

**LESSONS FROM SUCCESSFUL FARMERS: KEY DRIVERS OF
GROWTH IN SMALL FARMING BUSINESSES**

The image features a large, faint watermark of the Mahidol University logo in the background. The logo is circular, with a blue outer ring containing Thai text. Inside the ring is a yellow emblem depicting a traditional Thai architectural structure, possibly a stupa or a similar religious monument, set against a blue background.

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GROWTH IN SMALL FARMING BUSINESSES**

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural businesses in Thailand have faced various internal and external challenges, such as a lack of new knowledge, environmental changes, and a shift in social attitudes towards the industry. The study aims to investigate the success factors of small farming businesses in Samut Songkhram province, Thailand. By employing qualitative approaches, including in-depth interviews and on-site observations, the study has identified common factors of success in small farming businesses: (1) motivation, (2) stakeholder engagement, (3) market presence, (4) technology adoption, as well as other factors contributing to the success: (1) eagerness for improvement, and (2) marketing strategies. These factors are analyzed and structured into three stages: adoption, growth, and expansion stages, offering insights into business success. The study's recommendation has highlighted the importance of knowledge expansion in marketing, technology, and quality control, tailoring to three stages of the businesses to increase revenue, reduce costs, empower the adoption of creative practices and enhance contribution to Thailand's economy.

KEY WORDS: Agricultural Businesses/ Motivations/ Stakeholders/ Technology
Adoption/ Marketing Strategies

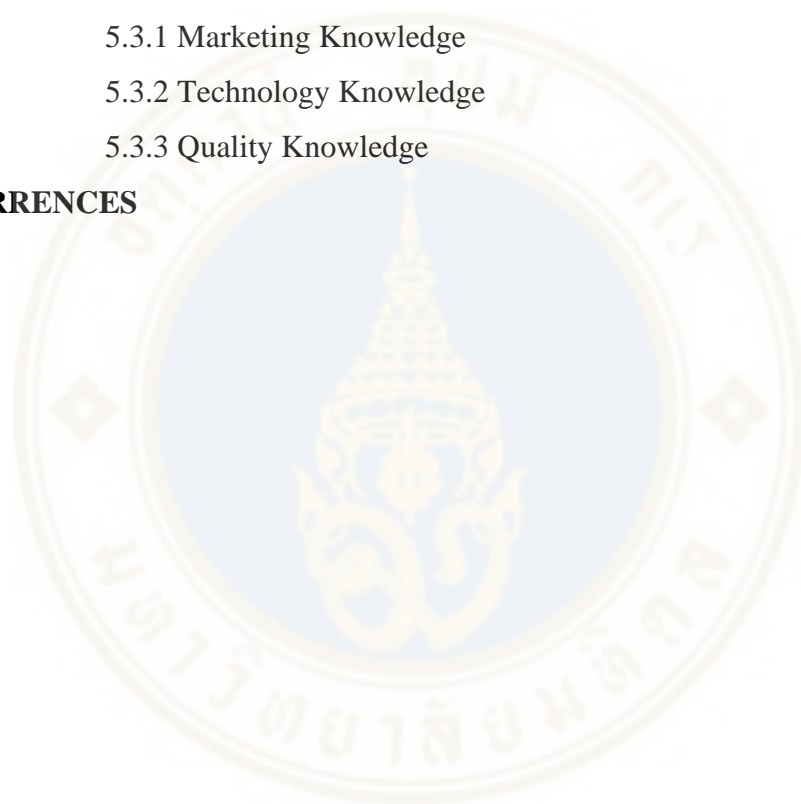
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

For decades, the agricultural sector has served as a cornerstone of Thailand's economy by employing more than half of the Thai population and providing competitive advantages to the country from the rich resources available (Poapongsakorn et al., 1998). According to Boonyanam (2018), over half of the population in the country, approximately 54%, are contributed to the agricultural sector. That utilizes almost 130 million acres, 52% of which is considered suitable for agricultural activities. Since then, Thailand has been historically leading in the valuable production of goods such as rice, rubber, and tropical fruit, which continuously play a significant part in Thailand's GDP (Poapongsakorn et al., 1998).

Despite its importance to the country, the sector has lately faced influential difficulties that slowed its growth, primarily from uncontrollable environmental changes such as water shortage, unpredictable temperature, and humidity levels (Boonyanam, 2018). These uncontrollable changes have resulted in less attractiveness in the industry. The agricultural sector has contributed to the country's GDP, accounting for only 10%, particularly in the past three decades (Udomkerdmongkol & Chalermkao, 2020). These challenges have increasingly prompted local Thai farmers to shift their interest to other related sectors, such as the food processing sector, coffee, and vegetable oil production (Tikum & Ahmad, 2024) that are perceived as more financially steady and more promising for business growth (Walderich, 2024).

Beyond the difficulties caused by environmental and economic factors, farmers often operate their businesses using traditional approaches, focusing only on the primary conventional production and sales processes. Many lack significant marketing knowledge, creating benefits for middlemen to facilitate sales and obstructing direct consumer engagement. Relying on the middlemen amplifies critical issues such as the incapability of price control and minimal bargaining power. However, this specific

challenge is likely to occur mainly in small-sized farming businesses, where space, budget, and facilities often have constraints (Nugroho, 2021).

Social attitudes have also contributed to the decline in interest in the industry (Tikum & Ahmad, 2024). Due to an increase in the access of educational level and the traditional beliefs of the Thai population about farmers having low status in society, the thoughts have shaped the attitude of the Thai population that working in the farming industry can offer neither financial stability nor social respect (Tapanapunnitikul & Prasunpangsri, 2014). Being driven by the stories of obstacles and struggles from Thai farmers has discouraged many individuals interested in the industry from pursuing the agricultural business, which reflectively contributed to the noticeable decrease in the number of locals entering the industry (Tikum & Ahmad, 2024).

However, being aware of environmental factors, some existing farmers have begun to recognize the gap for improvement through the importance of the technologies, leading to applying suitable technologies that potentially increase the possibilities to overcome the environmental challenges and improve the growth of the Thai agricultural industry (Udomkerdmongkol & Chalermphao, 2020). Innovations and automated machinery have begun to offer benefits from various perspectives, including cost reduction, profitability maximization, and labor efficiency (Agriculture Landscape in Thailand, 2020). By overcoming the difficulties as such, either simple or advanced technologies can potentially shift the mindset and perceptions of Thais and make the agricultural businesses a financial and respected career that is more prioritized once again.

1.2 Research Gap and Objectives

Despite the low interest in the farming industry and the challenges faced, some groups of farm owners have adjusted and innovated by leveraging various strategies such as effective marketing, stakeholder engagement, and technology adoption into their farming businesses. Nevertheless, only a few researches have been conducted intentionally to navigate the approaches and strategies that have contributed to their success. These studies have focused on broader issues in the agricultural industry. The absence of exploration regarding modern influences, such as marketing

strategies, operational factors, and technologies potentially assisting farmers in overcoming the challenges, remains unidentified.

The purpose of this study is to address this available gap by investigating and analyzing the common factors among successful farm owners in Thailand. This paper aims to discover actionable practices and insights that hopefully inspire both current and prospective farm owners who are willing to achieve sustainable and financial success in farming businesses. Through navigating sample cases, this study aspires to empower farm owners, introduce potential practices, and elevate the industry's contribution to the country's economy and society.

1.3 Personal Motivation

A strong personal connection to the farm owners has influenced the focus of this research. Many hidden insights learned from personal connections have never been exposed and investigated publicly. Thus, this study is intended to investigate common strategies and practices contributing to the achievement of these farm owners. By uncovering these common factors despite the difficulties, this study seeks to deliver a roadmap to enhance the operational process, increase profitability, foster business growth, and promote sustainability to prospective and current owners.

1.4 Research Question

This research paper is guided and inspired by the main research question: "What are the common key drivers and lessons learned from small farming businesses in Thailand?" The expected result of the study is the common practices, innovations, and strategies adopted by sample farm owners, purposely to provide viable lessons that can be employed to enhance their agricultural businesses.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Agricultural industry in Thailand

One of the nation's economic drivers has long been the agricultural industry. It is represented by cultural identity and the production of essential goods, specifically in the cultivation of fruits such as durians, young coconuts, mangoes, longans, pomelo, and mangosteens, which have been strong export products (Statista, 2024) (Figure 1). For instance, Thai Durian exports to China have reached over 0.47 million tons within the first few months of 2023 (Adair, 2023). Despite the importance of the industry, it has encountered significant obstacles in the past decade, including the unpredictable climate, shortage of water, and particularly the decline in interest from the local farmers (Waqas et al., 2024). It can be seen from the case of farmers in Chiang Mai province that there is a dramatic reduction in yield crops because of the rainfall, affecting the water management system of the farms (Waqas et al., 2024).

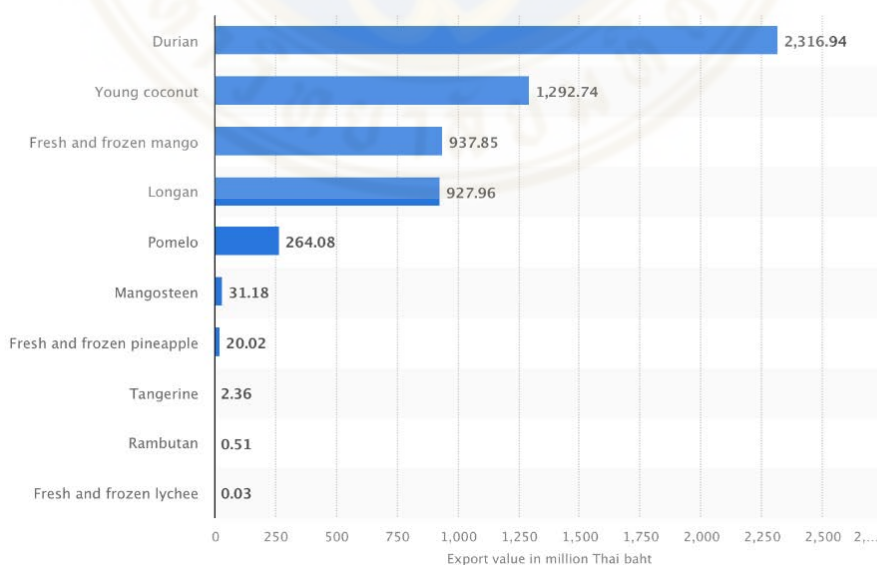


Figure 1: Value of tropical fruits exported from Thailand as of March 2024 (Statista, 2024)

As the country has been facing climate issues and loss in farming economics, the development of sustainable farming is considered a necessary system that can potentially benefit agricultural businesses in the aspects of profitability and an eco-friendly environment (Iba & Lilavanichakul, 2024). Increasing trends of sustainability and organic growth have enlarged globally, which provides excellent opportunities for Thai farmers to explore this opportunity and stabilize their businesses. As described in the United Nations Development Programme (2023), organic farming not only maximizes natural production methods but also minimizes the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. This is the integration between traditional knowledge and modern techniques.

However, being aware of the difficulties caused by uncontrollable external factors, Thai farmers remain tied to traditional approaches, operational processes, and the lack of adoption of resources. (Attavanich et al., 2019).

2.2 Family-owned businesses in Thailand

Family-owned businesses in Thailand have played a crucial role in the country's economy, accounting for more than 80% of Thailand's GDP (Udomkit et al., 2023). Significant numbers of these businesses have roots in the agricultural industry, where the traditional and long-term strategies are passed down from one generation to another generation. Interestingly, compared to the global succession rate, Thai family businesses have performed at a higher rate than the global average rate, with roughly 60% of the business transitioning to the second generation (Banchongduang, 2024).

These transitions between generations often lie in the firm and healthy connections between the family members, impacting commitment, trust, and mutual support. These components construct a solid foundation for decision-making and collaboration within the business aspect (Sallay et al., 2024). However, the success of these transitions may pose difficulties and challenges due to the requirement of balance in knowledge transfer. Older generations are likely to focus on their legacy, while younger generations often prioritize adaptability and innovation to emerge with the modern market demands (Kamolchanokkul & Srisukhumbowornchai, 2019).

2.3 Growth mindset and Self-motivation in farming business

The concept of a growth mindset can be explained in many aspects due to its importance in overcoming difficulties in business perception. According to Boyd (2014), a growth mindset is defined as the belief that an individual's abilities can be effectively developed through learning, hard work, experiences, and collaboration. In the agricultural aspect, this mindset assists farm owners with the resilience and adaptability needed in order to conquer the challenges.

Since there are complications with uncontrollable factors, farmers have adapted from traditional methods by considering adopting either simple or advanced technology as seen in smart farming practices. IoT (Internet of Things) was implemented to monitor various conditions such as soil quality (real-time), temperature, and humidity. The farmers benefited from resource optimization, improvement in crop yields, and cost reduction. This approach has efficiently leveled them as leaders of agricultural innovation. By embracing appropriate technologies to their businesses, it demonstrates an obvious growth mindset, driving long-term sustainability (Digital Economy Promotion Agency, 2020).

Motivation is also considered a critical factor in the process of success. It can be categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic is driven by internal satisfactions such as social respect and family legacy, while extrinsic, the opposite of intrinsic, is driven by external factors such as rewards and financial gain (Li et al., 2024). As Shetty et al. (2024) emphasized, successful farm owners often adopt both motivations as energy sources to pursue their businesses forward. On the contrary, a fixed mindset with a lack of self-motivation, either intrinsic or extrinsic, self-motivation can oppose progress, even in strong foundational businesses (Shetty et al., 2024).

2.4 Adoption of technology in Agricultural sector

It is unavoidable to conclude that development in the agricultural industry becomes more critical in every move of the industry, particularly to decrease uncontrollable issues and cope with the needs of the global market. Due to the challenges that farm owners are forced to deal with, many of them have seen the importance of adopting the technologies, leading to the term "Agricultural Technology."

Agricultural Technology is a broad term used to describe any inputs that are implemented into agricultural activities to improve productivity (Passarelli et al., 2022).

The Thai government has recently viewed the adoption of technology as a significant tool for Thai farmers. They have embraced different appropriate technologies and begun to educate farmers by creating the concept of "Smart farming" to restructure the Thai agricultural industry, aiming for an increase in yields and a reduction in production cost. The program provides additional skills and knowledge of technologies to the local farm owners so they are able to implement these tools into their farms. More importantly, these farmers from the Smart Farming Program are encouraged to become leaders who can pass along the knowledge and drive the communities toward the technology world (Thailand Investment Review, 2020).

In spite of the benefits of technology, there are high barriers to these technologies, especially for small-sized farms in Thailand. These barriers are from the lack of technical knowledge, inaccessibility to technologies, unwillingness to use technology adoption due to traditional beliefs, and, most significantly, financial constraints (Dibbern et al., 2024). However, it is convincing that the involved stakeholders, such as the Thai government and local community, can help local farmers overcome these obstacles.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The paper seeks to gain more understanding from the Thai farmer owners by adopting a qualitative method during the research, as it is deemed to be the most suitable approach for collecting necessary samples. Moreover, this approach additionally provides opportunities to better understand the farm owners' actions and how the chosen strategies contribute to the business's success in more practical ways.

The research methodology was employed by conducting face-to-face interviews to gather in-depth and essential information. As assuming this approach facilitated an open as well as comprehensive response received directly from the owners. Additionally, after the interviews, field visits were undertaken as a secondary method to observe the farms' environment, gaining more understanding and insights into their operations. The interviews were conducted with five farm owners in Samut Songkhram province by leveraging the method of qualitative research to navigate in-depth insights and discover various perspectives.

The sample selection was guided by a set of specific criteria in order to ensure that agricultural owners' experiences align with and are relevant to the objectives of this study. The selected samples capture key attributes relevant to understanding success factors in the farming sector. While the research focuses on identifying the common key drivers and strategies implied within the farming businesses, variations among the owners are recognized and integrated into areas of interest in this study. The selected owners still operate in distinct business models that share foundational similarities, enriching the study exploration from unique perspectives and shared practices.

All five farm owners were selected based on specific criteria as below;

- His or her age must not exceed 35 years old.
- He or she must be the current farm owner and the leader of the farming business.

- He or she must be the full-time business owner.
- Their businesses must be in the agricultural industry.
- Their businesses must be located mainly and only in Samut Songkhram.

In order to gather the most significant and comprehensive information for analysis, the questions listed were designed as open-ended, mainly to avoid the lowest and most straightforward yes-or-no answers. The beginning of the interviews tentatively covers the background information of the businesses and the motivation/intention behind the decision of the samples pursuing the farming businesses, despite the opportunities to grow in the career where they may have gained their knowledge and skills to apply to. This collected information is aimed to contribute to the analysis that is used to explore the common key success factors and the approaches used by the farm owners, even though the owners produce a unique variety of local fruits such as pomelo, lychee, mangosteen, melon, and Bengal currant. Furthermore, the research is not only seeking the common factors but also seeking to examine the differences in approaches that led them to success.

Below are the main questions the writer used to navigate the comprehensive information from the agricultural owners;

- What is the background of the business/farm?
- What are the reasons for the decision to pursue farming businesses?
- What have you done or changed to the business so far?
- Have you had collaborations with other businesses/farms within and outside the industry?
- How many distribution channels do you have and what are they?
- Have you implemented any sources of technology since your operation?
- What are your main concerns about this business?
- Have you faced any challenges or issues during your operation?
- Have you felt that some decisions should not have been made? Do you consider it as a mistake to the business?

- What do you consider the most significant investment that you have done to the business/farm?

To conclude, this study applies a qualitative approach to identify the common key success factors and other practices from the farm owners who own fruit farms in Samut Songkhram province, Thailand by conducting the face-to-face interviews to gain more of the in-depth information of the agricultural sector.



CHAPTER IV

FINDING

4.1 Background Story (each sample case)

Five farm owners were interviewed to see the common and different activities of farm owners genuinely managing their businesses. Establishing a prior connection with one of the owners led to introductions to other owners, creating a welcoming and warm atmosphere for the interviews. These interview sessions took place at a cafe owned by one of the owners (Case E) on the 23rd and 24th of October in Samut Songkhram, delivering an informal setting for meaningful interviews. The interviews were conducted with limited time of 1 hour for individual case in order to manage the scope of questions.

4.1.1 Case A:

Owner A is the third generation of the farm. It started with his grandfather 70 years ago, with a space of only 1-2 hectares. Due to the limited space, his grandfather only focused on coconuts at the beginning of the business. After a few years of running the business, he began to save up and bought more land. Now, the farm covers an area of 20 hectares.

During the past 70 years, owner A said that his family had explored different types of farms because they faced complications in the growing process caused by a lack of basic knowledge. Eventually, they redirected their primary focus from growing coconut to Lychee and Pomelo. Despite the change in primary focus, coconuts and pomelo seem to be the main products on the farm. Unlike Lychee, a seasonal and sensitive fruit, these fruits can be produced and sold all year long. Owner A said, "It is unpredictable whether Lychee will bloom. The conditions of growing it have become variable and unreliable. It used to be more predictable in the past when the weather was better and followed its season, but not anymore."

Because of the uncertainty in Lychee yield, but determined to retain the Lychee trees, owner A decided to expand finished products out of Lychee, which can be done before it begins to bloom. The purpose is to gain more income from these Lychee trees while expecting to benefit from its trees eventually. He elaborated more, "I have started working with one of the bee farms, where they can help with pollination, aiming to produce the Lychee honey. This pollination process does not require the Lychee to bloom, and I will not have to rely on the production of Lychee anymore."

Currently, Farm A's distribution channels are mainly from existing offline customers, who tend to be locals who have purchased from his grandfather before, as well as online channels. Online channels are often managed through Facebook Live, where he talks to customers online and delivers the products by post.

4.1.2 Case B:

Owner B has a background similar to that of Case A. The farm has been passed along to him by his grandfather, and he is now the third generation on the farm. He has managed it for 8 years, while 42 years earlier, it was managed by his grandparents and his parents. Their main products are Pomelo and Coconut. Owner B runs the farm with a space of 20 hectares by splitting 15 to grow Pomelo and 5 to grow coconut. He mentioned during the interview that the fruits on his farm have been changed from time to time. They used to grow Lychee in the past decade but decided to cut them down due to the difficulty of growing them and unpredictable production. He explained, "It is impossible to keep replying to its production. The weather has changed a lot in the past few years, and it has significantly affected business. So, we decided to cut them down and grow other fruits where the production can be managed instead."

Besides the agricultural business, he has expanded his interest to another industry, which is the hospitality industry. He built a hotel within the area of the farms by hoping to combine these two businesses into an educational center in the future. He explained more, "When I was starting the resort, it all came from the questions raised of where else I can present the products and where else I can sell it." Along with his passion for the hospitality industry, operating a farm and resort in parallel does not seem to create potential difficulties.

However, his main distribution channel remains the local wholesales, which are calculated to account for 90% of the overall production. Owner B said, “My family and I do not want to risk the entire business by relying on our marketing to sell directly to customers. Also, we have been partnering with local wholesalers for a long time, which has answered our financial stability objective.”

4.1.3 Case C:

Owner C is a unique case compared to others because of the fruit that he is growing, which is Bengal currants. He claimed his family was the first to grow Bengal currants in the province. The farm has been open for only 14 years up until today. He is only the second generation, which is different from other owners who are the third generation of the business. He mentioned that he was not interested in being a farmer then but aimed to be a business owner one day. However, he started to get involved in farming only 4 years after his parents had begun. It all came from his thesis during his master's degree, which inspired him to take it to a better level.

Because of its financial growth, owner C has continuously expanded the lands, using the available funds from the profit generated to increase the production capacity. Owner C is aware of the unappealing flavor of its fresh Bengal currants, which inspired him to use different types of products to enhance the flavor of the Bengal currants. It also bridges the accessibility to customers.

His production has covered the beginning process of growing Bengal currents, passing along to the transformation of products, marketing process, and selling to the end customers. He explained that setting up the entire operation reduces the risks of relying on other stakeholders. It also allows him to control the cost internally. He also built a farm cafe within the farm area to support the Bengal Currants products, as the cafe is used to sell finished products. The farm cafe was set up as an educational center to raise more awareness and increase the brand visibility to a broader market.

4.1.4 Case D:

Owner D has a strong family background in fruit farms as well. His family has run the Pomelo farm in Samut Songkhram for over 20 years. Despite their decent knowledge of pomelo, he strongly desires to pursue different types of farms. After

exploring the market for some time, he recognized the health trend of consumers beginning to be careful with their food consumption. Aligning with a background knowledge in farming, he decided to pursue the salad hydroponics farm independently. There are several reasons behind the decision to build the hydroponics farm. First, hydroponics farms were not as competitive as they are today when he started them, especially in Samut Songkhram province. Second, it does not require much financial support to operate. Lastly, with low labor task requirements, he can work independently without labor support.

Even though it is not a competitive market, he also encountered several challenges from the traditional beliefs that contrast with his business. Besides the competitors in the market, he also faced marketing attacks from other indirect competitors. However, he was asked whether those challenges had a significant impact on his business, and he answered, “My business never got any impact from those challenges. If my customers ask me questions, I am always prepared to answer them honestly. There is no need to hide anything, so no fake news from competitors can hurt my business.” This demonstrates a strong aspiration of where he positions himself. He contributes great confidence in his product.

He added, “I am more than confident that my product is of the highest quality because I have done research and training and prepared for the foundation of this business.” These actions result in efficient operations on the farm. He always manages time wisely by scheduling and planning the work timeline that must be aligned with the customers' orders, requiring him to do no labor in the work process.

4.1.5 Case E:

Owner E took over the farm from his parents after they had started it for only one year. He is in the 7th year of this business. He had explored different kinds of fruits and found that melon was suitable. With limited land, he applies the concept of hydroponics rather than the traditional way. *Hydroponics* is a technique used to grow plants using water-based plants with no soil. Adopting this technique allows him to get a higher yield in a shorter time. Additionally, he was the first to apply hydroponics with melon, making him the leader of the farming market in Samut Songkhram.

Similarly to other farm owners, his main purpose in working on the farm is to be close to his family. He also strongly desires to own a business and grow it into a bigger project. However, with limited resources at the beginning stage, he only built one small hydroponics melon farm, planning to set it as an educational center for other farmers.

His plan has worked out well, and he has built a strong connection with other melon farm owners to help him expand the sales. He then becomes a consultant and provides recommendations to other farm owners who want to build melon farms. He set up a small café within the farm area for the convenience of the consult sessions. These farms he consults become his partners by acting as a middleman and collaborating with the customers. He mentioned, “My current focus is to be a consultant as I believe it can build a greater business than owning the farm with a low investment.”

4.2 Analysis

The analysis is based on information gathered from five interviews with the farm owners and is organized into two main categories: common practices and different practices. This analysis method mainly highlights comprehensive insights into the key success factors of small farms in the agricultural industry.

The information gathered has revealed that, despite the various challenges farm owners face, along with the diversity in their products, certain common practices are shared. These shared success factors include motivation, distribution channels, stakeholders, and consistency of market presence. They are considered key drivers of business success. Even though similarities in practices are observed, some results vary significantly. Differences found are influenced by the different characteristics of the farm owners and how they view or position their brands and products.

Cases and background	Adoption and Development Stage		Growth Stage		Expansion Stage	
	Actions	Outcomes	Actions	Outcomes	Actions	Outcomes
Case A: Growing different fruits and sell it to local customers	Developing partnership with other farms in the farming community in the province	Gaining new distribution channel as well as new channel for market presence	Collaborating across industry and expanding product lines such as lychee honey	Gaining new customer segments, who are interested in honey and stabilizing revenue	Adopting simple technology such as watering system	Increasing yield and reducing labor costs
Case B: Growing different fruits and selling all to intermediaries	Making decision to cut down the Lychee and replace them with pomelo	Reducing the risk of unpredictable yield from Lychee	Implementing automated watering system and monitoring system	Reducing the time and cost on the labor tasks	Expanding distribution channels through new industry	Gaining new distribution channels and upstreaming production
Case C: Growing and selling only Bengal currants to local customers	Gaining knowledge about the main products of the farm	Development of new product lines such as dried bengal currants and jams	Building a farm cafe within the area	Gaining internal distribution channel and reducing the need of intermediaries	Developing collaboration with well-known businesses such as Casa Lapin	Gaining significant relationship and new products designed
Case D: Background of farming knowledge from the family	Researching market trend and consumer needs	Building a hydroponics farm with uniqueness and representing the health trend	Improving quality of products using simple technologies such as temperature monitoring system	Controlling the quality and the yield of products	Designing packaging for special occasions and expanding new customer segments	Gaining more number of new customers and more revenue
Case E: Unclear direction of the products and limited resources	Restructuring the farm, creating new farming plan and growing melon	Stabilizing products as well as farming management	Researching and learning about the current and potential customers	Targeting the right group of customers and adopting the appropriate marketing approach	Developing partnership with interested farmers and sharing the knowledge with them	Transforming into new business with lower need of resources

Table1: Key actions of farm owners in different stages

Actions taken by individual farm owners were analyzed and personally categorized into three stages: the adoption and development stage, the growth stage, and lastly, the expansion stage (*Table 1*).

The adoption and development stage indicates the initial actions in the first period of the farm owners pursuing the businesses. Once the farmers are able to manage the farms comfortably, they continue to enhance the farming business. This leads to the growth stage. The final stage, the expansion stage, is beyond the growth stage. In this stage, where all individual owners are, they mainly aim to transform the farms into larger, more efficient, and more impactful businesses, reflecting the ambition to raise it to another level.

Furthermore, the findings, categorized into three stages, have highlighted common factors: strong self-motivation, stakeholders' engagement, market presence, and technology adoptions, demonstrating similarities and contributions to their business achievements.

4.2.1 Common Key Success Factors

4.2.1.1 Drive / Motivation

It can be noticed that all farm owners had comparable beginnings in the first period of their operations in the farming business. Starting with a strong drive to take over the farms and carry forward their family's legacy. They all share a significant commitment, striving to build it to another level of success and improvement beyond the current stage. Farm owner A explained "I gained interest in the farming business because I grew up on the farm with my granddad. He taught me to take care of the farm, and I see how much he loves it. He remembers every tree he plants and has always asked if it is still in good shape until today when he has aged and cannot go to the farm himself. Because of the attachment, it drives my commitment and inspires me to come back and run it after my granddad."

This is similar to farm owner C, who was inspired by the motivation from his parents to take over the farm that was established 4 years earlier. He shared that his interest in the farming business did not originate from his parents directly. However, it began during that initial period that coincided with the time he was pursuing

his master's degree. "I did not plan to return and work as a farmer, but I have always felt like owning and running a business. During the study of my paper for my master's degree, I decided to use my parents' farm as the topic and surprisingly discovered that everything I found during the research could be practically adopted to help my family's farm. Thus, that was the moment when I officially pursued the farming business." said farm owner C. Interestingly, this information has indicated that their strong motivation mainly expanded from their childhood, environment, and family background, with minimal external pressure.

4.2.1.2 Stakeholders (Wholesaler, Customer, Competitor, Supplier)

One key common factor highlighted by all farm owners is the importance of stakeholders. Individual farm owners demonstrated an awareness of the value of maintaining engagement with stakeholders during the interviews. Several common stakeholders mentioned during the interviews are customers, local wholesalers, suppliers, and competitors, considered alliances in this case.

Although the local wholesales (middlemen) and customers are crucial stakeholders, they use different approaches to managing these relationships. They tend to balance the dynamic of customers and local wholesalers, as both potentially impact the business. Unexpectedly, the farm owners adopt more flexibility with the middlemen rather than the customers. It is to align with the purpose of them positioning themselves to the middlemen, forcing them to be flexible to the sales volume as they are considered risk mitigators. On the other hand, the farm owners intentionally aim to train and educate their direct customers that the product has its price and should not be undervalued, purposely to reduce the chance of facing price negotiation, maintain the product value, and highlight the quality of products offered.

From the interviews, one stakeholder that is unbothered for all farm owners is the competitors within the province because these competitors are viewed as allies, creating a friendly and collaborative farming community within Samut Songkhram. Partnering with other farms provides access to specific information from experienced farmers, opportunities to expand, and a platform to share knowledge. One key takeaway from having an alliance is cost reduction. For instance, connecting with other farms in the community allows them to know the backgrounds of those farms that

can potentially be trusted partners for future trades. This circumstance occurs when one farm has a shortage of the product needed or is likely to fail to meet the delivery deadline; they can collaborate with other trusted farms, leading to a win-win scenario. This collaboration enables one of them to achieve the customer order, which beneficially maintains the relationship, while another has the opportunity to sell its product.

However, chemical suppliers do not play significant role for farm owners at this stage because of the low levels of demand and dependency. The alliances gained provide them with more flexibility and bargaining power. Additionally, it is often challenging for independent farms when it comes to the minimum order of the suppliers. Rather than troubling with the minimum order requirement, farm owners can partially purchase the supplies with the allies, reducing the cost and maintaining flexibility.

4.2.1.3 Market Presence

Market presence emerges as one of the most critical aspects during the interviews, with all five owners believing its significant influence on brand awareness and sales performance. All farm owners highlight the importance of presenting the brands and products on suitable marketing and distribution channels to improve customer engagement and brand visibility. The owners collectively demonstrate that initiating a presence on diverse platforms, either online or offline, serves as a significant approach, especially events and online platforms. It helps reach different customer segments and increase brand recognition.

- Online platforms (Social Media)

Online platforms are undeniably one of the most effective platforms in businesses, particularly in the digital period. Beyond its ability to diversify the market, social media is a significant tool for observing and monitoring activities and engagement. The evidence is shown in the adoption across all farm samples. Interestingly, farm owners are likely to favor Facebook over other platforms, citing its effectiveness in gaining customer accessibility and reducing the communication gaps between them. Farm owner E explained that he has learned to use various tools on Facebook that effectively support him in growing his business, “I created content that I believe is suitable and catchy for my audience/customers. It does not matter to me whether I like this style of content or not. What matters is whether it can bring interest

to customers and influence them to purchase my products or not.” Additionally, he claimed that the result from his research has revealed that the majority of his customers, who historically and potentially purchase from him, are housewives and women who are between 45 and 60 years old. This insight beneficially allows him to generate specific contents to appeal to the right targeted group, later resulting in increased numbers of orders through the Facebook channel. Facebook has also provided him more opportunities to attract new customers and convert them into loyal customers by delivering high-quality products consistently. Online platforms are a significant tool for farm owners to learn about the market and customers.

- Event

Another form of market presence that all farm owners have participated in is events held across the country. These events are usually organized by the private sector or government, who tend to invite potential farmers as they see fit. While it is commonly agreed by all farm owners that this form of market presence does not boost brand recognition remarkably, they all still believe that it partly contributes to customer awareness in the long term. However, securing spots at these events can be challenging, as small farms are not the top priorities. It was explained by farm owner A that his first participation in the event, or even up until today, was made through connections from the local farming community. In particular, he mentioned that farm owner B introduced him to the event organizer. The main goal of continuously participating in these events is not to gain more revenue but to engage with the market actively and consistently showcase the product quality, which is the main selling point. One of the farm owners mentioned this point, “Opening the booth at these events sometimes causes additional cost for me as I may not make enough revenue to cover the total cost, but I continue to participate because it is viewed as an opportunity to introduce my products to the market and customers. Not all customers are into online platforms. Some of my existing customers know the brand from one of these events.”

- Viral Marketing

This marketing channel is one precious channel agreed upon by all owners, as consumers usually believe in reviews and opinions from other buyers. All farm owners agreed that without viral marketing from the existing customers, they would have no ability to expand to a greater market than the local area possible.

Moreover, it makes them validate the decision to prioritize quality strategies rather than pricing strategies, as this has always delivered the expected results. All agreed that viral marketing effectively enhances the credibility of the customers and market while assisting in establishing repeated purchases at the same time. Viral marketing is applied to all available channels, online and offline platforms, with the farm owners gaining feedback from engaging with customers on how they recognize and learn about the brand or products.

4.2.1.4 Distribution Channels

Direct: The key distribution channel in the farming business is selling directly to the customers or B2C. All farm owners have shared the common perspective of selling to customers without intermediaries, which leads to significant long-term advantages. They all agreed that this approach has allowed them to establish the value of the products, increase engagement with customers, strengthen brand awareness, and also maintain the ability to control the quality of the products. In addition, adopting the B2C allows them to gain power in price negotiation and frame the perception of products.

Indirect: Collaborating with local wholesalers or middlemen is essential for farming businesses as it helps mitigate risks, especially in fruit markets with fluctuating demand and supply. One of the farm owners highlighted that this approach of relying on local wholesaler has both negative and positive outcomes. On the positive side, it helps reduce the risks of the farms overproducing and unsold the available inventory, which may lead to bigger issues since the fruits usually have limited shelf life, creating time constraints. On the contrary, the negative side is low bargaining power and loss of price control. Local wholesalers often negotiate lower prices with the farmer to make more profits and remain competitive in the market. Thus, partnering with the local wholesalers is likely to weaken the bargaining power of the farmers.

4.2.1.5 Technology

Implementing technology into the business in this era seems unavoidable and enhances the competitive ability in the market, similar to the farming business. Technology has been part of the operations of the farming business through the support in the daily activities within the farms. According to the interviews, all five farm owners have implemented various technological methods, aiming to supportively

reduce the need for resources, lower the financial need, and stabilize quality. The primary method frequently highlighted during the interviews is the automatic watering system.

Automatic watering system: To streamline the operations, all farm owners have decided to invest in the watering system, designed to assist in the specific needs of the primary objectives. The main goal of the system is to minimize the time required for the irrigation process and reduce the labor tasks during manual operations. For instance, farm owner B shared that the irrigation implemented on his farm has significantly lowered the time and effort spent on manual watering. The watering system allows him to work on more goal-contributing activities. Moreover, the system can complete activities through their phones, improving efficiency and convenience in different aspects even more.

It is noticeable that all farm owners are seeking technologies, either simple or advanced, that can replace labor tasks and time-wasting activities to maximize the efficiency of their production. Currently, farmers in Samut Songkhram are collaborating and brainstorming as a community to explore the usage and comparison of the thermometer and humidity detector that can potentially record the level of humidity and temperature since these two are the main factors impacting the volume of production.

4.2.2 Other Factors

While the individual farm owners have shared common factors that contribute to their success, it was revealed during the interviews that, even though some factors are not commonly applied, it plays a significant role as elements driving towards the achievement.

4.2.2.1 Eagerness for Improvement

It is undeniable that all business owners, not particularly in the agricultural industry but in general, have shown interest and eagerness to put additional effort into moving their businesses forward. Nevertheless, according to the interviews, this can be viewed in different aspects, raising another related question, “Since they all are so eager and willing to put more effort into making it better, then why are they not trying more or taking actions differently?”. During the interviews, all farm owners

expressed a strong passion for constant improvement, specifically in technology adoption. 4 out of 5 even mentioned the plan of technology implementation that can enhance their quality and optimize their resources. However, only one revealed the importance of improvement in branding and marketing. Farm owner C explained, “It would be tough and impossible, especially for my business, to grow noticeably like this without knowing and positioning my brand well because Bengal currant is challenging to consume and its flavor is not so appealing for some consumers, I knew that I had to make it more interesting and highlight its uniqueness by finding the selling points to make people more interested.” He continued, “Enhancing technology is significant because it will lower the cost in many aspects, labor, utilities, operation, etc. but to be able to do so, marketing is even more crucial. Without customers, how will you be able to grow the brand, develop better products, and, more importantly, have more funds?”

4.2.2.2 Marketing and Branding

- Awareness of the brand and products

During the interview, the evidence was found, showing that only one of the five farm owners, farm owner C, has a clear understanding of what his products are, how they should be delivered to the market, how he wants to communicate to the customers, and also where the brand should be positioned in the market. Farm owner C explained, “I want people to understand the product easily, make it closer to the consumers, making them be open to give it a try.” Furthermore, he reads the consumer’s trends and recognizes that healthy trends are interesting to many consumers, and people are likely to consume more healthy products than before. He has begun to share his focus on this in order to make the products align with the trend and highlight it as a selling point.

- Products Diversification

Referring to the brand's awareness from farm owner C, he realizes that highlighting and focusing on its fresh Bengal currant will not easily contribute to the business goal because of its unappealing flavor. Thus, he made the decision to expand its product lines to allow new customer segments to access it. He has expanded products such as jam and juice by producing these based on Bengal currants, which are now sold successfully. In addition, he has expanded into a new business, a farm cafe, by opening it in the area of the farm and only selling products originating

from Bengal currants to attract more customers. He explained more, “I know that eating it fresh cannot be easy for consumers, so having it in different versions will surely help solve the pain point. Because I love drinking juice, I set up the cafe in order to sell the products more to the market and make it less difficult to consume for customers.”

- Collaboration

Collaboration is an aspect where the business can benefit significantly in various ways, including brand marketing. Collaboration requires common interests between two businesses. It is not easy to collaborate due to the complexity and non-common interest that may occur. Farm owner C has gained many exciting opportunities to collaborate with well-known brands such as Lemon Farm and Casa Lapin. Even though the product itself is not popular among the Thai population, he can always encourage the product to go to the bigger markets than the local market. He explained that collaboration does not come easily by itself. He had to work hard and put effort into finding and grabbing that opportunity himself. One significant action is that he always continuously explores the markets, talks to people, makes connections, and builds relationships. Because of his actions and efforts, the outcome has paid off. Two big projects encouraged by his hard work are the innovative products, collaborating with Lemon Farm, and also the temporary seasonal drinks menu he created based on Bengal currants, which he collaborated with Casa Lapin, a famous coffee store. This concludes that no opportunity comes on its way; individuals must seize it by themselves.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The Thai agricultural sector has long been the root of the country's GDP. Lately, however, it has encountered significant challenges due to various factors, including unstable environmental conditions, educational levels, inaccessibility to new knowledge, and social attitudes, which obviously reshape the success of small farming businesses. This study has underscored the in-depth key factors of the five farm owners in Samut Songkhram province, resulting in the reveal of common and different practices.

Success in the industry demands a critical combination of personal motivation, marketing knowledge, and adaptability. Key characteristics of a successful farm owner are a strong aspiration, also known as drive, and determination to conquer the challenges faced during the operations. Without such characteristics, it cannot be denied that navigating those uncontrollable challenges, significantly impacting agricultural activities, such as weather conditions, distribution channels, production cycle, and price fluctuation, will be a challenging task.

Farm owners must acknowledge the marketing mindset to engage and connect with the customers effectively. This mindset not only allows the farm owners to bypass the need for middlemen in the businesses but also facilitates engagement with direct customers, adapts to customer preferences, and has a clear understanding of the customers and markets. By learning online marketing and adopting diverse distribution channels, farm owners can potentially expand their revenue and enhance the products they offer.

In addition, farm owners essentially need to have a clear understanding of their brands, products, and targeted customers to steer in the defined direction, along with having a growth mindset, particularly in integrating either simple or advanced technologies into their businesses. By leveraging these technological tools such as IoT,

and watering systems, which have the ability to improve the efficiency, it will help optimize the need for resources and ensure quality control.

The insights from this paper provide a summarize for existing and aspiring farm owners by aligning practical and traditional knowledge with technological advancements, not only to enhance operational efficiency but also to make a significant contribution to Thailand's economy.

5.2 Limitation

This study was intentionally designed to gather information and provide guidance for existing and prospective agricultural owners. However, its designed scope was defined by criteria, focusing only on Samut Songkhram province, and it involved a relatively small sample size. It shall be highlighted that the result/outcome of the research is not completely generalized to the entire industry, and it requires further navigation. Future research within the area is strongly recommended to address the existing limitations by incorporating broader stakeholders such as suppliers, distributors, or customers and expanding the geographical areas for additional benefits. Increasing the sample size is also recommended to better understanding of the varieties of strategies and practices.

5.3 Recommendation

Farm owners, who desire to achieve sustainable success in the business are recommended to expand their knowledge base constantly. Besides a strong understanding of products and brands, they should gain expertise in other aspects such as marketing, technology, and quality control, which is crucial and can significantly enhance competitiveness and operational efficiency. These recommendations can be adopted at different stages of the business. As categorized into the adoption, growth, and expansion stages, marketing knowledge can be acquired at any of the three stages based on the strategic needs. Technology knowledge should be pursued in the growth and expansion stages due to the stability of the operations. Quality control knowledge is likely to be suitably gained during the growth and expansion stage as people tend to consider it subjective and complex when integrating into farming businesses. While implementing proposed recommendations, farm owners may inevitably encounter

various challenges, including time consumption of acquiring knowledge, financial constraints due to the high cost of technology adoption, inefficiencies in strategies, and resistance to lack of digital literacy.

5.3.1 Marketing Knowledge

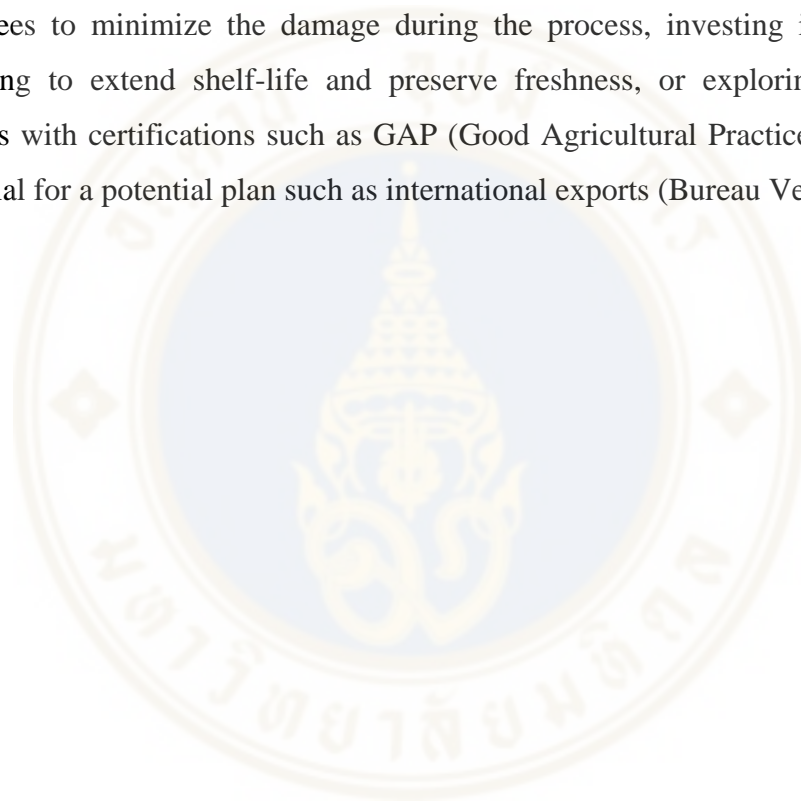
Acquiring marketing knowledge may seem unrelated to the industry and often overlooked. However, it plays a vital role in identifying consumer needs, transforming raw products into more value-added products, and targeting the right group of customers. Farm owners should consider marketing as a bridge to engage with customers (Chiu, 2024). Some actionable tasks recommended are utilizing social media platforms for direct customer engagement, developing the brand identity through storytelling, or innovative products to move beyond raw products. Farmers can effectively acquire marketing knowledge through various methods tailored to their levels of expertise. Practical options include online learning platforms such as YouTube or other learning websites, local communities such as educational centers, and government-supported programs.

5.3.2 Technology Knowledge

Embracing technologies is no longer an option, even for small farms, particularly in the competitive agricultural industry. Learning about technology may appear to be challenging, but it can be easily accessible through different educational platforms. Farm owners can learn from online tutorials, community knowledge sharing, or government-supported training programs (Thailand Investment Review, 2020). It is recommended that simple technologies be introduced to integrate technology into daily operational tasks slowly. Examples of simple technologies are automated irrigation, humidity sensors, or temperature monitoring since these tools have been successfully implemented in the case studies and aligned with the needs of the farms. Technology adoption can greatly benefit farms, including optimizing water usage, detecting early potential issues, and reducing waste.

5.3.3 Quality Knowledge

Quality is a crucial factor that farm owners must prioritize, particularly in the fresh products industry, where customers tend to criticize the brand or farm based on the quality of the products. By ensuring that quality consistency remains, it enhances many areas, including trust, loyalty, and satisfaction, which are vital for long-term growth. Controlling quality leads to high-quality products, encouraging repeat purchases and verbal recommendations. It also differentiates the farms from others in the market. Actionable steps that can be quickly adopted are providing training to the employees to minimize the damage during the process, investing in equipment or packaging to extend shelf-life and preserve freshness, or exploring standardizing products with certifications such as GAP (Good Agricultural Practice), which can be beneficial for a potential plan such as international exports (Bureau Veritas, 2018).



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