

While the sun shines

by Sally Colby

The secret to good hay is knowing what you have, knowing how to market it and learning the art of making it.”

That’s what Mike Stefan, of North Collins, NY, says about the skills involved in making consistently good hay. Stefan started to learn how to make hay while growing up on the family dairy farm. After high school, he studied to be a teacher, but wanted to farm even after the dairy herd was sold. “I didn’t want to lose the farm, so we thought hay would be a good option,” he said. “I could work that in with a teaching job.”

Although the hay operation was the initial enterprise, Stefan delved into serious field crop production. Every spring, after making the first cutting of hay on the home farm, Stefan and his sons follow the combines and bale straw in the Albion and Kent areas, then move southward through New York and Pennsylvania. “We’ve been doing that as a family for 17 years,” he said, adding that they’ve learned a lot from working on farms throughout the region. “We come home in time to do the next cutting of hay.”

In addition to making 800 acres of hay, Stefan currently grows 100 acres of oats, 900 acres of corn and 700 acres of soybeans. He also grows 450 acres of grapes for Welch’s. After more than 20 years of teaching technology, Stefan recently retired and is developing plans that will bring two sons into the business.

Because alfalfa doesn’t survive for long on the ground he’s farming, Stefan makes only timothy and orchardgrass hay, each grown as a separate crop. “Early on, with my dairy knowledge, I knew I didn’t want to sell bales of hay that were inconsistent in quality,” he said. Stefan’s high-quality hay is suitable for a variety of livestock including show cattle, horses and production dairy animals.

Stefan said timothy is the more challenging of the two hay types to grow. “We fall-seed timothy because it takes a while to establish,” he said. “We’ll get a light hay crop the first spring. It’s mostly for the equine and dry cow market. Orchardgrass is less challenging - we fertilize it and cut every 30 days.” Timothy typically yields well for about five to seven years, and although a stand can remain productive for longer, Stefan aims for quality and reestablishes timothy when a stand declines.

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For the past two years, Mike Stefan has entered samples in the World Forage Analysis Superbowl. He’s placed 2nd and 5th, but said, “I’m doing the impossible making hay in the East.”

Photo courtesy of Under The Old Willow Photography

Superbowl held during World Dairy Expo in Madison, WI. Entries are analyzed by near infrared technology for relative forage quality. “If you’re going to make something good, you have to prove it’s good,” said Stefan. This year, his sample received fifth place in the grand champion hay class sponsored by Barenbrug USA. Last year’s sample placed second.

Despite his high placings, Stefan said he’ll probably never win a top place for several reasons, including the fact that straight grass hay won’t test as high as hays that contain some alfalfa. “I’m doing the impossible making hay in the East,” he said. “We’re trying to bale hay at 12% moisture in 70% humidity.”

It takes years to hone the skills necessary to make

top-notch hay, and there’s more to it than waiting for good weather. “Hay is judged by the eye of the beholder,” said Stefan. “There’s also a huge expense in making hay. I’m rotating fields every seven years, and there’s the cost of seed, fertilizer, machinery, trucking and storage.”

While some hay producers replace equipment frequently, Stefan has a different philosophy. “I’m a fixer-upper, not a trader-inner,” he said. “I buy something used, put it in the shop, strip it down and fix it up. We’re very detail-oriented - it isn’t uncommon to see a tractor on my farm with 8,000 hours that looks showroom new. We pressure wash equipment and make a list of what needs to be fixed. Then we hand wash, wax and put it in the shop.” By owning his own trucking equipment, including six tractors and 14 trailers of various types, Stefan can move product on time. Stefan and his sons do most of the mechanic work, with help from a truck mechanic when needed.

Stefan’s business plan includes a piece of equipment that will help meet the needs of the aging horse market. “We’re in an area with a strong retail market for hay that isn’t being served,” he said, discussing the high demand for small bales. “The hay press is an alternative to switching to different equipment to make small bales.”

The hay press slices and repackages large square bales. “It does it all on its own,” he said. “Hay doesn’t have to be fed into a baler. When the bales come out, they’re strapped together with nine bales in a block.” After processing, hay can be stacked on pallets for storage. Stefan plans to load processed hay into shipping containers and drop-ship to customers.

The press allows Stefan to continue making high-quality large square bales that can be reprocessed during the off-season. Although the reprocessed bales look different than traditional small bales, customers who have purchased hay at retail farm stores will be familiar with pressed hay. Stefan plans to have the press operating by late autumn.

With upcoming changes, Stefan said the next year or so will be full of ups and downs. “There will be a lot of business moves,” he said. “We bought an additional farm, we’re adding the hay press and my sons Dylan and Tyler are coming into the operation.” His children Ryan and Carissa are still in high school and will also have the opportunity to farm with the family if they so choose.

Although they’ll assist their father with hay, Dylan and Tyler will concentrate on the commodity crops as they continue to learn the finer points of preserving forage. “Making hay is an art form,” said Stefan. “They haven’t reached that level yet.”

Drive more from A2

Building a website is only the first step. Claiming the business on Google helps the search engine find the business.

“Google My Business is the most important part of a local SEO strategy,” Basse said. “GMB allows the creation of free business listings. A business needs to provide important business contact information like the store or office address, exact location on a map, category of business, phone number, website address, et cetera, while creating the listing.” Once the listing goes live, it needs to be verified. Post verification, the business can optimize GMB by uploading a picture of the farm and its products or services; mention business operation hours; mention additional categories which are relevant to the business; and share business updates and fresh content on a regular basis.

“It’s important to give users as much information as they need so they don’t have to search elsewhere,” Basse said. “It makes a huge difference. If the hours or address are wrong or you’ve moved, that’s a negative experience.”

She also said that business owners should update and claim their profile on Yelp. For some businesses, TripAdvisor may be warranted. Social media, Bing My Business and

others may be good places to sign up.

Keywords are critical in creating an online presence, but they can baffle business owners who offer a variety of services. Which portion of the business should they represent if they sell farmstead cheese, but also host classes on cheesemaking? Or suppose they sell CSA shares but also grow wholesale flowers?

“If 80% of your business is one thing and 20% is another, prioritize the 80% because that’s what Google will favor,” Basse said.

To develop keywords that help customers find the site, it’s important to think like the customers. What words would they use in their search? “You want to make sure you incorporate local keywords to your site so people know your business is local to them,” Basse said.

Making the keywords specific enough is also vital. For example, “fall décor in Syracuse” is vague compared with “pumpkins in Syracuse.”

“You want to make sure you’re very specific,” Basse said. “Dig deep into the intent of the searcher so you show the right thing. Once people start bouncing off your site, Google will see you’re not relevant and lower your ranking.”

Tools for keyword research can make

the task easier. Ahrefs Keyword Generator, SEMrush Keyword Magic Tool, Ubersuggest, Moz Keyword Explorer, Google Trend and SpyFu are a few examples.

Additionally, a business’s online presence should be optimized for mobile devices. “Mobile-friendliness is a critical component for helping you rank in search results and deliver a positive user experience for your audience,” Basse said. “When people look for a local business, they often use their mobile devices to search for a local company. If you don’t have a mobile-friendly website, those users will likely bounce from your site and visit a competitor’s instead.” (Google favors sites that are mobile-friendly.)

“The best way to create a mobile-friendly site is to integrate responsive design,” she said. “Responsive design enables your site to adapt to the screens of all devices, from laptops to smartphones. As a result, your audience will have the best experience on their device and stay on your site longer.” Most website builders include this feature.

“Focus on publishing content that is high-quality and original,” Basse continued. “If you have just a shell of a website and there’s no information, you won’t rank on Google. Content is key. You want

to make sure you have things on it. While using keywords is important, it’s advisable only to use them in a natural way. Don’t ‘keyword’ stuff, where you’re repeating the same keywords over and over.”

She advised those unsure of what to post to include more information in the “About” section. Customer feedback and case studies can also provide good content.

Some of the critical things to do on each page are including the full keyword in the URL, the keyword in the title tag, concise keywords and the keyword in the description. “You never want to skip any of these,” Basse said. “These will help you optimize every page.”

The title tag is the title or topic of each page, usually in the largest font. The meta description tags are short descriptions that summarize the content. The URL is the web address of a specific page. Header tags add structure to web pages. Image alt tags or alt text tell about the image.

“I know it seems like a lot of work, but take your time because the effects are long and hard. The best way to stay relevant is to continue to work on these,” Basse concluded. “Even evergreen strategies require you to revisit, evaluate and see what works and what doesn’t.”