

'Bout a 100 – Sideline Beekeeping

DEVELOPING A PRODUCT & SERVICES LINE

Finding The Right Balance In Products And Services

Larry Connor

Last month I discussed some thoughts about the management of a sideline operation and marketing hive products. This time I want to dive into the issues associated with the selection of the products and services you plan to offer to customers regarding your sideline beekeeping activities.

You know you cannot do it all with your bees and there are limits on the range of products and services you can provide. You may want to focus on honey production and pollination, or you may want to jump into the value added hive product production and marketing operation. Or, if you have an unquestioning co-beekeeper, a lot of time, and plenty of energy, you may want to try to do a bit of all of these activities and select the ones where you have the most success and profit.

As a book publisher, I constantly get pressured to expand my product line, to offer new services and take risks in areas I know little or nothing about. My little business started out when I was a faculty member at The Ohio State University and a coworker (a full professor who could do no wrong), lost some really nice slides I had inherited from my predecessor, W.A. Stevens. I was upset that these images were lost forever, so I finally developed a series of slides as part of my OSU Extension program. Now, over 35 years later, those images haunt me in presentations from the “senior” members of the teaching corps at bee schools and talks.

Eventually I started a little business called Beekeeping Education Service and offered small slide sets of my own photos for sale to beekeepers. This was started in late 1975 and I sold slides at the ABF meeting in Philadelphia in 1976, the bicentennial year. I continued selling these slide sets from Florida, during my Genetic Systems days, and from Connecticut after I moved. Now there is a box of leftover slide sets in my garage here in Kalamazoo. Since the world has moved to digital photography and PowerPoint presentations, those images are only of use to a few die-hards who insist they will go to their grave with the wired remote in their hand. So be it.

I purchased Wicwas Press from Roger and Marylou Morse in 1988. Then my objective was to produce quality bee books written by other writers. That objective has been met, and my insistence on good writing, good editing, excellent graphics, and affordable prices have worked for the past 20 years. Not that this has been a huge moneymaker. There have been some rough patches to get through, and there are many more books on bees in print today than there were in 1988. The bee-book publishing business plan is scary – more book titles and fewer beekeepers who might read the book, if they take the time to read.

Well-intended beekeepers offer suggestions to me on

how to make a fortune in beekeeping. I have been advised to enter the film and video industries, and make a fortune selling materials. Well, I actually did produce a video series, and marketed it as the Weekend Beekeeper in the 1980s. It was then I learned that most American, Canadian and English beekeepers have a Ph.D. in watching TV and will tell you every damn thing you have done wrong or disagreeable. It is okay to be told that you have some fact wrong, but it is just plain annoying to be lectured on the importance of turning off all leaf blowers for a 10-mile radius before making a videotape. When Universities and professional film companies started making bee movies, I retired from that project.

I have stuck to the subjects I think I know and can handle with some efficiency and competence. I have published proceedings of academic meetings and done a fine job with the publications. But the market just isn't there – the reality is that you might sell fewer than a hundred copies of such a publication. A few years ago I delivered hundreds of copies of a hardcover proceedings to the recycling center where, I discovered, they would be burned to generate heat and electricity. That was not their intended purpose, but I could no longer afford to pay to store them, move them, or even give them away. There was something cathartic in their elimination from existence.

Until 2006 I published books written by other authors. That is fine, and a well written, nicely edited and competently printed beekeeping book is a delight. Some authors made the task a delight, while others required extensive reworking – to the point where I felt I should have been coauthor. Then in July 2006 I published *Increase Essentials*. My latest book *Bee Sex Essentials*, was rolled out at the Mega meeting in Sacramento last January. Please don't take this the wrong way, but it has taken me decades to assemble the necessary experience, self-confidence, humorous stories and self-checked ego to write books. Clearly I am a slow learner in this department.

So, having found a niche in publishing bee books, I need to generate a new book every year or so for as long

Beeswa Bar – A relatively simple product with great utility for craftspeople and homeowners.



as I live. My other retirement plan requires 52 friends who can care for me a week at a time. It would be fun to be able to do both. Some folks assume I am retired now. Remember, I am an actor in community theatre, and I can play many roles. Watch me play the retired guy. It's all an act. I have worked with beekeepers most of my life, it is highly unlikely I'll ever be able to retire!

What to Make, What to Sell?

As a hobby beekeeper myself, newly relocated to Kalamazoo, I debate with myself what product I might want to produce and sell for beekeepers. The image of presenting elaborate gift boxes to corporate executives with my honey, pollen, candles, soaps and creams, is a great mental image. But I don't have the interest to do that sort of product, and I know that 99.99% of you can do these and do a much nicer job at it. I mention this because I can suggest – anyone can suggest you do gift boxes or queens or sell educational programs to schools – but if you do not want to do it and feel you have little or no interest in the subject, move on to something else.

I've thought a lot about raising some improved bee stock, something that is gentle, productive, winter hardy, adapted to northern conditions along the 43rd parallel, and is totally and completely resistant to *Varroa* mites, all the brood diseases and lots of other problems. My problem is my level of acceptance for producing something. IF I were to raise breeder queens, I would want to do it right and produce a superior product. But the effort required do the selection and breeding is beyond what I can finance, and I don't see any huge grant and staff of trained associates to carry this program forward. True, I have serious thoughts about working with other beekeepers so they can do these things, but this is a pretty small part of any business I expect to generate during future years.

Taking Inventory

You are probably better off if you do an "assets and interest inventory" before you start any new scheme of any sort, but especially with bees and beekeeping. Your assets may be financial or they may be the information you know and experience you possess. The interests must be measured as a level of your dedication to a particular subject. I am both interested in and financially motivated to write and sell books and photographs. I do not have the finances or interest to make gift baskets, as much as I think they could make someone a huge amount of seasonal money in November/December. Finally, I have lots of interest in making mead, home brewed vinegar, and honey-beeswax soaps. But I want to do this for me, and for friends. I really don't have any illusions of being



Highly attractive candle display at Tracy Hunter's sales area outside Indianapolis, Indiana.

the next Bert's Bees, as much fun as that is to dream about. (Last November Bert's Bees was sold for \$913 million to Clorox).

My age is a factor. If I were 30 years younger and had a completely trustworthy partner, all this might be different. There is money to be made in almond pollination if you have the right combination of contacts, luck and experience. And you are willing to work very hard to fight the many challenges facing many beekeepers in today's world. Unfortunately, if I have to spend \$70-80 per colony per year to move them into and out of almonds, and into and out of a peak nectar forage area or feed them heavily, it might be just as easy and much less risky to stay home and play with two colonies and get an exciting job like greeting folks as they walk into Wal-Mart. I suspect the latter option keeps a lot of bees on the road.

Of course not all sideline operators will consider sending their bees to almonds. Instead they will find a suitable endeavor in their own area to keep bees and to make money from them. I suppose some sideliners may elect to lose money with their beekeeping every year – perhaps to provide essential pollination services for wildlife in their area.

Some Questions to Ask Yourself?

What do you enjoy doing? Are you happy working in the woodshop making bee boxes or do you find that a chore? Are you at peace with the world when you are making up new colonies (for increase or for sale) or do you find it is stressful or do you lack confidence in what you are doing? Are value added products – from creamed honey to beeswax soap – something you enjoy making or do you find it tedious and difficult to sell? Are you a salesperson? Do you like working with honey customers or do you get someone else to wait on them? Do you have a neat and attractive sales area or do you have a corner in the kitchen filled with cardboard boxes with honey jars stuck inside?

You get the idea. Ask those tough questions of yourself and your partner, if you have one. If you contemplate developing a sideline business with someone else, you both better sit down and deal with these issues together, and in advance. Here is a list of potential products (certainly not all inclusive) for you to consider:

Products and Services

Honey wholesale – Offhand I cannot see the profit in a sideline beekeeper producing honey in drums and



Wax products attract dust and dirt, plastic wrap may mark the wax. Tracy Hunter keeps all molded candle products in a drawer system mounted inside a cabinet. I like the fact that this gives his staff a quick inventory check.

buckets, but there are bound to be exceptions. If you have a very unique honey source and a buyer willing to pay a premium price for that honey, then it makes sense. This is especially true if the buyer already has a market for that honey and you don't.

Honey retail – A vast majority of sideline beekeepers see themselves as retail honey marketers, even if just at the home level. I have seen beekeepers use the honor system with a small honey display in the entryway of their home. Regular buyers know where to come and get their honey, and will leave the correct money or a check.

Bees, queens, queen cells, nucs – I have written a lot about these, but every beekeeper can be in a position to sell an extra nucleus hive or a few extra queens. Just spread the word at bee meetings.

Beeswax wholesale – If you have bees you will eventually have a pile of beeswax. Sale of the wax for frame exchange or to a local craft shop may generate some income at a minimum of effort.

Beeswax retail – The expansion of the wax business, with sales of blocks of bulk beeswax, is one way to increase sales. If a pound of bulk, unprocessed beeswax sells for \$2, it might be worth the effort to clean it up and sell is for \$8 to \$15 per pound to local buyers. Never forget the market for sales to other beekeepers – the ones craftier than you.

Candle production – My impression is that the beeswax candle market has dropped lately, but I know that in certain areas there is a high demand for hand-dipped, molded and rolled beeswax candles. As long as the products are tasteful, well-made and creative, candles will have a market, especially before the Christmas holiday season.

Propolis collection – There are buyers of bulk propolis that have been reported to buy your propolis scrapings for over \$10 per pound. If you have more than a couple of hives you certainly should save the propolis and send it off once a year for a little bonus check.

Propolis products – For me, this is the biggest overlooked area of sideline beekeeper value added products. I visited a beekeeper in West Virginia who was making some propolis products. They were simply made and nicely labeled, and I still use some of them for various cuts and rough skin. I like to use these products over antibiotic creams. The important thing here is not to make health claims. I suggest you have a copy or photocopy of a magazine article about these products on the display, but make no claims about the benefits of their use.

Soaps with hive products – Beeswax in soaps changes the texture of the soap. The addition of a little honey makes the product seem like it should be healthier to use. I want to see someone make propolis soap, but I haven't found one yet. I don't recommend adding pollen because of allergy issues. But the addition of a small amount of royal jelly to soap might make it a premium product.

Skin creams and lotions with hive products – During the Winter I use a tiny jar of skin aide containing beeswax and honey on dry skin and lips. The products are natural and I feel better using them. And I think they work.

Infused Honey – The addition of essential oils from citrus and other plants produce some wonderful honey. My favorite is orange blossom honey with tangerine oil added – it bumps up the intensity for toppings and finishes for grilled meat and fish. Check your labeling requirements,



Making sauces with honey is a great value added activity. Here are three from Tracy Hunter.

but the potential here is huge and largely untapped in most local markets.

Creamed honey with and without flavorings – Creamed honey was perfected by Dr. Dyce at Cornell and a royalty was paid to the beekeeping program there for many years, supporting research and graduate students. Anyone may use the process and it is relatively simple. Creamed honey has a nice texture, but does not work equally on all nectar sources. Try some with your own honey. The addition of dehydrated fruit powder and ground nuts has expanded the market for this product. Add some ground hot pepper to some for a taste shock. Enjoy!

Pollination services – If you do not have a food-approved kitchen to make some of these products (a growing trend nationwide), you may decide to specialize in the pollination of specialty crops. Here in the Midwest there are a number of beekeepers who put colonies into cucumbers, melons, pumpkins and squash. They need to charge accordingly, since the bees will generally lose resources and bee population on these plants. But these are examples of "extra income" if you are in the right area.

Educational services – Because I have sold slide sets and currently sell photographic prints I have had contact with many beekeepers who have a considerable business going into schools and Summer camps and talking about bees and beekeeping. Some beekeepers do this on a limited basis as a method of selling product – one gives each child a small honey bear with instructions for getting more honey from his operation. Other folks, including some retired teachers, charge for their services, earning over \$500 a day visiting classrooms. I have done some of this. First, it is hard work, being "on" from 8:50 am to 4:10 pm in an elementary school. But as a sideline business, many well-spoken beekeepers can do this. Contact the local PTA or PTO in your local schools and other groups with funding to support these extracurricular educational events. Right now, with the CCD in the news everywhere, there is a huge interest in the service clubs and other organizations with regular meetings.

Product resale/bee sales/equipment sales – Some folks plan to have an inventory of bee supplies on hand for their own use, so the sale of some of these items makes sense. It will take a great deal of time – beekeepers will talk for hours after a \$10 sale. I warned you!

There are undoubtedly more to add to this list. But enjoy the process of deciding what you want to do and how to do it. **BC**

For a copy of Dr. Connor's new 152 page, full color book Bee Sex Essentials, or any other Wicwas Press titles, send an email to eebooks@aol.com.