

Seven Sons ships to 48 states and has grown using internet, social media, and different delivery options.



Egg Sideline Grows Into Million Dollar Business

Seven Sons Farms makes weekly deliveries of pasture-raised eggs, chicken, beef, lamb and pork to customers in Chicago and communities throughout Indiana, as well as shipping overnight nationally. It all started with selling extra eggs from the family's home.

"We always had eggs we sold from the front door," recalls Blaine Hitzfield, one of the seven sons of Lee and Beth Hitzfield involved in the business. "As we began raising pastured beef, friends and neighbors wanted to buy a quarter or half of beef. We began having customers walk up to the door asking about beef, so we converted a shed to a little store and added a freezer."

While it sounds simple, the business' growth was anything but. In the early 1980's, Lee and Beth purchased a 120-sow farrow to finish hog operation and raised 800 acres of corn and soybeans. When Beth suddenly developed severe rheumatoid arthritis after the birth of her third son, the couple began researching health and wellness. As dietary and other changes improved her health, they began making changes in how they farmed as well.

By the mid 1990's, the sows had been sold and a transition from corn and soybeans to perennial pastures was underway. "Building fence on high value crop land was considered an odd thing to do, and the

next 10 years were rough financially," recalls Blaine. "Dad wanted to get cattle back to regenerate the soil, build organic matter, and reduce inputs."

The Hitzfields followed Joel Salatin's template of pasture rotation with poultry following beef. When the family began selling their meat at local farmers markets, the business grew.

In 2000 they came up with the Seven Sons Farms brand and started putting labels on the meat as it came back from their processors. Blaine built websites for local businesses while in high school. In 2004, he built a website for the family business and started working on social media.

"At one point we were doing \$40,000 in sales out of our former garden shack and on-farm vending machine," says Blaine. "We had a very loyal clientele who understood the quality we offered and were willing to pay a premium."

Those clients were travelling as much as 3 to 4 hrs. to pick up meat at the farm. Meanwhile the internet was rapidly building visibility, demand, and online orders.

The family set up drop sites for remote customers to pick up their orders in Chicago and around Indiana. Once again business expanded rapidly. The family reinvested in the website, making it as appealing and easy to use as possible. However, with growth

came complications.

"We were trying to manage 50 drop locations, all on different schedules and a couple of thousand customers," says Blaine. Seven Sons was also dealing with packaging, dry ice, overnight shipping to customers outside the drop sites and more. That was all in addition to raising the animals and getting them processed.

A friend of Blaine joined the business to work on the website and develop software to resolve issues. He taught himself software development and came up with low-cost solutions. He has since joined a local company that Seven Sons partners with.

"None of us went to college," says Blaine. "We just figure it out as we go and have found incredible people who've done amazing things for us. The first year with the new software, we tracked about a million dollars in sales."

At their consultant's advice, they focused on customer retention strategies versus customer acquisition. "He said we had a great brand and list and just needed to serve our customers even better," says Blaine. "He laid out a plan, and we've been able to really advance retention, but also leverage social media. His campaigns work in the background, but it makes it look like we live on social media."

The emphasis has paid off many times over. Today Seven Sons ships product to customers in all 48 continental states. Instead of drop spots, they work with local courier companies who make deliveries to the customer's doorstep in the Chicago area and throughout Indiana. Seven Sons drops off product at their warehouses, and the companies do the rest.

Product is priced on a margin goal of 20 to 40 percent based on demand for the most popular cuts and supply on hand. When the pandemic hit, the system was ready and reacted accordingly.

"We thought we had too much inventory on hand in early 2020," says Blaine. "Our home deliveries went from 250 to 300 per week to 1,500 per week."

FedEx and UPS handle interstate shipping, and Seven Sons has had to flex with the challenges these companies face since COVID hit. Packaging has been redesigned so that frozen products stay rock solid for 4 days.



Seven Sons bacon steak is one of the specialty items they raise and sell.

"The majority of what we ship is 1 and 2 days, but if there are delays, the customer may be frustrated, but it's not a problem for the food," says Blaine.

All 7 brothers have stayed involved in the company, as well as several of their wives. Seven Sons now includes close to 20 full-time equivalent employees. They offer health insurance and other benefits. One special benefit is a \$2,000 per year food credit, whether the employee is gathering eggs, filling orders, or doing customer relations via social media.

"Everyone gets to experience our products and when they talk to customers, they can speak directly to the quality," says Blaine.

Direct as well as virtual interaction is key to the business. Weekly farm tours every Saturday are done in person and posted to YouTube for those who can't make it.

In addition to the herds and flocks Seven Sons Farms raise, they partner with around 30 farms, mostly in northeast Indiana. These are carefully vetted farms that follow the same regenerative practices as Seven Sons.

It is all part of an overall effort to communicate with customers. "We focus on customer convenience and building trust with our consumers," says Blaine.

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How To Make Money Selling Bratwurst

Instead of selling individual cuts of meat or wholesaling to restaurants, a couple of Oklahoma livestock producers say bratwursts are the secret to their success.

Chicken brats started out as a way to use up drumsticks at Ward Family Farms in Pawnee, Okla. Other chicken parts sold well but there were always leftover drumsticks, says Chad Ward.

"My butcher said he would bone and grind them. You can do anything with ground meat, and he came up with brats," Ward says.

He was skeptical at first, but not anymore. "I had done beef brats but quit them because chicken is better. The texture is nicer, and they are not overly greasy," he explains.

The dark meat provides enough fat and now he bones some whole birds to make brats and breakfast sausages. He offers four varieties including plain, cheddar, cheddar jalapeno, and chorizo. They sell them for \$9 to \$12 for packages of four to customers in northeast Oklahoma at pickup sites and through home delivery.

Customers are quickly convinced once they taste chicken brats. Even with the

extra processing costs, the brats net a nice profit for about 25 percent of the pasture-raised chickens on Ward Farms. The rest of the chickens are cut up and marketed directly to customers through the farm's website. The Wards also raise and sell beef and lamb and recently added hogs to the farm.

A couple of hours away, Angela Faughtenberry raises chicken, pork and beef on certified organic pastures on her Tulsa, Okla., farm. She initially focused on selling her pork to high end restaurants and raised Mangalitsa hogs, considered the Wagyu beef of pork because of its marbling quality sought by five-star chefs. Selling it for \$3/lb. wholesale she was making very little profit.

"I needed to move the whole animal. So, I came up with brats. I hold the bacon and grind the rest of the pig," she says, and sells some of it as ground pork and sausage. But after experimenting with other seasonings, she has her butcher turn most of the meat into Jalapeno and cheddar brats.

"I'm able to turn it to \$40/lb. by putting the brat on a bun and selling it for \$10 with grilled onions and a bottle of water to make it feel like a meal deal," Faughtenberry says, at a downtown Dallas farmers market.

The location is as important as the product, she says. The regulations about needing pressurized hot water in Tulsa were more challenging to serve food. In Texas, the license just requires water and bleach. The Dallas location is also a permanent market with reasonable daily fees and goes year-round on weekends plus a few special events.

Though it's a 4-hr. drive from her farm, the venue attracts 10,000 people a day so it's worth it. She also likes the freedom of choosing when she wants to sell and not be at the beck and call of restaurant owners.

The brats continue to be the moneymaker, however, and have made Faughtenberry's farming business very successful. Besides a much higher profit per pound, she is transitioning her hogs to Berkshires, which will take a third of the time to finish compared to the Mangalitsa hogs. She also can raise fewer of them and make more profit than she did when selling wholesale.

"I think it saved my farm," she says. "I encourage farmers to try something. Farmers are the best cooks, and they need to get over the intimidation of cooking for the public."

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413 Farm sells brats to customers at a better profit than selling wholesale.

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