

'Bout a 100 – Sideline Beekeeping

Beekeeping Is Getting So Expensive

Larry Connor

Common-Sense Approaches To Cutting Costs

Sideline beekeepers face many of the expenses of a much larger operation but fail to have the economy of scale professional beekeepers theoretically experience. Here are some common-sense approaches to cutting costs and keeping the level of production and service as high as ever.

As I address the ninth challenge facing sideline beekeepers, there is admittedly some interaction of concepts as we look back on them. Certainly issues affecting costs are some of the areas most likely to intersect with some of the other 'challenges'.

Working smart – Undoubtedly we all waste time, or use it inefficiently. There are times when we hang onto something – a process or idea or a queen – without any hope of return but do so for sentimental reasons or on the faint promise of income later. Think smart, and work smart. If you need to use the bean-counter approach, and figure out how much it costs to do something on *per hive* basis, I suggest you take the time to do the math. That often shows how there is an economy of scale, of getting all the work done at the apiary in one visit rather than two; in working alone on certain projects when the cost of hiring extra help will eat up any profit you might make.

Up front costs vs. average cost over a period of time – When a deal comes along it is wonderful to pick it up, perhaps in bee equipment. Even when you absolutely know there is no risk of disease in the boxes or frames, you have to look the gift horse in the mouth. Are the boxes solid? Or will you spend many hours patching and fixing? Are the combs old or new? Old combs will require replacement and more of your time. Are the frames riddled with wax moth damage or bright, solid wood?

The really successful beekeepers who have taken the time to share financial records with me always talk

about the *cost of an item over time*. From the family car to the 'big' bee truck, from the cost of new top quality equipment to the cost of equipment picked up at auction, the smart beekeeper studies the cost of an item on a per year basis. Will that new extractor work for you for five years or ten before you have to replace it because of your growth and expansion? Will it hold up for that time period? Will that hundred dollars you are saving in 2009 when you purchased an item cost you a hundred every year as long as you keep that piece of poorly made equipment in operation?

Old Yankee beekeeper story – A number of years ago a tough New England beekeeper passed on after approaching the century mark. Other beekeepers who knew him always felt sorry for the man, because his equipment was filled with holes and his frames came apart in the extractor. They felt that he was working to keep himself going as well as the equipment for as long as possible. Later, when the beekeeper's estate was being settled, someone discovered this man had a barn filled with new beekeeping equipment – from bottom boards to lids, new boxes and all new frames, wired and foundation installed. Apparently the beekeeper was getting every penny out of the equipment before he put the new

stuff into operation. The lesson? Find a balance here, and put your equipment on continuous replacement schedule to spread the costs out over as many years as is reasonable.

Comb replacement – There has been an enormous amount of publicity concerning comb replacement. Some of this came out after the first encounter with CCD, but many beekeepers were replacing twenty to thirty percent of their combs every year (at least the wax part), due to their knowledge that old wax holds pesticides, including the miticides used to control tracheal and *Varroa* mites. Here is an excellent example of a management decision that may not be the one the accountant wants you to follow. If they know what they are doing they would ask you this: What is the benefit of this comb replacement? Are you using so many pesticides in and around your bees that a radical replacement is necessary, or are you attempting a natural mite and disease program and trying to minimize the chemical content of your honey combs? How you answer these questions will determine your plan of comb replacement.

Ultimately it may be the bees that tell you if you have to replace your combs. If there is a reduction in productivity on older comb, the bees are talking to you. Are you listening?



Get rid of old comb.



Continually replace old equipment with new equipment.

free swarm costs the average beekeeper somewhere between \$100 to \$150 by the time you add in all the time, fuel and effort that goes into the capture of swarms and their management. A certain number of swarm calls will be duds – the swarm already left or it is a nest of wasps. Many beekeepers remove swarms as part of their service to the community. I encourage that. We need everyone to see the beekeeper as the good guy or gal.

Where can I cut costs?

Labor – If you pay someone to help you work bees you need to be very careful about the cost benefit you get from this setup. I am always amazed how many people keep employees sitting around, wasting time while the boss gets off the phone or away from the spouse and household chores.

I know it is nice to have help with beekeeping – from putting equipment together to pulling honey. But to hire someone, from a family member to someone you just want to help out,

may ultimately mean that you are working for that person to cover their paycheck (and not yours). You have to become organized (and probably won't). You have to have a clear vision of what you want to do and the job is not done until the list is finished. Part time help can be very challenging, since the employee either has another job or a family to manage as well.

A friend of mine who isn't a beekeeper has faced the current economy and decided to not rehire an employee for seasonal work. My friend said that he is amazed how much more relaxed he is not having to find jobs for the employee to do (sometimes mowing the lawn), all the time paying him a pretty good salary for Michigan economics. So far this season, not having the employee is working. The friend is only doing smaller jobs and is doing ALL the work himself. He is in charge (well, as much as the guy is EVER in charge), and not spending hundreds of dollars every week that he has done for years. That amount of money, added up over half a year, will probably make the difference in making

money this season, rather than losing it. Yes, it now takes him longer to finish a job. But when it is done, he did it. He does not have to return to do any 'service recovery' because the employee botched the job.

This guy has a lot more patience with people than many of us. He was doing the employee a great favor, but was spending money that he did not need to spend.

There are always a few people who will work for nothing or next to it. They are called Parents. I am always pleased to see Dad working in the honey house or wood shop, staying busy, rather than asleep on the lounge. How many of us need to find some one who will help us, and who knows the job, and will be delighted to help out in the effort to feel useful and needed.

Packages vs. Nuclei vs. Swarms

– As I mentioned above, some of those 'free' swarms can be pretty expensive. If you have to take time away from work, or you do not get the work done that you set out to do today – that swarm is not worth it. Find and train hobby beekeepers to catch swarms. If you are going to be a semi-professional beekeeper act like one!

As far as the Nucleus vs. Package battle – you will need to do the math yourself. How do packages fit into your operation? How could nucleus hives change your system of management? Would fifty nuclei hives make as much money for you as 100 package colonies? Only you can answer these questions for your operation. Keep good records when you make side-by-side comparisons.

Buying queens vs. raising them – If you are a regular reader you prob-

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ably know that I MIGHT argue that you should raise your own queens to cut the cost of buying queens every season. The reality is that there are indeed many situations when semi professional beekeepers would be better off raising the queens they need, modifying their seasonal production schedule, and investing the money they spend on queens for the cost of training to learning how to raise queens.

Not all beekeepers should do this. Many of us are too busy to raise queens, and if we try to do it we may not have the skills necessary to produce a top quality queen, and our entire operation may suffer due to inferior queens. Keeping the best possible queens in your colonies is a sound business practice: if you cannot produce those queens then you should get them from someone who can. Many areas of the country I have visited are well advised to promote the production of localized queens by a few local beekeepers who are well suited to fill this economic niche in the queen production market.

Where I am, not quite to the 43rd parallel, the season for producing queens should start no sooner than fruit bloom (second week of May) and could come to a screeching halt in August or early September if the bees are on a dearth. It is a lot harder to produce queens when there is robbing going on from hive to hive, and when the colonies are locking the drones out at night. That said, there is a strong potential for production and sale of queen cells (at two day and 10 day ages), virgin queens, and mated queens. There is a five to ten fold difference in price from a ripe queen cell to a mated queen, and queen cells, quite frankly, are a simple and cost effective method of making up colony losses during the Summer when you reconstitute hives for the fall and winter. Cultivate a close relationship the local beekeeper who is able to produce quality cells during June and July in the northern states, and treat her well.

After equipment, queen bees are often the largest cost area in a mid-sized operation (I am assuming you do not move bees to almonds and have a huge trucking cost).

Win by not playing – When it comes to almond pollination this season numerous beekeepers were

Labor costs.



exposed to the fickleness of a down market, and are in the process of re-thinking their decision to put their colonies into a pool with other middle sized operations to make up a load. When everything is done by the book it can pay, but 2009 will be remembered by many beekeepers as the year they lost money on almonds.

Shop for insurance – After a year of shopping, I found a much better insurance arrangement for the family farm when I linked it to my house in the city. I did not intend to do this, and I have some misgivings, but the savings were huge – nearly 50 percent. By linking there are no gaps in coverage. Bees and other farm products are covered. Yep, it is a small-scale beekeeping operation, but I wanted protection for the rest of the family and to make sure there was

plenty of liability coverage. There may be 20 or 30 hours of time invested in this insurance hunt, but we will see the payback every year when the renewal comes due.

Finally, I remind everyone to KISS – Keep It Sweet & Simple. When in doubt, do the simple and direct thing. I see people spending a lot of time making fancy honey displays only never to use them. Chances are there is one in another beekeeper's warehouse. Make them a fair offer... But only if you have a clear plan on where and when you will use it. **BC**

In July Dr. Connor is offering a queen rearing class in Michigan, over the middle weekend in July. If you want to know more, contact LJConnor@aol.com. He plans to be at HAS, EAS and WAS this year – a first for all three in one year. Any bets he makes it?



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