorite tool for growing and sharpening my act.
- Chris Blanchard: Kurt, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Kurt Bench: My new favorite tool is probably my newest app on my iPhone called Rev. Midway through the season, I'm a firm believer in pocketbooks, I've got the range kind that you can sweat, they fold up or whatever. But, I now have this Rev where I just stick it in my phone and have notes in my phone. And for a certain cost or whatever you can have them, they'll have a printout for you or whatever. So that's probably the coolest thing I've found this as of recent. I have a knack of keeping notes on my phone, this is an easier way to do that.
- Corinna Bench: Get out, that's your favorite tool? I can't believe that.



- Kurt Bench: Yep.
- Corinna Bench: A digital tool for my husband. I love that.
- Chris Blanchard: Things you never thought were gonna happen. Things you didn't know about your husband, right? Rev.com is actually who we use for doing our transcripts. I actually will send this recording off to them and they'll do that transcription for us and then we'll send it back when we edit it. When you do that you're making audio recordings obviously, with your voice. Do you get all of those transcribed, or do you go back and select, which ones you wanna get transcribed.
- Kurt Bench: I have not started that process yet, but I'm just right now making hand notes off it. So I'm gonna be in the process of creating a system for next year, how that's gonna work out for me.
- Chris Blanchard: Okay. Awesome. Corinna, what's your favorite crop on the farm?
- Corinna Bench: Oh, I would have to say the ones that make the most money. So the carrots, and the Romanesco are probably the ones that have the best story behind them, and that create a frenzy among my customers. So I love any chance I have to talk about those high-end products that everybody wants, or I can create scarcity and excitement. That's really fun for me to do that.
- Chris Blanchard: I love that answer. It's such a marketing answer. The ones where I create the frenzy. Kurt, do you have a crop that's your favorite to grow.
- Kurt Bench: My two would probably be bigger really good carrots and garlic. We have really good soil for those two crops.
- Chris Blanchard: I know you make a big deal out of your carrots on the website. That, that's actually something that you come back to again and again in your ad copy.
- Corinna Bench: Yeah, we actually have a name for them. We call them crack carrots and people are always asking us, "Why are they called crack carrots." And I say, "Well, because they're addicting." And I remember getting that tip from Eliot Coleman somewhere that if you just name something a different way it just causes a conversation to happen. So that's been a fun thing.
- Chris Blanchard: I think it's a really important idea. And especially with, I mean, it gives you a way to set those carrots apart from the carrots that somebody can get in the grocery store. It really says these are not just carrots, they're crack carrots.
- Corinna Bench: Right.
- Chris Blanchard: Kurt, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Kurt Bench: One thing, probably look at my soil a little bit closer and get some better soil samples, and really build soil right from the get go more so than I have in the past. We're just into mineralizing the soil and we're getting the right amount of compost on and our cover crop rotations. We're just getting a good rotation thing, but in your first years



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you just gotta go slow and whatever works, works. So we're in a really good place right now.

Chris Blanchard: Corinna, how about you? If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?

Corinna Bench: Oh, that's easy. I have two, I'm sorry. I'm gonna have two. The first one is I would start building my email list way earlier. I would have let go of that myth that email doesn't matter. So that would be the first thing. And the second thing that I would do is I would interview my customers. I would just do that way earlier. Get on the phone and talk to my ideal customer, get into their head and figure out what is it that they love about me. Why are they coming to my farmer's stand? Why are they buying in my CSA? And what are their pain points? And just really trying to know who they are so I can better serve them.

Chris Blanchard: Awesome. Corinna and Kurt, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.

Kurt Bench: Thank you, Chris.

Corinna Bench: Thank you so much, Chris. This was a blast.

Chris Blanchard: All right. So wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 145 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You can find the notes for this show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the Episode's Page, or just searching for Bench, that's B-E-N-C-H.

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Chris Blanchard: Thank you for listening. Be safe out there. And keep the tractor running.