

Invest In Yourself with Stephanie Wiley

David Crabill: Welcome to the Forrager podcast where I talk with cottage food entrepreneurs about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill and today I'm talking with Stephanie Wiley. But real quick I wanted to check, have you created a website for your business yet? And if you have, do you pay for it?

[00:00:18] A lot of entrepreneurs still think they need to spend money to get a good website. And that is simply not true anymore. I am a really big fan of Square Online. That's what I use for my fudge business' website, and I created a free tutorial that will walk you through how to set up a totally free website in less than an hour.

[00:00:36] And in case you think free also means cheap, it's actually quite the opposite. I think Square Online is hands down the very best website tool for most cottage food businesses. So, if you want to learn more, you can watch my free tutorial by going to forrager.com/website. All right, so I have Stephanie on the show today.

[00:00:56] She lives in Whitefish, Montana and sells cookie brittle with her business, Fat Kid Cookie Company. For many years, family and friends raved about Stephanie's unique cookies and told her, "You should sell these," but it wasn't until she tragically lost her 18 year old son that she decided to completely change careers.

[00:01:17] Out of that loss came a very strong mission for her new business and in less than two years she's already grown it to 34 wholesale accounts and is expanding rapidly. In this episode you'll hear how Stephanie continues to push herself beyond her comfort zone in order to make an impact and leave a legacy for both her and her son.

[00:01:39] And with that, let's jump right into this episode. Welcome to the show, Stephanie. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:46] **Stephanie Wiley:** Thank you. It's so good to be here.

[00:01:49] **David Crabill:** Stephanie, can you take us back to how this whole journey got started?

[00:01:54] **Stephanie Wiley:** Yes, it's a little bit of a long story, but the short version is this is a recipe that I had been making for many years and sort of changed it as time went by. And I would take it places and everybody would say, "Oh my gosh, I have to get this recipe from you." And in the back of my mind, I always thought, well, maybe I'll do something with it.

[00:02:16] So I'd very awkwardly say, "I'm so sorry, I don't share this recipe, but I'm happy to make you some cookies." I had it in the back of my mind in my previous life. I had been a photographer for 20 years and you know, major life events happen and knew that I needed to switch careers, took about a year off, sort of debating what direction I was going to go in.

[00:02:41] Finally, just decided that I had nothing to lose and I was going to go for it and try to start a cookie company. And that was in the fall of '21. And here we are.

[00:02:53] **David Crabill:** Right, so you mentioned in there you'd had some losses in this business. You didn't have anything to lose. Can you share a little bit about that?

[00:03:01] **Stephanie Wiley:** Yes, in the spring of 2020, I lost my 18 year old son to fentanyl poisoning it had been a really quick couple of months where he started experimenting with some heavier drugs It was right when COVID started, we pulled him out of school, we got him into rehab, he got sober, he turned 18, that is actually when we got, into an inpatient rehab.

[00:03:30] Because of COVID, it was really difficult for everybody I know. And so anyway, he was sober, he graduated from high school, and then a week later he used. And it turned out that he used fentanyl and he passed away. So I had already planned a move out of state. So that summer I moved and just knew that in my heart, I did not have it in me anymore to do photography.

[00:03:59] It was just too hard to be with families. and really put on a happy face for people. So that's when I took some time off. And then the next year I lost my mom actually. And then the next year I lost my dad. So it's been a rough couple of years. But starting this business has been really good for me because it's been a way for me to use my creativity and keep my mind busy and just keep moving forward.

[00:04:32] And I have made a point in giving back. So we give a portion of all sales to fentanyl awareness organizations and. Tommy's my son. And I know that he's behind me and he's pushing me to do this. And I know that, you know, he's with me and he's really my why.

[00:04:53] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean that's, pretty rough stuff there. So I know that you share this whole story directly on your about page on your website. Um, What was that decision like to decide to be so open about it?

[00:05:08] **Stephanie Wiley:** That decision was not a hard one for me because immediately after Tommy passed away, even in his obituary, we decided to be honest about, you know, what had happened because I feel like. Addiction is a horrible disease, and I know that Tommy didn't want that sort of a life, and he just didn't get a chance to live a sober life.

[00:05:33] And so, I think that there's so much shame brought To the families of people who have addiction issues and also to those who are addicted that presents this spiral almost and then people are unwilling to talk about it and after all of that happened and I moved away I had really moved away from my support system with the exception of my partner who I moved to be with so I started writing about All of it, because I found that in my sharing and me being vulnerable, people weren't hesitant to talk to me about it and to ask questions.

[00:06:12] And I really felt that. Tommy had a great upbringing and I did everything the best way that I could as his mom and I don't want other families to feel like they can't talk to me or anybody else that they can't ask questions because in talking about Tommy. You know, not only do I keep him front of mind for me, he's always on my mind, but I also feel like in talking about him and in helping others through talking about him and through sharing and in doing this business, I am creating a legacy for he and I to share together because he just had a short life and he didn't have that chance to create a long lasting legacy for himself.

[00:06:59] **David Crabill:** Well, one of the things I know that you say in your marketing is like cookies are just for fun. Cookies are not serious. But then on the flip side, you do have this really serious Why for your business and you share that within your website? So I just I just thought that was kind of an interesting juxtaposition right where you know, even though this business is supposedly just for fun.

[00:07:25] It's really extremely important and you have this big why behind it.

[00:07:29] **Stephanie Wiley:** Yes, definitely, there's a big why behind it and there's a big reason that I'm doing it. and the business end obviously is not always like fun and games but cookies make people happy and my goal is to bring joy to people and that is something that I'm doing.

[00:07:46] Through cookies and people question me a lot on the name of the company and at the start I had some people say like, don't you think that's going to be offensive to people? And my answer is there's a lot of responses to that. Part of it is. If people are offended by the name, then those probably aren't my people, and I'm not going to be able to please everybody.

[00:08:09] But the other part of that is, life is hard, and everything in life doesn't need to be serious, and this is a cookie, and Cookies can be fun, and the reality has been that most people, upon hearing the name, either laugh a little, or they make a joke, or they just have a little smirk, and it's a memorable name because it's so silly.

[00:08:33] But everybody does have an inner fat kid that can't resist something, and you know, so why shouldn't it be a little bit playful?

[00:08:41] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean, the name is quite unique and obviously it like stands out, right? Like you can't ignore the name and it immediately would grab someone's attention if they were passing by your booth. So I've actually noticed that kind of across your marketing where I don't know. Like, you're not really that humble about your business.

[00:09:02] Like, you're very assertive and you know, you like stay like, these cookies are the best, right? Like, you kind of have that ability to market yourself in a very bold way. Is that something you learned over time or do you know from the beginning you should like position yourself like that?

[00:09:19] **Stephanie Wiley:** Have to give credit where credit is due. And I have a brother and a sister in law who are both in marketing. One is in marketing for a beverage company and one is in marketing and he does consulting for many companies. So they have been instrumental in helping me with marketing. I didn't really have any experience with marketing personally.

[00:09:40] So they have really helped me, up my game in the marketing sense. I am not a naturally born salesperson, but one of the things that I have found is like they're cookies it's not a personal thing. Like I'm not. me or something that I'm making that's like very, very personal.

[00:10:01] So anyway, that, piece of it has made it easier to be pretty bold about it. The other part of it is that honestly, the responses that I have gotten, From people eating the cookies and the emails and the texts that I get and the responses when people try it in person Have also been the other piece of that is that we're really using Comments that people have sent us, you know and people that gift it They get texts that just are hilarious from the people they gift it to and they always forward it to me And it's been a really combined Reason why we've gone so bold in the marketing?

[00:10:38] **David Crabill:** You mentioned in there, like you're selling cookies. It's not like you're selling yourself. And you've done that though, right? You had a big, two decade career being a photographer and you've had a lot of entrepreneurial experience before. I was just wondering like, what's been the difference between running a service based business like photography and now running this product based business?

[00:11:02] **Stephanie Wiley:** The photography was great. really did love it. but it was very personal because for the first half of my career, I was really just photographing families and Children. And I did weddings here and there. But All of that is very personal, and you're brought into people's personal space, and honestly, that was a privilege.

[00:11:22] That was really a privilege to be able to create memories, or document for people that, you know, they can always turn to. And then the second half of my career, I also... Not only did I do people, but I also photographed um, homes, and so that was a little less personal. The difference is that In photography, I really did not sell myself much at all because it was so personal. In the cookies, and like now providing a product, it's a product and it's not really part of me. Yes, my story is me, but the cookies are just, fun. They're just a little bit easier to swallow in terms of sales and how personal the business is.

[00:12:09] **David Crabill:** I'm thinking about someone who, you know, has had a career and is ready for a change, right? What's it been like to find a totally new career at this point in your life?

[00:12:20] **Stephanie Wiley:** It's been crazy. have learned so much. I knew nothing about this. I did have a friend who had started a cottage food business. And so she gave me some information and then really I spent so much time Googling and that's how I found you. and that's how I started.

[00:12:41] But from there to now I feel like I've gone back to college and I honestly feel like every week I have studied a new major because the learning process has been so huge. And it's in all different areas because not only am I baking, but also I'm, you know, trying to do the marketing and I'm trying to do the financial part and I'm trying to do the packaging and the shipping.

[00:13:08] And I mean, there's so many pieces to it that. Not only am I learning a lot in that sense, but every week there's some new problem that needs to be solved. And so it's, been a little bit exhausting to be honest. But I'm really glad that I'm 54 and I'm so happy to be able to use my brain.

[00:13:29] Like this and to really challenge myself.

[00:13:32] **David Crabill:** Yeah, now that you've had experience with like all the things that it takes to run a business like this, right? And it's a lot. you said earlier that you weren't willing to give away your recipe because you thought, oh, I'd like to turn this into a business someday.

[00:13:45] That's a pretty common sentiment, I'd say, with a lot of people, you know, if they're thinking about starting a business around their product. Now that you've actually gone through the process of building this business into a substantial business, Do you still think it's as important to, like, keep that recipe a secret?

[00:14:03] **Stephanie Wiley:** sort of do, to be honest, so it's like sort of a mixed thing, right? Because I think the recipe is a huge piece of this. But I also think that the whole package, like the whole brand is probably an equal component. So, that's really a hard question to answer.

[00:14:21] Right now the trend is these big soft cookies, and I think that there's a lot of recipes out there for big soft cookies, and people are really willing to share their recipes, which is fantastic.

[00:14:34] This recipe that I make is just a little bit different than that, and so for me it has been important to sort of keep the recipe. a bit of a secret just because they're so different.

[00:14:47] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it's definitely a very unique product. Can you describe the product a little bit?

[00:14:52] **Stephanie Wiley:** It's cookie brittle. So it's a crisp cookie. It's like for anybody who really liked the more overdone cookies, like the crisp

chocolate chip cookie or just the edges being a little burnt. one of our taglines is never chewy, never gooey. I have two different recipes that I'm doing currently and I'm working on some recipe development right now, but the original flavor is a little bit sweet, but it also does have a little bit of spice in there. So there's like a little surprise once you swallow it, you feel a little heat in the back of your throat.

[00:15:29] **David Crabill:** So it's interesting that this is kind of like a one product company, right? I mean, I know you do the peppermint as well, but for the most part it seems like you're focused on one flavor.

[00:15:41] **Stephanie Wiley:** Right now, yes, but that's why I'm working on some recipe development because I've, I've had a lot of conversations about growing the business and I've gotten some advice that is you need two more flavors. So right now I'm really working in the kitchen to develop two new flavors so that it's not just a one pony show so to say I don't want it to just be one flavor

[00:16:07] **David Crabill:** but you have had a lot of success just building this kind of one product company to this point, right? And so it's interesting that you put spice into the cookies have you experimented with selling cookies that don't have spice?

[00:16:21] Maybe to cater more towards kids.

[00:16:24] **Stephanie Wiley:** Well, it's so funny because just two weekends ago, I was at a show and a lot of parents, once they see cookie, they just naturally assume this must be for Children, but I always tell people there is a tiny bit of spice in it and it's a little bit. It's just a hint. generally speaking, most parents say, Oh, they're fine with spice.

[00:16:45] So, I haven't had very many people not give it to their kids. I feel like it's more of an adult treat. It really pairs well with, wine and coffee and even beer. And so we're with the adult track of, you know, marketing to adults a little bit more. And then if they want to share it with their kids, fantastic.

[00:17:09] But it's more of an adult dessert.

[00:17:12] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I've seen that a lot in your market where you talk about pairing the cookies with other things. And do you think that's been an important piece of the marketing in terms of just like, pitching these cookies towards a completely different demographic?

[00:17:27] **Stephanie Wiley:** I do. And there's been a couple of things. I think the pairing actually, you know, people like suggestions and they like to think like, Oh, I could eat this with a cup of coffee or I could have this over ice cream. Personally, I like it when people say like, Oh, it works really great with this because it gives me an idea of like, Oh, I should try it with that.

[00:17:49] The other thing is that because it's a relatively different product, I do package a lot of samples. And whenever I ship out orders to retail stores, I ship samples along with them because at least that way the people that work in the store can taste it and know what it is if somebody's asking.

[00:18:12] People are often confused when they see cookie brittle. They sort of think like, oh, well, is it peanut brittle or is it candy? I did not anticipate that at the beginning, but I have found that the samples are, extremely important.

[00:18:27] **David Crabill:** Now, I know that you initially had nuts in this recipe when you launched the business, right? So, can you talk a little bit about why you removed the nuts?

[00:18:38] **Stephanie Wiley:** you know, part of it is that just the nut allergy thing is so widespread that it makes it a little bit easier just to not have nuts, but the bigger part of that was I was using pecans and they doubled in price from the time I started to the time I was ordering my first packaging.

[00:18:57] And so it just didn't make any sense to keep using nuts I personally think they taste better without the nuts. like I like nuts, but I don't love them in cookies. I have had a few people say, like, could we order. Special batches with nuts for those people, I would be willing to do that.

[00:19:15] But in general, it just became cost prohibitive to keep using nuts

[00:19:21] **David Crabill:** Now, this business is a classic case of you've had a recipe, you've been producing it for years, people are saying, you should sell this, right? And you decided to take the leap and start the business. Now, It's one thing for people to say like, you should sell this. It's another thing for people to, you know, hand over their hard earned cash for a product.

[00:19:40] So, hypothetically speaking, what if the product hadn't sold as well as you had hoped? Do you think you would have pivoted and changed the recipe and tried to make the business work? Or do you think you would have just... You know, shut it down.

[00:19:53] **Stephanie Wiley:** I think I would have kept trying at it, but I think I would have put a Time frame on it probably because at a certain point I needed to get back to work if people weren't willing to buy it and if they weren't having the reactions that they did have, I think I probably would have not gone forward with it.

[00:20:12] **David Crabill:** So you decided to start the business and, move ahead with this idea. Can you walk us through kind of what it took to get the business off the ground?

[00:20:23] **Stephanie Wiley:** so in the fall of 21, I did a lot of traveling to see family and friends and I decided I'll just make the cookies and take them with me everywhere I go and just sort of test out the responses I get and the responses were really great So I got back home and I believe this was Towards the end of October and my partner was on he had just left for a hunting trip So he was off grid and that week.

[00:20:53] I just thought I'm just gonna do it So I built a quick website on Squarespace I put it on my, social media that I was starting a cookie company and I got the store up and running online. by the time he got home a week later and he had no idea I had done any of this.

[00:21:13] The house was overwhelmed with shipping boxes, bags, cookies. I mean, it was a little bit insane, so it all happened very fast, the very start. And then that sort of took me through the holidays. And then in January I sort of had to like take a step back and be like, Okay, let's reorganize here.

[00:21:35] And really think about what this means going forward and what I need to do to make it actually work. So it was like a really quick, almost a spur of the moment decision but a lot of thought has gone into it since then.

[00:21:50] **David Crabill:** That's actually quite different than most people's experience starting a business. I mean, it usually takes them a very long time to Launch the business, create the website, get to there for a sale. was that something that you intended to do? Is that just like the type of person you are that you're just going to take the reins and, you know, get it out the door.

[00:22:11] **Stephanie Wiley:** That's just sort of the type of person I am, I think. I mean, I could definitely dwell on things for a long time,

[00:22:18] but I just think that's the type of person I am.

[00:22:22] **David Crabill:** I think I hear conflicting ideas about some people say, Oh, you just have to. Launch and get yourself out there and other people say you have to do your research, you know, you have to you know, carefully consider this Did you spend much time researching it before you started?

[00:22:39] **Stephanie Wiley:** I mean, like I said, I did do a lot of Googling about cottage kitchens and, the cottage food industry.

[00:22:47] I mean, I did some research. I didn't do a ton of research. Really, I sort of came at it as Let me just try this and see what happens.

[00:22:56] But, one of the things I really didn't take into consideration is that we are on propane where we live, and that is not an efficient way to bake, economically speaking.

[00:23:07] I did go and buy an electric oven I found a great deal on Facebook marketplace. So we went and picked up this electric oven and I did use that for a little while. And then at that point I was still doing everything, but that was also at the timeframe when my mom was really sick. she was in California, so I spent a lot of time that spring traveling back and forth, So The first couple of years that I did this, I was not able to really commit to doing it. completely full time just because of family circumstances and me needing to go back and forth to be with my parents and to help them out.

[00:23:45] So that happened between the time I had bought the electric oven. and after she passed away, I came back home and started looking into commercial kitchens.

[00:23:56] **David Crabill:** what... What was it that caused you to decide to take that leap into finding a commercial space?

[00:24:03] **Stephanie Wiley:** Well, biggest piece of that was that I knew I wanted to be able to ship the cookies legally across state lines. because I am not originally from Montana, most of my sales were not in Montana. And so I just felt like I wanted to get everything done legally. Set up correctly so that I could continue to build the business.

[00:24:27] **David Crabill:** Okay. And that's pretty common for people to just, you know, start the business. Maybe they sell on Etsy or maybe they, you know, do shipping or whatever. so were you Going to local markets. Did you, did you just start this by selling directly to family and friends?

[00:24:44] Like what did the early days of your business look like?

[00:24:47] **Stephanie Wiley:** The early times I was just selling online, really, I mean, I, I was selling direct to some friends here, but most of it was online and most of it came originally from friends and family, and then it just sort of spread word of mouth. I did start getting orders from people I didn't know that maybe had been gifted the cookies or had had somebody tell them about them.

[00:25:14] So it just sort of grew organically.

[00:25:17] **David Crabill:** So this is definitely a very different, trajectory than most cottage food businesses, right? Like most people would start by selling locally. selling at their local market. You tried to basically just sell online. And a lot of people have this misconception that if they throw up a website or they put their product on Etsy, it'll just sort of like start to sell.

[00:25:37] Do you feel like you had to put a lot of effort into finding the customers that would buy on your website?

[00:25:45] **Stephanie Wiley:** I do feel like that. I feel like it's definitely a misconception that if you build a website, they will come. I mean, that just doesn't happen where we live. There are only farmer's markets during the summer. and I know that there are like craft fairs and things throughout the year.

[00:26:03] I have done some, some I have not done a farmer's market. I know that that is something that I probably should do and that's sort of on my list for next summer. Just because, you know, you need to get your name out there locally, and I know that that would be helpful no matter what, and I can see that from the markets that I have done and the shows that I have done, but yes, at the beginning, it really was just online sales, and I, you know, started sending emails out and started doing posts about it, and I was very fortunate that a lot of my friends at the holidays, like, bought lots of bags and gave them out as gifts, and that really did help.

[00:26:47] **David Crabill:** So now that you've gone through the process of getting a commercial kitchen, getting your wholesale, your manufacturing license, do you think it was important to kind of do things under the table at first to prove the concept before going through that more complicated process?

[00:27:04] **Stephanie Wiley:** I think that if I had had more contacts here in Montana and been able to really just, you know, sell a lot. to people I knew

here, then I probably wouldn't have had to, you know, ship out of state. But because this wasn't my original home I just didn't have the network of people. so for that reason, yes, also that.

[00:27:27] Process of getting licensed, it was very complicated and there was a lot of paperwork to fill out and a lot of different people you had to go through and so I don't know that I would have wanted to do that before I had had an idea that it would have been worthwhile.

[00:27:42] **David Crabill:** So the first piece of that is finding a commercial kitchen typically, what was it like to find a commercial kitchen for you?

[00:27:50] **Stephanie Wiley:** We live in a relatively small town, so there's not a lot of options, actually. I did find one online, and when I finally got the guts up to reach out to the owner, he was very nice, and it has been a really great process. I was very intimidated, because again, this is all new to me, and I didn't know the language, and I didn't know the processes, and you know, it was a little scary, but now that I'm a little further in, I can see that there was no reason to be scared.

[00:28:21] **David Crabill:** what about the actual license, like the wholesale and manufacturing license? What was that process like?

[00:28:29] **Stephanie Wiley:** so there was just a lot of information. You have to do the certificate for. the Serve Safe, all of that. You have to go take that major class and it was confusing, honestly, it was just confusing because you're going through the health department, then they send you to the state department and there's just all this communication and you're sort of back and forth.

[00:28:50] And. it was confusing. Overall, it was confusing and time consuming.

[00:28:55] **David Crabill:** So, how long did that process take? I think you said you started in the spring of 2022, is that right?

[00:29:02] **Stephanie Wiley:** 2022, yes, that's correct. I was able to actually start baking in the kitchen in the late summer of 22. So, it took about three months.

[00:29:14] **David Crabill:** So that was just over a year ago, so what has been the progression of your business since that point?

[00:29:22] **Stephanie Wiley:** now I have preprinted bags. I sell the cookies in two different sizes. So, I originally got preprinted bags for the smaller size. And I joined this program through the Department of Commerce in the state of Montana called Made in Montana. I joined that and was in their trade show in March of 23.

[00:29:46] but needed to get the preprinted bags before I was in the trade show because the trade show, there's two days of it. One day is all open to wholesalers or, you know, retail shops. And then the second day is open to the public. So in order for me to sell to retail shops, I really needed the bags to look professional and to be what I wanted them to be.

[00:30:10] Until that point I had been using both craft bags and mylar bags that I'd been buying from Amazon and then getting stickers and putting them on them. So I was in the trade show and that opened up a lot of doors just in terms of getting into retail shops and since then I have also gotten New bags for the larger size cookies, which mostly are what I sell online.

[00:30:40] their price point is a little high for retail shops. so now I think I'm up to maybe 34 retail shops Mostly in Montana, but also sort of spreading to other states. And I am now sort of starting to think we need to do some, run some online ads and go in that direction more.

[00:31:04] But it's been growing, so it's been exciting.

[00:31:08] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean, 34 wholesale accounts, it's pretty sizable. Now, before you did the trade show, how many wholesale accounts did you have?

[00:31:18] **Stephanie Wiley:** well, the kitchen that I'm baking in, there's a little coffee shop up front and he sold them in there. And then I had one other friend who said she would sell them in her shop. So basically almost zero. So the trade show really did open up doors and then I got the cookies on Faire. So I've gotten a couple of shops through Faire and I'm just in the process of talking to a distributor to be part of their product lineup.

[00:31:48] So that's also very exciting.

[00:31:51] **David Crabill:** So, can you explain what Faire is?

[00:31:54] **Stephanie Wiley:** Oh, sure. So, Faire is an online marketplace for products and it's all like a wholesale marketplace. So, shops all over the country

and actually I think all over the world can go on there and find unique products and order and, you know, depends. The vendors. set up their own minimum quantities to order, but they can find products that are unique and order them to sell them in their stores.

[00:32:24] Some of those stores are brick and mortar and some of those stores are online stores.

[00:32:30] **David Crabill:** So it sounds like this trade show is a big turning point for your business, yes?

[00:32:35] **Stephanie Wiley:** Definitely. Yeah.

[00:32:37] **David Crabill:** And it was what? Spring of 23?

[00:32:40] **Stephanie Wiley:** Correct. It was March of 23 and it was the first show that I had ever done. So that was a little bit insane, actually, just because I had no idea what to expect. luckily in that January, I had gone to the fancy food show in Vegas just to walk around. and part of the reason I decided to go to that was because I had already signed up for this trade show and I really had no idea what to expect. So that was helpful. I mean, the one in Vegas is a much larger scale than the one in Montana, but it was great to just sort of have an idea of what I was getting myself into.

[00:33:18] **David Crabill:** so this trade show and kind of this turning point in your business happened what? About a year and a half after you started the business. can you give me a sense for how big the Montana trade show is? Like how many people run through there?

[00:33:32] **Stephanie Wiley:** Well, I'm not positive on the wholesale day. I feel like their numbers for the retail day was like 5, 000. We had a really big storm the day before, so I think the numbers were less because people really come from all over the state to come to this trade show, not only for wholesalers, but also the retail day to the general public.

[00:33:58] And so the weather was a big factor in, I think, keeping people away. But there was still a couple thousand people, definitely.

[00:34:06] **David Crabill:** So what did it take to actually prepare for that trade show?

[00:34:11] **Stephanie Wiley:** so because I was actually selling there and like having people leave with bags of cookies, it was a lot of prep because since I had, not done any other trade shows, I didn't have Anything for a booth, so I had to order all of the, backdrop and the tablecloth and some branded sweatshirts.

[00:34:32] I had a friend come with me, and so we had to order all of the marketing materials and postcards to send with people and then also the pre printed bags. That was a big piece of it, and honestly, that was biggest expense, really. but the pre printed bags I needed them to be there before the trade show so that it was a cohesive branding experience And then I had to bake a lot I had no idea what I would end up selling so I was in the kitchen a lot right before that baking and packaging cookies into the bag so that I could bring enough that I wouldn't run out.

[00:35:10] Some of the wholesale accounts were cash and carries, meaning that they paid that day and then took the cookies with them. And for those people, I had like case quantities. So there's eight bags in a case. So they would buy like a case or two cases and walk away with it. And then the next day on the day that was open to the public, those people were buying, you know, a bag or a couple of bags at a time.

[00:35:36] at the end of that trade show, I think, Including the orders that then I needed to ship out afterwards, I sold about maybe somewhere between 500 and 600 bags of cookies.

[00:35:50] **David Crabill:** You know, I've seen a picture of this trade show set up, and like, you have huge vinyl banners across the entire thing. It's definitely a cohesive brand, for sure. And I know that you've worked on your brand, right? You've redone your logo, you've redone your brand. Can you explain a little bit about that?

[00:36:10] **Stephanie Wiley:** Very first one was something that I came up with on my own, then my brother came in and helped me and we sort of recreated what I had originally done. And then really soon after that, it just became apparent that it could be a lot better. So at that point through my brother, we brought in a graphic designer to work on a logo suite.

[00:36:34] I did not have any idea what that was, but that is just basically a collection of your name, cohesively done in a few different logo styles. And so some of them say Fat Kid, some say Fat Kid Cookie Co., some say Fat Kid Cookie Company, but they're all done so that they work together and they can be interchangeable.

[00:36:58] So I had him come in and do that for us and then we started building a new website the website really took much longer than almost anything else just because I Switched over to Shopify and it was just a little bit more complicated to get it up and going But in the meantime I also brought in somebody to help design the bags and I worked with a copywriter to help with some of the copywriting stuff on the website.

[00:37:31] At the end of the day, though, for that, actually, it's a real compilation of what that person did and what we came up with as like asking friends for their input. My brother helped and I have another brother who's also very creative and he helped a lot with the wording and because on the bags, especially on the website, but the bags, there's so much opportunity for.

[00:37:54] Words, and you don't want to overwhelm it, but if you want it to be a cohesive brand, everything really needs to have a specific brand voice and be there for a reason so that when somebody is looking at the bag, it all makes sense.

[00:38:08] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it's especially important when you're putting your product on store shelves, like you are with these wholesale accounts. You need to have the product speak for itself. It looks great. Like, I mean, your, your logo, the brand design, it looks phenomenal. Do you know about like what the investment was like the financial investment to get that?

[00:38:31] You know, graphic designer for the logo to get the designer for the bags to get your website up and running. Like, what did you actually have to invest in terms of money to completely redo your brand?

[00:38:42] **Stephanie Wiley:** I definitely invested more than I anticipated. Well, at the beginning when I started this, that wasn't even a thought of mine. And so um, by the time I got to that piece of it and really like, just upleveling everything, it, cost a lot. It's probably somewhere in the range of like \$10,000, which is a lot of money, and I'm very determined to make this work and to grow it.

[00:39:09] And that is the reason I was willing to put that much money into it.

[00:39:13] **David Crabill:** what drives you to like turn this into a big thing? I mean, like, what's your vision for the brand or for the business?

[00:39:23] **Stephanie Wiley:** first of all, I believe in the product. I really do. I also really want this to work because I want to give back. I want to get it to a

place that I can give back in an amount that actually can make a difference in other people's lives. I don't want other people to end up losing their kids or their husbands or whoever, their people, to this fentanyl crisis.

[00:39:49] And I would like to be able to donate enough money that made a difference. I also know that Because I lost Tommy, in a strange way, this, me working so hard on this is a little bit of a connection to him, because I just feel like he's pushing me, and he's sort of driving me to do this. other thing that's just sort of a more practical thing, honestly, is that, you know, I'm 54, so, As we age, I have plenty of energy, but that is not going to last forever, and so it's not like I'm starting a business at age 24 and have all the time in the world.

[00:40:29] I don't. So I feel a little bit of that time pressure because I'm older.

[00:40:35] **David Crabill:** So, as you sort of expanded your vision of where you'd take this, what are some of the challenges or frustrations you faced along the way?

[00:40:46] **Stephanie Wiley:** Well, one of the other things I really didn't anticipate is like getting onto store shelves is amazing, but really that's when it becomes harder because you need people to buy the cookies. If they're on the store shelves, they need to be purchased or they're not. Going to be on the store shelves for very long.

[00:41:06] that is a challenge. And that is one of the reasons that I think that at some point in the near future, I'm going to, you know, invest a little bit of money into ads and Google ads. And Well, one of the more practical things that has been a little bit tricky is that the cookies have chocolate on them and chocolate melts in hot weather. So the shipping has, is a little bit of an issue I haven't done really cold pack shipping because they don't need to be frozen, but definitely that is something that I'm constantly experimenting with and trying to improve in terms of keeping the cookies cold during the shipping process.

[00:41:47] The baking part of it also is tricky in the hot weather. And the cookies since they have chocolate, they have to cool enough. So just the logistics of the hot weather have been pretty hard with this cookie.

[00:42:02] **David Crabill:** Have you dealt with some failures, like if they arrived and been melted for some of your wholesale accounts?

[00:42:09] **Stephanie Wiley:** I haven't heard back from any of the wholesale accounts. I generally ship as fast shipping as I can afford to. For all of the direct

to consumer orders that I get online, I have created you know, some inserts that sort of tell people, like, if they arrive and they seem to be a little melted, just put them in the freezer and they'll harden right up and some people actually seem to prefer to eat them out of the freezer, although that's not necessary, but I definitely have.

[00:42:41] Sort of made sure that all of the marketing materials after the purchase is made mention that They have chocolate that will melt so Bring them inside right away if they get delivered to your door or put them in the freezer it's something that I just want people to be aware of. It's not something I have great control over because there are no preservatives in the cookies.

[00:43:02] And it's been a little bit of a struggle just because it's something I didn't anticipate.

[00:43:08] **David Crabill:** So, you have 34 wholesale accounts. How many of those are you actually having to ship your products to get to them?

[00:43:15] **Stephanie Wiley:** I have a couple local accounts, so most of them are shipped. So I would say in the high 20s, definitely. it's actually funny because there are so many areas in Montana that are very rural The overnight shipping isn't really available.

[00:43:32] So even for some of the accounts in our state, they can't get there any sooner than two days.

[00:43:40] **David Crabill:** So that obviously adds a whole another cost, right? I mean, when you're doing wholesale, you already have to account for the, you know, the markup that wholesalers are going to get. And now you're having to deal with shipping costs as well. So what are the financials look like in your business?

[00:43:57] **Stephanie Wiley:** Well, the shipping is, I mean, the purchasers pay shipping. So for wholesale, the shipping is really covered by the people that are purchasing the cookies the online sales. You know, it's hard because everybody's so used to Amazon prime and so many big companies offer free shipping. It doesn't make any sense.

[00:44:18] I am not able to offer free shipping, well, actually, I started out charging a shipping fee based on the weight of the package and then just sort of realized that people were willing to buy more if the shipping was a little less money.

[00:44:34] So now I have a flat rate shipping fee. So I definitely pay a portion of the shipping for every package that's shipped out. But I have included that in my cogs and... I think that in the summer, my shipping costs are more than in the winter. So it balances out a little bit, but definitely shipping is a huge factor.

[00:44:57] It's a big cost.

[00:44:58] **David Crabill:** So what are your products priced out at?

[00:45:02] **Stephanie Wiley:** So my four ounce bag, which is the smaller bag is \$7 a bag and so that's the MSRP. A lot of the retail stores that it's in are charging more than that. And then the 10 ounce bag, which is the bag that I sell online, that is \$16 a bag.

[00:45:21] **David Crabill:** And can you give me a sense for like, like how big is that because I mean imagine these cookies are pretty lightweight, right?

[00:45:30] **Stephanie Wiley:** Yes, they are lightweight. I mean, I would say,

[00:45:33] the four ounce bag is like a perfect snack sized bag of cookies.

[00:45:37] It has probably like, it depends, but maybe seven or eight cookies in it. They're pretty satisfying and filling because of the chocolate. They're actually not so lightweight, but I would say the little snack size bag, the four ounce is perfect for like two to three people, maybe four people.

[00:45:56] what I had to do because they're not like drop cookies is that all of the nutritional information is based on the weight of the cookie. So. the four ounce bag is based on four one ounce servings. The 10 ounce bag, we call it the family size bag because it really is sort of the perfect amount for a family to have as a bag of cookies and it will last a little while.

[00:46:19] And they're all in resealable bags and the shelf life is great as long as the bag is kept sealed.

[00:46:25] **David Crabill:** So in the cookie world, kind of the general rule of thumb as I'm sure you're aware is like a dollar an ounce, right? And we've made a four ounce cookie would be four dollars. You're... Obviously going well above that. So can you just walk me through like how you came up with the pricing? What did it start out at?

[00:46:43] And you know, how did you arrive to where you are today?

[00:46:46] **Stephanie Wiley:** This is another thing that I didn't know anything about was how you come up with your cost of goods. I mean, I really had no clue. So that's been a big learning curve, but also I, I know how important it is to know those numbers because if you are off on those numbers You're basically running a business for free.

[00:47:06] I started selling the small bags I think it was like 6 or 6 and 50 cents. And Took it up to 7 just after I saw my own costs the profit margins on food are slim. And so definitely, I think that the preprinted bags have made a big that, people see you're spending more money on the packaging and they know they're paying for that and also for a smaller bag, you're paying more money per ounce, because it's a smaller bag, but you still have all of the extras you have to pay for

[00:47:42] **David Crabill:** So this shift to pre printed bags, I knew it took you a while to get there. What is the cost of those bags running?

[00:47:49] **Stephanie Wiley:** the cost of those bags is actually less than I was paying when I was buying the craft bags and the stickers I feel like for the four ounce bag right now. I'm I think it's about 50 cents a bag. So it's a lot. The bigger piece of that is that there are minimums that you have to order.

[00:48:07] And the company that I used actually does a dollar amount as a minimum. I think I ordered 7, 500 bags, but I split them up between the original, the peppermint, and then we did a blank bag, come up with these additional flavors, We can do a sticker on the front and a sticker on the back for the nutritional information. And those can just be used, you know, sort of as specials online or if I sell them to retail stores they'll just have stickers for all of the flavor information.

[00:48:40] **David Crabill:** All right, so 7, 500 bags, that's a quite a high amount. And I know that a lot of these companies, like you have minimums, right? With 7, 500 at their minimum,

[00:48:51] **Stephanie Wiley:** 500 was actually more than their minimum, but it brought down the prices so much that I just decided to go with the 7, 500 because I have actually used a lot of bags so far and I have, and we haven't even gotten to the holiday season. For the peppermint, but 7, 500 was above their minimum. I just felt like if I'm going to have to reorder sooner rather than later, I might as well just pay less for.

[00:49:20] More bags and not have to reorder sooner,

[00:49:23] **David Crabill:** and you got these bags before the trade show, right?

[00:49:27] **Stephanie Wiley:** correct?

[00:49:29] **David Crabill:** Right. So this was before you even really had your wholesale account. So this is a, kind of a risky business move, right?

[00:49:36] **Stephanie Wiley:** Yes,

[00:49:37] **David Crabill:** But what did it feel like to like make that decision and make that investment in your business?

[00:49:42] **Stephanie Wiley:** it felt scary because it's a lot of money But it felt great. Once I got the pre printed bags, I was so much more confident in the whole product because Now that I have the bags, they match the branding. Everything is so cohesive that it makes a better and a bigger impact on people.

[00:50:02] When I tell people that I have a cookie company, most of the response is, Oh, that's so cute that you bake. But then when I show them the bag, their reaction is completely different than that. Like, Oh wow, this is a real deal.

[00:50:16] Like you're really actually have a company.

[00:50:18] But The craft bags. I don't see any way to not start with craft bags and actually Craft bags are very charming and I really loved them it was just that at a certain point I wanted to make it a little bit, more upscale, sort of, just so that I could get into, stores.

[00:50:42] **David Crabill:** what would be the point at which someone would know they're ready to make that leap into getting everything pre printed?

[00:50:51] **Stephanie Wiley:** I mean, I think it depends on your market. Because if you're going to just stay at farmer's markets and, honestly, like, I think that's fantastic. And if that is the business model that you're in and you can make a good living, then I don't know that there's really any reason to ever change to reprinted bags.

[00:51:10] But that was not my goal from the start. My goal was always. sort of to get this to be bigger and to get this to be on shelves. And so we really spent a lot of time looking at cookie shelves, like the cookie aisle what was out there

and, you know, what can we do to make this stand out and show up in the cookie aisle.

[00:51:33] **David Crabill:** Yeah, with packaging you've got a lot of options, right? And often times I see, brittle like, product like yours in plastic containers, right? Like, I imagine that's something that you considered. And why did you decide to go with the bags?

[00:51:46] **Stephanie Wiley:** To be honest, I never even considered a plastic container, and there's no reason I didn't consider that. I just sort of thought immediately bags, I really have no idea why I never considered a plastic container, I guess I just felt like bags were a little more conventional.

[00:52:03] The other thing is that honestly I started with the craft bags, so that was just sort of the direction I thought it would go.

[00:52:11] **David Crabill:** Interesting. well, so now you, with the 34 wholesale accounts and you're shipping these cookies out every week, what does your weekly schedule look like?

[00:52:20] **Stephanie Wiley:** It's still a little rough around the edges. Because every week is definitely not the same. it depends what I have coming up. I try to keep inventory on hand so that I'm never surprised and needing to, like, rush into the kitchen to bake unexpectedly. generally, I go into the kitchen about once a week.

[00:52:42] Sometimes twice, but I have also realized that when I started going into the kitchen, I was going in for like eight hours and I quickly realized that that was too much for me. I would make mistakes. I would drop whole sheets and whole bins of cookies on the floor. I just was rushing and Really making it sort of worse for myself.

[00:53:05] So now I limit the time that I'm in the kitchen. I generally go in for like maximum five hours I've also increased my Efficiency, so I'm still able to make a lot of cookies during that time frame. But Yeah, I try to go into the kitchen about once a week I definitely have one day a week where I sit down and I track all of the growth in terms of like social media and all of that and look at all of the analytics and finances and update QuickBooks and do all of that and then a lot of my time is spent at , you know, reaching out to people and checking back in with people and following up on leads.

[00:53:45] So each week is very different.

[00:53:48] one of the reasons though that I've always wanted to work for myself and even in my photography days too, is that I really like to have a flexible schedule for myself. And this, I have sort of maneuvered it so that it's also quite flexible.

[00:54:04] **David Crabill:** I still remember when I got that first email from you. That was before you'd even started the business. let's say, like, there wasn't anything in that email exchange that really stood out to me to indicate, like, oh, this business is definitely going places.

[00:54:21] And it's not, that's not to say anything disrespectful about it, it's just that You're just like anybody else, right? You're just like anybody else starting a business. What do you think it was that really helped you be as successful as you are?

[00:54:37] **Stephanie Wiley:** Definitely. I'm just like, like anybody else. And a few different things. I have definitely reached out and gotten help when I've needed it. so from your website and listening to your podcast, I was exposed to Sari Kimbell who has Food Business Success.

[00:54:54] I joined her online group and started listening in on her zoom calls and her webinars and stuff. And I listened to a lot of podcasts and then I decided at a certain point, I thought, I'm just going to go for it and do private coaching with her.

[00:55:13] And that really did help a lot since then. I've also gotten to know more people that are doing, food businesses, and that has been really helpful because you can ask them questions and how are you handling this or there's so many things that come up. And then I've also reached out to our small business development center and I've had.

[00:55:35] Quite a few meetings with the guy that runs that here in our town. And he has been very, very helpful also. So a lot of it is just, you know, that you're willing to stick to it and keep moving forward, but there's a big piece of it that is reaching out to people. And if you have contacts that you can ask questions of.

[00:55:57] It's important to do that and to be willing to ask questions because I'm new to this. And so I just feel like any information that I can get cannot hurt me. one of the things that Sari always says is it's. It's not how, but who, So you just, have to start reaching out and getting out of your comfort zone. Definitely.

Everything I've done so far has been pretty far out of my comfort zone. But the more I do it, the more I challenge myself to do it.

[00:56:27] It's not easier. It's just that it's not as scary as it was at the beginning.

[00:56:32] **David Crabill:** I'd also say one of the themes that I see throughout this conversation is that you're unafraid to invest in yourself. And I don't know if, you actually have been unafraid or like what's pushed you to make those investments before you necessarily knew that they were the right choices.

[00:56:52] **Stephanie Wiley:** I always been a little bit adventurous and daring so definitely that is a piece of it that's true. I am not afraid to invest in myself. The worst that can happen is that I am back at ground zero and I have to start a new career especially through these last couple of years and how much loss that I've had and how much I've had to, you know, work on myself to get through that with a positive attitude and resilience.

[00:57:19] I am not afraid to go for it, because at the end of the day, I mean, say it fails, that's okay. I tried my best, and I wasn't afraid, and for me, that is really important. And then say it's a success and maybe it's only going to be as big as it is right now and that's okay to like I want it to be bigger, but I'm not going to be heartbroken if I can't get it there as long as I tried my best.

[00:57:50] **David Crabill:** Well, It's amazing to see how far you've come and I imagine that you will be getting significantly bigger over the next few years. So thanks for sharing all of that. Now if somebody would like to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:58:07] **Stephanie Wiley:** Our website is fatkidcookiecompany.com. Instagram is the same as well as Facebook, and all of the contact info is on the website, and anybody can reach out, and I'd be happy to chat.

[00:58:25] **David Crabill:** Awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming on and sharing with us today.

[00:58:28] **Stephanie Wiley:** and thank you for having me. This has been really nice.

[00:58:31] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager Podcast.

[00:58:37] For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/98.

[00:58:44] And if you're enjoying this podcast, please take a quick moment right now and leave me a review on Apple Podcasts. It doesn't have to be a long review, but it's truly the best way to support this show and will help others like you find this podcast.

[00:58:56] And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground. To get the course, go to cottagefoodcourse.com.

[00:59:08] Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.