Crowdfunding: getting it done together

by Milan Wiercx van Rhijn

Milan Wiercx van Rhijn is running a successful beekeeping business in France. From a beginning five years ago, he now owns an effective enterprise enabling people who do not have the time or skills to be beekeepers, to still have the pleasure and enjoyment of honey bees. This is Milan’s explanation of how he began his business: his tips for success are valuable for beekeeping entrepreneurs everywhere.

Want to start a beekeeping business? Great! But - unless you have your own financial reserves, it can be difficult to get your business financed nowadays. In general the economic difficulties are omnipresent. Banks and other financial investors are very reluctant to provide loans for starting businesses (risky investments), let alone investing in a starting a beekeeping business: part of agriculture which we know is harder than it used to be, due to the many problems bees face today.

We are all in different personal situations. In my case, I was a 20-year old boy when I left the Netherlands for France in 2009. When I wanted to start a beekeeping company I did not have any diploma, let alone a job. But still, this drive, this passion, to start as a professional beekeeper was very strong. I decided to launch my project with the help of crowdfunding.

What is crowdfunding?
Crowdfunding was a relatively new phenomenon when I started. When one has an idea for a project or product, he/she can ask the public (you and me) to help to fund it. In return he/she gives you something (this can be one of the first prototypes, a special thank you note or even a part in the enterprise). There are many crowdfunding platforms, for example: Indiegogo.com Kickstarter.com Gofundme.com

How I did it
I wanted my crowdfunding project to be very close and personal. I started with writing to people close to me: friends and family. I wrote them a personal letter, explaining what I was planning and how I wanted them to be a part of it. The agreement was stated clearly, because in the end it still is a business contract. The participant would pay for a hive and in return they would get 40% of the average honey harvest each year. They were given the possibility to name their hive (which I would then paint on) and I sent them periodically a newsletter.

I never used an (online) crowdfunding platform for my project, for I believed I would lose the personal contact with the participants (this is my own opinion of course).

How it went
Honestly, I do not think that I would ever have come so far without crowdfunding. Next to the financial support, you will receive also moral support. People are with you, you are doing it together. There is another extra benefit: there is no financial pressure. I lost 80% of my colonies during winter 2013-2014, which would be catastrophic in the case of a loan with a bank. How does one pay off a loan when there is no honey to sell? Again, the people who were part of the crowdfunding were there to restore my lost confidence.

At this moment, I have about 50 people participating. They have given me a great start, financial independence, moral support and an amazing network of ambassadors.

Can it work for you?
Although everyone is in a different situation, I am convinced that creativity is the key. Do not expect a crowdfunding platform to be like Santa Claus: posting a plain wish list for your beekeeping essentials will probably result in failure. Instead, try to let your close friends and neighbours become part of your beekeeping adventure. Give them (proportionally) honey in return for hives/financial support/labour. Be sure to have everything on paper, especially with people that are close to you. It would be a shame if a misunderstanding results in disagreement. Make them understand that it is a business that will benefit everyone: they get honey and by participating they also contribute to more bees in the world - pollination benefits everybody!

Make sure that you know what you are doing. Are your expectations realistic? What will you do when things go differently from expected? Write it all out and make sure it is all clear for you. Then, go for it.

Good luck! Bzz!

See Milan’s pictures at www.instagram.com/milan_proupbees and his website www.proup.com