

Farm Fresh

Local mom brings farmers together online



Jena Van Wagner,
Executive Director,
Michigan Family Farms
(MichiganFamilyFarms.
com), Kingsley/Grand
Rapids



THE HARDEST PART: That we can't do this for free. We have to charge to cover the costs, but the upside is that we have a whole group of professionals that follow through on the promises we make. Because of the shared nature of this site, each farm has a cost-effective way to have their own spot on the web and receive a ton of marketing support to drive visitors to their page and farm — all for a fraction of the cost of doing it on their own.

PERKS TO THE JOB THAT MONEY CAN'T BUY: Ice cream. Seriously. Really good ice cream. Oh, and loving what I'm doing, the people I'm working with and how fun this project is.

THE START: I was doing work with a few local farmers, and they shared their difficulties in devoting time and money to marketing. I thought, "Wouldn't it be great if they had an easy way to market themselves?" and boom, the idea for Michigan Family Farms was born.

THE WEBSITE: MichiganFamilyFarms.com is a gathering place for family farmers, the products they grow and those of us who love them. Basically, it is a way for farmers to market themselves and for consumers to find great products. We're creating a database of farms, products, restaurants and stores that can be searched in a myriad of ways. You can use this when planning vacations, daytrips or just dinner. There are so many great local foods that don't have more stamps on their passports than you do, and every dollar you spend on local food stays here. It helps your neighbors and community while being the best nutritional choice for you.

THE JOB: I'm the idea generator, strategy writer, salesperson and chief ice cream scooper (hey, I really do a little of everything!) for this social networking hub.

THE BEST PART: I know this is cliché, but the best part is the people I meet: people who love what they do, are passionate about what they sell, and have such wonderful products to offer.

A TYPICAL DAY ON THE JOB: The website is backed by a mid-sized boutique advertising agency out of Grand Rapids. Once a week, I'm there in the office all day. The rest of the week is a free-for-all. From touring farms to checking out farmers' markets to working with new farm partners to get their pages just right, no two days are ever the same.

EDUCATION/EXPERIENCE: I have a degree in marketing and public relations from Ferris State University and 13 years of experience in the advertising field.

YEARS ON THE JOB: The website went live in early December, and we are timing our promotional campaign to coincide with the beginning of the growing season.

FAMILY LIFE: My husband, Paul, and I moved here from Grand Rapids five years ago to raise our children in a place where they would take trees for granted. Niklas, our 6-year-old, and Mara, our 3-year-old, are on a first-name basis with the local farmers!

Jena Van Wagner can be contacted at 616.915.5967 or visit www.michiganfamilyfarms.com.

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