

Conquering the (world) restaurant market

By Dave Yanko



Jordan Boesch of 7shifts

Photo by: Kevin Hogarth

It all started about 10 years ago when Jordan Boesch decided to help his father with shift scheduling at the Quiznos restaurant the latter operates in Regina. It was a messy situation.

"I watched him do scheduling at the back of Quiznos using an Excel printout, and he'd actually assemble a lot of the pieces using sticky notes," recalls Boesch, who's 29 and the CEO of 7shifts, a popular restaurant scheduling software. "Staff would phone to say they can't work Friday, for instance, because they had school or a dance class or soccer. And he'd have to deal with all these shift trades."

Boesch says the solution he came up with was simple. But his explanation reveals as much about his budding entrepreneurial spirit as his problem solving ability.

"So I taught myself how to program," he begins, "and I built something that allowed him to upload the Excel document to a website so staff could log in and download it. It eliminated the phone calls. That was the starting point."

Today, that simple solution has evolved into 7shifts, a restaurant-specific scheduling tool used by about 2,300 restaurants, 85 per cent of them in the United States, 5 per cent in Canada and the remainder scattered around the world in places as far flung as Kyrgyzstan. And there's no slowdown in sight. A year ago, Boesch's Saskatoon-based company had three employees. Today there are 17, and the career page on the 7shifts website is advertising openings for four more "smart, eager and passionate" people. In the one-year period ending in January 2016, 7shifts experienced a 300 per cent increase in sales.

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Culebra: A pipe dream come true

By Dave Yanko

“Out of sight, out of mind” applies particularly well to sewer pipes. Until there’s a backup.

That’s when “Canada’s failing infrastructure” becomes much more than an item on the nightly news or pothole on the daily commute. Entrepreneur Harold Torres believes his technology can save money and put minds at ease.

A year after arriving in Saskatoon from Colombia in 1998, Torres landed a job working in the City of Saskatoon’s water and sewer department. It didn’t him take long to learn that corrosion and roots were taking a big toll on sewer pipes in the city. And that set his mind churning.

“After seeing so many problems, I wanted to create my own fix for these lines,” says Torres, founder, president and CEO of Culebra Sewer and Water Works (“culebra” means “snake” in Spanish). “I wanted to find a really good application.”

In 2009, he switched city departments to avoid any potential conflict of interest, purchased a mechanical snake for clearing drains and started working for himself, part time after work and on weekends. Soon he was facing a major decision. “I was coming home at 11 or 11:30 every night,” Torres recalls. “That’s when I decided to go full time.”

It wasn’t easy leaving behind a secure job with good benefits. But six years later, Culebra employs three people, boasts sales of around \$400,000 and is growing at a snappy rate. And much of the reason for Torres’s success lies in that application he dreamed of finding while working for the city.

Culebra specializes in relining old sewer pipes—and is a licensee for Nu Flow, a company that manufactures a proprietary relining system in Oshawa, Ont. Relining can be done as part of a fix for clogged or corroded pipes or it can be used for preventive maintenance, before bigger problems arise. There are a number of benefits to relining rather than replacing sewer pipes, and a project Torres recently completed at a century-old building on the University of Saskatchewan campus illustrates some of the main ones.

“We get more calls now than ever before...”

Built in the early 1900s, the sewer line at the campus building is made of clay tile, as are those of many old homes in Saskatoon. Water and roots in the joints caused cracking and blockages in the 34-metre “connector” that leads from the building to the city’s sewer line beneath busy College Drive. Torres says building maintenance staff asked him to resolve some issues they were experiencing with the sewer system in the building, which includes a residential component. Clearing the pipe of roots fixed the immediate prob-

lem, but his inspection showed it would only be a temporary fix.

“We approached them and said ‘We can put a sewer liner in here, and we can do it without affecting the residents,’” he recalls. And that’s what Culebra did.

Instead of replacing the pipe by jackhammering through cement floors and walls, digging a trench out to the main sewer line and halting east- and west-bound traffic on College Drive for at least a day, Torres relined the pipe with a mix of epoxies that will extend its life by 50 years. While city officials approved the project before he proceeded, Torres had no doubt they were paying close attention to the job. “If something went wrong, they would have been really upset with us because they would have had to have closed one of the major bridges people use to go back and forth to work every day.” Torres completed the project over two nights with minimal inconvenience to residents.

Homeowners are showing a good deal of interest in the new technology as well. “We get more calls now than ever before from people who say ‘Oh, we heard you’re doing sewer liners; can you come out?’” He says preventive maintenance employing the relining technology is “definitely a good investment” for people living in older parts of the city where roots and corrosion in sewer pipes are common.

In this respect, Culebra’s witty motto says it all: “When a flush is better than a full house.”



Harold Torres of Culebra Sewer and Water Works

Photo by: Kevin Hogarth

Regina Farmers' Market changes with the times

By Dave Yanko



Dee Kitsch and Nikko Snyder of the Regina Farmers' Market

Photo by: Red Storm Photography

After more than 40 years in operation, the Regina Farmers' Market (RFM) is at the epicentre of converging trends. While managers positioned the non-profit to take advantage of some of these trends, others arrived on the winds of change. And business has never been better.

"There's a trend toward local food and supporting local business," says Dee Kitsch, marketing manager at RFM, which marked its 40th anniversary in 2015. "And there's a worldwide trend toward super fruits and super foods. People realize the best place to get the healthiest produce is at the farmers' market."

"Farmers' markets are cool right now."

Kitsch has enjoyed a first-hand view of these emerging trends. As the daughter of Regina's Laurie Kitsch, better known around the RFM as The Cookie Lady, she recalls hanging out at her mom's market booth 20 years ago. The changes have become all the more apparent since she began working at RFM in 2010.

"When I was a kid I used to see the hippie crowd," Kitsch recalls, adding a second group was comprised of elderly ladies and gentlemen who bused to market on Saturdays to collect a week's worth of groceries. "These days it's quite a bit different. We still have the hippies—we welcome all the hippies! But I would say our main

demographic now is young families with children."

From May to October, the RFM operates on Saturdays and Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the 2100 and 2200 blocks of 12th Avenue, sometimes "wrapping around" onto the 1900 block of Scarth Street. In March and April and from October to December, the RFM operates indoors on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Shrine Centre on 2065 Hamilton Street. Kitsch says anywhere from 8,000 to 15,000 people visit the outdoor market on a summer morning, and up to 85 vendors are present selling their produce and products.

Fresh produce remains the most popular offering at RFM. "Saskatoon berries are the number 1 bestseller." However, changing lifestyles have brought about changes in product at the RFM. Some people continue to shop for the quality ingredients they use for cooking or canning. But Kitsch says that today, the majority of people are opting for convenience over cooking.

"And instead of going to the grocery store for processed convenience foods, they're coming to the farmers' market for home-made convenience foods. Frozen meals have become really popular in the last little while."

Kitsch says there's also been a change in awareness about food and its sources. "At the farmers' market, food hasn't travelled a lot to get to you. It's fresher. And it comes from someone you can actually talk to face to face. There's a trust that's built up." This change in awareness also applies to the types of produce available at RFM. Saskatchewan used to be known for its wheat, canola, crab apples and saskatoon berries. "Now we have a vendor who grows apricots, sour cherries, peaches and grapes. We have another vendor who grows

tomatillos, the Mexican green tomato."

Kitsch says RFM has changed with the times to ensure its survival. She credits Ada Bennett, her predecessor, with steering a new course that's led to the market's growing popularity. Bennett replaced legacy media ads with a new focus on engaging a younger demographic through social media. She also launched "Market Under the Stars," a Thursday evening event that's held several times each summer. Kitsch says "Market Under the Stars" has morphed into a very popular food- and drink-tasting affair. And while a few regular vendors still participate, the main purpose of the event is to have people taste local food and liquor.

"It's hoped the customer will go, 'Hey, this sausage is awesome. I'm going to buy it and try it for dinner.'" Kitsch says "Market Under the Stars" is contributing to Regina's resurgent downtown nightlife, as well.

Farmers' markets have reached a point where they either keep up with changing times or "fall behind and fold," says Kitsch. RFM has a strategic marketing plan and is prepared and willing to try new products and services that align with the plan. Kitsch says RFM's traditional fare—produce, pies, jams and jellies—"isn't going anywhere." But the market has worked hard to become more professional and to attract new, younger customers. It's been a little bit lucky, too.

"Farmers' markets are cool right now. And that helps."

Family farm proves fertile

By Dave Yanko

It's a funny life. Allen Zak had his heart set on working for NASA or an aeronautical engineering firm. He spent four years at the University of Saskatchewan studying engineering and majoring in physics. Today, he owns and operates a fast-growing startup that makes Zak Organics Crunchy Peas snacks from peas grown on his 6,000-acre farm near Fir Mountain, Sask.

"When I was living in the city, I'd go out to gas up the car up and I could smell fresh grain on the wind," recalls Zak. "I could smell the combines running. It was still pulling. I realized my real love was agriculture and business."

He returned to his family's fourth-generation farm in 1997 and began taking over operations from his father, who was run-

ning a conventional mixed farm consisting of 500 acres and 40 cows. While his wife Marilyn taught school at nearby Glentworth, Zak began accumulating land and farming it in a conventional manner. But he'd been concerned about the use of chemicals in farming for a long time. He says he saw the writing on the wall during a 2007 trip to visit his brother in London.



From left: Mike, Annette, Marilyn, Allen, Cole and Brody of Zak Organics

Photo by: Cal Fehr

ground for Zak Organics

"I was checking out a few stores and they were all about organic," says Zak, 45. "And I was like, 'You know what; this is where we're going. They're just 10 or 15 years ahead of us.'"

He returned home and listed his crop sprayer with an auction company. "I actually got a couple of thousand dollars more than I paid for it." He launched his career

as an organic farmer and today grows spring wheat, durum, kamut, flax and lentils in addition to green peas.

Zak began thinking about starting an organic food company around 2008. He says he realized he didn't have the business background or knowledge to pursue his new dream, so he enrolled in an executive MBA program at the University of Regina, a two-year course designed for mid-level managers and others who are established in their careers. Marketing, his classmates told him, would be key to his success. More good advice came from an organic foods official during an annual inspection of Zak's operation. Check out the Saskatchewan Food Industry Development Centre in Saskatoon, he told Zak. In 2015, with help from a grant from the Saskatchewan Agri-Value Initiative program, Zak entered into a partnership with the food centre to develop, manufacture and market crunchy pea snacks, which are popular elsewhere in the world but far less so in North America. Marilyn serves as CFO, relative Daena McMurdo is chief marketing officer and a partner in the company, and sons, sisters and other relatives lend a hand.

"We had a basic idea of what we wanted, but weren't exactly sure how to get there," Zak recalls. "So it was a process that we went through with the food centre." After much experimenting with pea varieties, organic spices and cooking techniques, Zak Organics Crunchy Peas went into production in March 2016 and "sales and production are growing quickly."

Zak produces three flavours of pea snacks, including Sea Salt & Lime and Smokey BBQ. But the fan favourite is Garden Herb. "When we open up a bag of Garden

Herb, it's like the entire room turns into a garden of dill," he says. He delivers the raw peas to the food centre and trucks the finished, packaged product back to Fir Mountain, located 40 kilometres north of the U.S. border. Orders taken online are delivered by post to points across Canada, sometimes with free shipping.

The crunchy pea product is a healthy alternative to traditional snacks such as potato chips. It's a Canadian Organic Certified, non-GMO product that's high in plant-based protein and fibre, contains no artificial flavours or colours, and is free of cholesterol and trans and saturated fats.

Zak says a strong online presence is an essential piece of his marketing effort. "We're on Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter. I can't imagine trying to develop a food company in rural Saskatchewan without social media." However, he believes his most effective marketing tool is the free sample, especially when presented in person. "I haven't found anything better than farmers' markets to get our name out there," he says, adding he loves to speak with shoppers and answer their questions. "We give out about a thousand samples each time at both the Regina and Saskatoon farmers' markets." The company website features a list of stores where the product is available.

Meantime, Zak's fast growth is creating new challenges.

"Eventually, we're going to have our own plant with our own staff," he says, noting the food centre has been most helpful, but its focus is development not heavy production. "At that point, we can really take the harness off and run with it."



Conquering the (world) restaurant market

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In a voice that's confident yet matter of fact, Boesch says something that's surely never before been uttered in Saskatchewan. "We've got a great opportunity here to conquer the restaurant market." Yes, he's talking about the world restaurant market. And his angel investors in Silicon Valley and big league point-of-sale partners elsewhere in the U.S. clearly believe his company has a shot at it.

What 7shifts does so well is soothe "pain points" for restaurant managers. For example, employees can trade shifts using a mobile app that notifies the manager after the swap has occurred. "It's all automated through the phone now," says Boesch. "There's less talking and less time involved; you can do it on the go." 7shifts can also be used to help a manager determine when to end an employee's shift when business tails off—an employee leaving early under such circumstances is a common practice in the industry. The program also includes a logbook that allows a manager finishing a shift to update the next manager on what's been going on in the restaurant.

Boesch says there's only one way to learn about all the various pain points experienced by restaurant managers.

"You have to spend a lot of time with them. You can't just go in there blind. You have to be armed with the information you need to build out something that's going to solve a problem." That approach appears to be working very well. "Managers report saving 80 per cent of their time using 7shifts. If they used to spend five hours on scheduling, they're doing it in one hour using 7shifts."

7shifts received angel investment money arising from its participation in an accelerator program in Silicon Valley as well as venture capital from other investors in California and Toronto. "These people have a lot of expertise in tech companies, in helping them scale, helping them with advice. And they have a vast network of people who are really smart and who've done this before."

Boesch's Silicon Valley investors wanted him to relocate 7shifts to their neighbourhood. It wasn't that they wanted to micromanage their investment, he says. They just wanted Boesch and his staff to be in an ecosystem where there's an abundance of help any time it's needed. "It's more that they want you to be part of this exclusive party that's happening. It's not necessarily the case that they are always at this party, but their friends are at the party. And all their friends are really smart and they're going to talk to you."

But Boesch told the Californians he didn't want to leave Saskatchewan. "We want to build our company here," he says, adding world-class expertise is never more than a Skype call away.

"I love Saskatchewan. I think there's great opportunity here. I think we can build our own ecosystem here and succeed here."

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