

# Executive Summary

## for Connecting Local Farmers to Consumers Through Digital Marketing

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**WPI**



# Executive Summary for Connecting Local Farmers to Consumers Through Digital Marketing

An Interactive Qualifying Project to be submitted to the faculty of Worcester Polytechnic Institute in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science/Arts.

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## Introduction

The majority of land holdings in Romania are small, self-sustaining farms (Agarwal et al., 2021), which can bring many benefits to a community, including access to fresh food and contributions to the local economy. Small farms can face many challenges, however, such as an aging farmer population, small budgets for machinery and supplies, limited market access, and low profit margins (Pawlewicz & Pawlewicz, 2023). As a response to the challenges faced by small farms, cooperatives have emerged around the globe, including in Romania where this project was based. HighClere Consulting (HCC), our project collaborator, manages a small farm cooperative called SolBun in the region of Braşov. Established in 2020, SolBun wants to expand its consumer base providing farm-fresh food to the people of Braşov County through free markets and delivered food boxes—an alternative to large-scale grocery stores. **Our project goal was to expand the SolBun cooperative's customer base in Braşov County by developing an online marketing platform and ordering system.** We accomplished this goal through four objectives:

1. Determine best practices from other well-established food box farms that can be applied to our online platform.
2. Identify the demands and preferences of potential Braşov customers in regard to purchasing local food through food boxes.
3. Develop profiles of member and affiliated farms in Braşov County, highlighting useful information for connecting these producers to consumers.
4. Design a website prototype that meets the needs of both consumers and the SolBun Cooperative.

## Background

Modern industrial farms are defined by their large-scale production and focus on maximizing profits through increased crop production and reduced crop losses (Logan et al., 2013). These industrial farms are essential in feeding a growing populace. Recent trends point toward the lowering of world hunger and a sharp increase in food production per capita in the last century, the outcome of these new farming technologies (Gowdy & Baveye, 2019). Industrial agriculture has found success in its ability to produce large quantities at low costs; however, it is not without detriments.

In the wake of industrial agriculture, concerns have arisen about the detrimental environmental impacts of some of their practices. While large industrial farms fill a need, small farms help to diversify the agricultural sector and are more likely than industrial farming to utilize sustainable farming methods and have a smaller carbon footprint. (Candemir et al., 2021). Examples of sustainable practices that small farms sometimes employ are using manure as fertilizer, weeding by hand, practicing pest control instead of using insecticides and herbicides, and growing, rotating and distributing a variety of seasonal crops in local communities (ibid, 2021). These practices promote the wellness and reusability of the ecosystem, as monocrops and overuse of fertilizers and pesticides/herbicides can destroy soil. It's important to note that not every local farm is sustainable, and not every industrial farm employ practices detrimental to the environment. However, there has been a noticeable effort for local farms to address these issues and target customers who value environmentally sound practices.

One way small farms survive in the face of growing agribusiness is to form community-supported agriculture organizations (CSA). A CSA is a partnership between farmers and the consumers, where consumers have some shared ownership, investing in crops up front to receive a weekly delivery of products in return (Moellers & Birhala, 2014). Another option is farming cooperatives, associations where small member farms pool their resources and diversify produce, selling at local markets or through ordering systems, which benefits all their users (Munteanu, 2014).

Our project collaborator, SolBun is a “hybrid” cooperative using aspects of agricultural cooperatives and CSAs. It is a private initiative composed of five principal member farms in Braşov County. Additionally, there are associate members that can join in a one-year trial period, and external collaborating producers, who contribute produce to fill gaps when principal members' need more inventory. One way SolBun has been attempting to aid small farms is through a food box scheme, wherein consumers make purchases, usually weekly, of delivered food boxes that contain products that are plentiful that week. There is no upfront fee or ongoing contract, as in a CSA and ordering is often done online.

## Methodology

To meet our four objectives and create suitable marketing materials, we used the methods outlined in Figure 1.

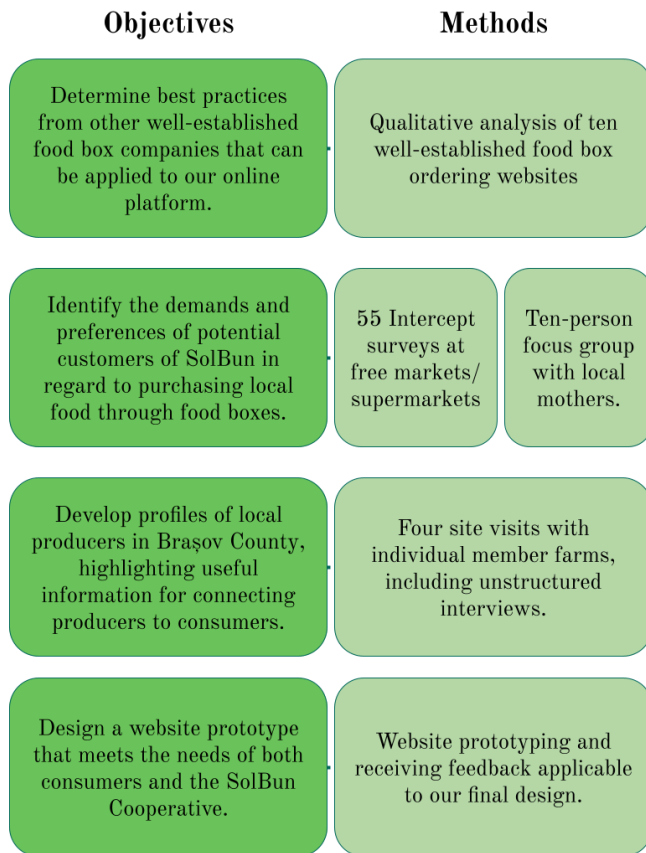


Figure 1. Objectives and relevant methods.

## Results

Through these methods we collected the following results to inform our decisions for the website prototype.

### Best Practices for Website Design

In our analysis of ten well-established farm websites, we observed the prevalence of personalized information about the farms. Pages such as About Us and features such as a blog connecting consumers directly to farmers or links to social media were common across both the U.S. and Romania-based websites. *About Us* pages often featured a description of the farm(s) involved, their backstory, generally how they operate, and what they sell—stressing a personal connection and creating trust between consumer and producer. We also observed instructional pages, in the form of *How to Order* or *Delivery Schedule* sections to help answer consumers' questions. These features and their frequency in the websites we analyzed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Common food box ordering features/pages and their frequency.

Feature/Page	Frequency
About Us	10/10
Blog	9/10
Social Media Links	8/10
How to Order	8/10
Delivery Schedule	5/10

## Braşov Food Shoppers' Habits and Preferences

Across our surveys and focus group we found that consumers wanted fresh food, convenience, low price options, diversity in products, and a personal connection with the producer. However, we noticed that different types of shoppers prioritized these differently. We identified three distinct consumer profiles and their attitudes about local food. Profiles of these consumer segments are shown in Figure 2. Their food shopping practices, motivations and concerns helped us to narrow our focus when designing our website, ultimately focusing on the convenience and quality of the products. Additionally, we wanted to incorporate a way for consumers to read and learn about the producers and products ahead of time to instill trust.

### Free Market Shoppers

- Older Adults
- Motivated by freshness/quality and personal connection
- Hesitant to shop outside of in-person because of the lack of face-to-face connection
- Unlikely to try a food box

### Supermarket Shoppers

- Younger Adults
- Motivated by convenience and product diversity
- Most common method of shopping
- Likely to try a food box because of the convenience

### Local Mothers

- Motivated by quality and freshness to provide to families
- Have to consider practical factors like price and convenience
- Don't trust free market sellers
- Likely to try a food box

Figure 2. Consumer profiles from intercept surveys and focus group research.

## Farmer Profiles

Using the above information and what we learned about the local farms on our site visits, we then set out to generate profiles of the local farms that would engage potential customers of the food box and demonstrate the freshness/quality they seek. When visiting all of these farms one thing that stuck out to us was the story behind why these people chose to pursue farming. Many had previous careers that may have even been more financially lucrative but chose to come back to a simpler way of life. We got a strong sense that quality of life and contributing to the community is extremely important to the local farmers of the Braşov County region. Even though farming may not provide extensive financial success, what's important to these farmers is that they're living a life that makes them happy and growing food they are proud of.

We sensed an immediate warmth and passion for all that they do when visiting these farms. Our interview material, photos, and observations were used to create a one-page profile that personalized the farms and conveyed the passion and warmth of the farmers. We included the following sections: What They Grow, Meet the Farmer, How They Promote Sustainability, Why This Farm, and How to Buy. The farm profile of Rognean Orchard can be seen in Figure 3.

### Rognean Orchard

Located just 20 minutes outside of Brasov in Bod Village, this family orchard has been providing fresh produce for the past 8 years.



#### What We Grow

Pears, cherries, plums, nectarines, peaches, apricots, fruit and vegetable juices as well as ten varieties of apples including generos, floretina, and golden.

#### Our Farm



#### Meet the Farmer

Meet Teodor Rognean, a former industry worker turned fruit orchardist in Brasov County. In 1995, he took a leap of faith and transformed his land into a thriving farmstead. Eight years ago, he planted the seeds of his orchard, sourcing saplings from research institutes in Bistrita and Aiud. Today, alongside his devoted wife and daughter, he nurtures not just crops, but a legacy of family and growth.

#### How We Promote Sustainability

Teodor Rognean is dedicated to sustainability on his farm. Trimmed branches are repurposed to provide heat for both the farm and home, while smaller branches are mulched to enrich the soil as fertilizer. Free-range chickens and ducks contribute natural fertilizer to the orchard, supplemented by manure sourced from a local cattle farmer. Additionally, Teodor maintains several bee boxes to support the pollination of his orchard blossoms.

*From the house to the orchard, everything on the farm has been built and maintained by Teodor's own two hands*

#### Why Rognean Orchards?

Rognean Orchards shines for its exceptional quality and care, stemming from generations of family dedication. Their produce, grown nearby without synthetic pesticides, reflects their commitment to both freshness and sustainability. Choosing Rognean Orchards means choosing not just great taste, but also a greener future.



Figure 3. Rognean Orchard farmer profile.

## Prototype Website

Using WordPress.com, we outlined content and a layout for a prototype site, as depicted in Figure 4. The main home page has a navigation bar that leads to the four main pages of the website: *About Us*, *Our Farms*, *Subscribe*, and *Food Box Information*. Each of those pages, with the exception of the *Our Farms* page would lead to a single informational page. The *Our Farms* main navigation button would direct users to the four different farm profiles, with the possibility to add or remove farms in the future. Table 2 provides a rationale for this outline, connecting features of our prototype with consumer motivations we identified in the research.

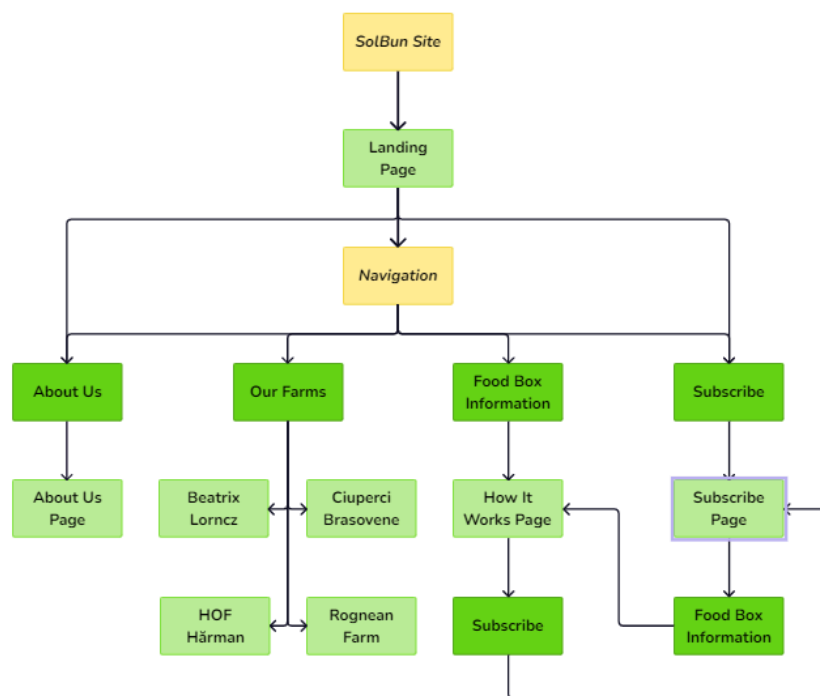


Figure 4. Website prototype architecture.

Table 2. Interests of consumers and corresponding web features or pages.

What Consumers Value	What We Implemented As a Result
Freshness/Quality	<i>Why This Farm?:</i> Specific details about what makes this farm high-quality
Freshness/Quality	<i>About Us:</i> Explain SolBun’s commitment to quality food
Convenience	<i>Food Box Information:</i> Explains the food box system, highlighting the direct delivery
Personal Connection	<i>Farmer Profiles:</i> Details the farmer’s background and provides a personal touch

## Deliverables

Our main deliverables included a final outline for the website content with some illustrative screenshots of how the info might be laid out, as well as the template we developed for a newsletter linked to the site. The prototype website (which can be found at <https://solbun1.wordpress.com/>) contains the content that we recommend be included in the final product, along with the recommended layout of the website. The template for the biweekly newsletter appears in Figure 5. In order to limit the updates that need to be done on the finalized website, the newsletter will include timely information to keep consumers informed. The most important feature is the list of products contained in that week's food box, and a link to the form where consumers can order it. In addition, it explains pricing and delivery, select recipes that could be made from food box ingredients, featured farm profiles that link back to the website, a calendar of upcoming events, and articles about local food such as how to identify genuine farm sellers at markets.



Hear about this weeks food box, as well as how to tell apart genuine producers and resellers at Piata Dacia. Also included are recipes and our featured farm this week, Rognean Orchard.

### This Week's Food Box

- Tomatoes
- Potatoes
- Carrots
- Broccoli
- Eggplant
- Garlic
- Celery
- Beets
- Rhubarb
- Cabbage
- Parsnips
- Spinach

Price: 100 RON

[Click Here to Order!](#)

Subscribe to our biweekly newsletter.

Review the produce in the letter and click to purchase that week's food box.

Fresh produce is delivered to your door!

### Recipes

Oyster Mushrooms



Oyster mushrooms, like the ones you might receive in our food box don't need much work in order to make them delicious. Simply roasting them in the oven with a little butter or oil and salt is all you need to make a great side dish.

### Featured Farm

Rognean Orchard

Our Featured Farm this week is Rognean Orchard, run by Teodor and his wife Daniela. They have been producing over ten varieties of apples for the past 8 years, all without synthetic pesticides. Check them out in their full profile!



[Learn More!](#)

### Upcoming Events

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Fri
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	1	2	3	4

### Genuine Producers vs. Resellers at Piata Dacia: How to Tell Them Apart



You may or may not have noticed, but at Piata Dacia, different vendors have different colored stands. These colors serve a purpose and can help you distinguish genuine producers from resellers/middlemen. Green and blue stands represent genuine producers while yellow stands represent resellers. Another way you can verify the authenticity of producers is most will have a certificate on the front of the stands confirming their genuineness. Make sure to use these tips the next time you're at Piata Dacia to ensure you're getting the freshest food !

Thank you for supporting local food!

Figure 5. Biweekly newsletter template for SolBun (Front and Back).

## Reccomendations

In addition to implementing a website based on our prototype, we recommend our collaborators

1. Implement a bi-weekly newsletter with guest contributors
2. Survey prior food box customers for their feedback
3. Conduct user testing on the website
4. Improve the site design and structure before publication
5. Maintain and update the site routinely, including addition of other farms

## Conclusions

The goal of the project was to aid in connecting local producers in the Braşov County region to consumers through the use of online marketing. To accomplish this we developed a mock website and newsletter. We also delivered a content folder with farm photos and video we collected that will assist in the design. Our detailed outline will aid SolBun in its creation of a permanent website that will connect farmers to consumers and develop a larger market. Furthermore, this project will allow consumers to connect to local producers, aiding in the development of local, community economies and sustainable “buy local” practices.