



Dustin Dodge of Swinging Bridge Brewing Company: Launching a "CSA for Beer"

IN A CENTURY-OLD building in downtown River Falls, Swinging Bridge Brewing Company is innovating on the community supported agriculture (CSA) model. Where farms sell produce shares, and in exchange, customers receive a box of fresh produce each week at favorable prices, "We do the same thing, but with beer," said founder Dustin Dodge. Purchase of a beer share entitles members to discounts, early access to new products, and invitations to member-only events. "People pre-buy their beer for the whole year, and it helps us with the up-front costs," Dustin explained.

Dustin always had a love for beer and a love for business. After high school, military service, world travel, and an entrepreneurial fling as a real estate photographer in Hawaii, he returned to Wisconsin in 2011. Dustin began working on a business degree in the Adult Degree Completion Program at the UW–River Falls and also started brewing beer with a kit at home. Soon he had a business idea that combined his two passions.

Dustin contacted the UW–River Falls Small Business Development Center, where he started building a business plan with director Danielle Campeau. Danielle introduced Dustin to David Kochendorfer, a consultant with the UW–Eau Claire SBDC who brought experience with a handful of other brewery startups. Dave provided Dustin with overall business planning, financing, cash flow projections, business structure, staffing and prepared Dustin for communication with lenders. "Dustin did his homework and is very ambitious. He wanted to learn and took the advice provided," Dave said. Swinging Bridge opened in March, 2017.

FINANCING INCLUDED CROWDFUNDING

Dave helped Dustin understand how financing could be structured and the implications of seeking investors vs. lenders, and helped him prepare pro forma financial projections. Dustin approached three local banks "and we received offers from two. Having the SBDC attached to our project definitely helped," he said.

Like many start-ups, Dustin's early investors were family and friends. Low-interest gap financing from the Regional Business Fund also helped. But Dustin had nontraditional financing in mind. "I wanted to use crowdfunding to pre-sell membership shares. It was also an advertising avenue to get the word out about our opening," Dustin said. Dave's advice: "Go for it, although we will keep the estimated dollars out of the financial projections. A bank won't believe the amount unless you actually have received the funds, regardless of the amount we were to estimate." The bank was shocked to learn how much Dustin was able to raise. Dustin's goal had been \$10,000 for the month-long campaign; he raised that in the first two hours. The campaign ultimately raised over \$34,000.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Dustin envisions Swinging Bridge as "that 'third space' between work and home—a community gathering place." Local partnerships are key. Its cozy 50-seat taproom serves a menu of sandwiches, soups, and boards, prepared by local businesses, and Swinging Bridge collaborates with the UW–River Falls. "We get our cheese from the dairy program," Dustin explained. "We donate our spent grain to the university lab farm for cattle feed." Honey on the menu comes from a university program, and a Branding and Communications class provided logo ideas that were fleshed out by a professional graphic designer.

A partner handles the brewery operation while Dustin manages other aspects of the business. "We don't do a lot of advertising—we spend those dollars on community involvement" such as silent auctions, Dustin said. "He's done a wonderful job," Dave commented. "He's following through—he has the right personality; he is ambitious and has passion."

Dustin now faces a "good bad problem"—keeping up with demand. "We have to brew as much as we can, as fast as we can," he said.

SWINGING BRIDGE BREWING COMPANY

Accomplishments with the SBDC at UW–River Falls:

- Raised \$330,000 initial financing including \$34,000 through crowd funding
- 9 jobs created
- Opportunities for students to apply learning
- Downtown revitalization through community involvement

"Having the SBDC attached to our project definitely helped us get funding."

- Dustin Dodge