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Horizons

A Golden West Customer Newsletter



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*Vanilla Bean Kings born out
of vanilla-making hobby*



How Sweet It Is

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Taylor Ernster
Vanilla Bean Kings



Taylor Ernster turned a hobby into a business so successful it was one of 10 South Dakota companies to make the Inc. 5000 list of fastest-growing private companies in the U.S. in 2022.

“We never in a million years thought we’d be building a brand versus just selling something,” he says. “Now, we’re thinking about the next five or 10 years.”

Vanilla Bean Kings started in the basement of Taylor’s home almost a decade ago. Today it distributes premium vanilla and other similar products from its facility along I-90 in Hartford. Success, much like the beans that are the linchpin of the company’s product lineup, is sweet for this South Dakota native.

Business started as hobby

Taylor grew up 18 miles south of Hartford in the community of Tea. After graduating with a degree in economics from South Dakota State University, he got a job in sourcing and creating private label brands. That’s when inspiration struck.

“From the experience I gained, I realized I could probably start my own business,” he recalls.

That business started out as nothing more than a hobby. Taylor bought vanilla beans to make homemade vanilla extract, which he gifted to friends and family.

“I always thought it was cool,” he says. “Extract making isn’t hard to do, but everyone always said it’s a much higher quality when making it yourself compared to buying it in the grocery store. Most commercial products have added sugars that change the flavor composition. I just wanted to make something that was as pure as it could be. Just two simple ingredients: alcohol and vanilla beans.”

Quality vanilla beans were hard to find

Unfortunately, he found it difficult to find quality beans at an affordable price.

“At the grocery stores, it was like \$12 for one sad-looking bean,” Taylor says. “So, I looked online and found that you could get a greater quantity, but the quality wasn’t the greatest. That’s when I started searching around for a source to buy vanilla beans.”

Taylor’s perseverance paid off. He found a supplier that offered quality Madagascar vanilla beans at an affordable price. He didn’t need all the beans he’d ordered, so he listed the extras on Amazon and was amazed by the response.

“I never imagined how many people were buying vanilla beans online,” he says. “I quickly realized there was a market for this back in 2015, and that’s when Vanilla Bean Kings officially started.”

Selling beans direct to customers

For the first four or five years they were in business, Vanilla Bean Kings primarily relied on third-party marketplaces like Amazon and eBay to get their product out to customers. That limited their interaction with customers, so over the past two years, the focus shifted to building their brand through their own website and social media accounts.

“We’re constantly posting back and forth with our customers and interacting with them,” Taylor says. “The feedback we get is great. People are very happy with our product. They love what we are doing, and we’re very proud of it, too.” ▶

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How Sweet It Is

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The company sources vanilla beans from some 10 different countries, including Madagascar, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Ecuador, and Papua New Guinea. Each has its own unique flavor profile. Madagascar beans, for instance, tend to be rich and creamy, while Indonesian beans have a more delicate, floral profile.

Offering pods, paste, powder & more

In addition to vanilla bean pods, which Vanilla Bean Kings sells in bundles, products include vanilla bean paste, powder, and homemade extract kits, complete with bottles and labels – the only ingredient missing is the alcohol. Vodka is most popular, but customers experiment with many other varieties. Coconut-based rum has been a recent hit, according to Taylor.

Another product you'll find on their website is school supplies for the children of Madagascar. Every online shopper is asked to consider a donation during checkout. That ties in with the Vanilla Bean Kings mission.

"We're focused on helping the countries where we import our beans," Taylor shares.

He has visited these third-world countries firsthand and been motivated to help them out as much as possible. That has included rebuilding hurricane-damaged schools and constructing sports complexes to provide a safe place for leisure activities. Closer to home, Vanilla Bean Kings

helps the Hartford community through product donations for silent auctions, among other pursuits.

Company appears on Inc. 5000 list

Vanilla Bean Kings has more than a passing familiarity with Golden West. Their first facility was right next door to the cooperative's office on Main Street, making them neighbors for six years. That made it convenient to set up the phone and internet connections needed to run the business.

"The Golden West guys helped us set up and get everything started," Taylor says. "Being an online business, internet service was pretty critical!"

The company's ranking at No. 614 on the 2022 Inc. 5000 list represents a 1,030% increase in growth – a testament to the strong demand for their product and positive response from customers. It has caused Taylor to reframe his thinking.

"We're still a small company, but we're starting to adopt the mentality of a bigger company to try and really push us forward, to not only sell more stuff but be able to raise more money with fundraising to help others," he says.

That commitment to offering an affordable quality product while also assisting people in developing countries makes Vanilla Bean Kings a local company with a global perspective – one that the town of Hartford, and the state of South Dakota, can be proud to call their own.

What started in the basement of a home has grown into a successful business that aspires to follow their mission of raising more money to help more people in need.



5 Things That Impact Wi-Fi Speed and Connection

In today's age, everything connects to the internet in some shape or form – from laptops and smartphones to TVs and baby monitors. It's possible for speeds to vary by device, even on the same network.

There are multiple factors that can affect your Wi-Fi speed and quality, but Golden West is here to help. Here are five things that can impact your Wi-Fi speed and connection.

1. Older Hardware

Having an older computer, laptop, or mobile device with slower processors could be your problem. Even with newer products, it's possible for older devices on a network to slow everything down. Make sure your hardware is updated, which will allow better Wi-Fi speed and quality.

2. Home Construction

Believe it or not, how your home is constructed can affect your Wi-Fi speed and connection. For example, concrete and brick walls block pathways of Wi-Fi signals, compared to drywall, which usually allows a good amount of signal through. Thick wooden doors, steel, water tanks, water heaters, and fish tanks can also affect your speed. Ensure your router is in the middle of your home, not being blocked by anything that'll slow down your Wi-Fi speed.

3. Outdated Software

Keep your operating system, applications, and your firmware updated on all devices. Approve updates when prompted, or ideally, set updates to occur automatically. This will help improve your device speed and performance and will also provide added online security.

4. Multiple Devices at Slower Speeds

In the evening when family members are all using the internet, speed is split among all connected devices. Golden West members subscribed to faster speeds shouldn't notice a difference even with multiple devices online. Those who do notice a difference – and who are able to upgrade – may want to consider a faster speed package to handle your household demand.

5. Not Running Updated Security Software

If you haven't been consistently running internet security software, it's possible your devices may be infected by malware, which could slow your speed and connection. Ensure internet security software is installed and be careful when opening any attachments or random, pop-up ads. Golden West includes VIPRE Advanced Security for subscribers who bundle internet with another service, or it can be purchased for \$4.95/month.

For more tips like this to help make the most of your Golden West connections, visit theexchangesd.com and click on Tech Tips in the menu.

Short Dial

Decades ago, a person could dial the last four digits of a phone number to call someone in their same three-digit exchange. Just last year all calls in South Dakota require dialing 10 digits.

There are still some calls for which you only need to dial three numbers. Short-dial numbers use a short-digit sequence to reach specific telephone numbers, usually universal.

The first and most widely known short-dial number is 911. There are other numbers in addition to 911 that can assist you. Here are the current short-dial numbers you can dial from your Golden West landline. Most of these numbers have been assigned by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Many of these resources are available online now, as well.

211 – Community Services

Call this number for questions about and quick access to health and human services, like human trafficking, disaster assistance, mental health, food, housing, utilities, and social service organizations. For more information, go to 211.org or helplinecenter.org. The 211 Helpline mobile app is also available for download on Apple or Google.

311 – Non-Emergency Services

311 provides non-emergency services. While it is available in many larger U.S. and Canadian communities, *it does not work in South Dakota*.

411 – Directory Assistance

411 provides directory assistance or local information, such as numbers or directions. With the rise of the internet and cell phones, and the resulting fall of payphones, the use of this service has declined. There may be a fee collected for calls. Every Golden West



phone subscriber can make two directory assistance calls per month before being charged.

511 – Traffic Information

You can call from most landline and cell phones for road and weather information that's relevant to your location. For more information, go to sd511.org. The SDDOT 511 mobile app is also available for download on Apple or Google.

611 – Telephone Service Repair & Internet Help Desk

As a Golden West member, you can call from your landline to report any

problems with your telephone, cable, or internet service. If you call from your cell phone, you'll be redirected to your cell phone company.

711 – Relay for the Deaf

Anyone who calls this number will be connected to a Telephone Relay Service (TRS), which allows those hard of hearing or with a speech disorder to place calls to a text telephone or other device. Go to relaysd.com in South Dakota for more information.

777 – Golden West offers its phone subscribers a unique short-dial number to reach customer service. It is not universal.

811 – Underground Public Utility Location

Also known as Call Before You Dig or SD One Call, this free and easy service gets your utility lines marked and helps protect you. Call 811 to know what's below, or go to call811.com for nationwide assistance or visit sdonecall.com in South Dakota.

911 – Emergency Services

911 is the number to access all emergency services, including police, fire, and emergency medical services.

988 – Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

You can call, text, or chat 988 and be connected to trained counselors who can help. Go to 988lifeline.org for more information.

SDTA Offers Scholarships to Ease Financial Burden

With costs rising on everything from coffee and eggs to gasoline and rent, paying tuition for college or a technical school is more challenging than ever.

The South Dakota Telecommunications Association (SDTA) can help ease this burden for students studying a variety of fields used in telecommunications. This includes majors from marketing to computer science, and more.

Every year, the organization provides financial aid in the form of scholarships to individuals pursuing a college degree in South Dakota. In 2023, they are awarding multiple scholarships totaling over \$5,000 to help offset the costs of college or a technical school.

Previous SDTA Memorial Scholarship recipients are not eligible to apply. Applications open March 15, and the deadline to apply is June 15, 2023. Scholarships will be distributed for the 2024 spring semester.



To be eligible, the student must:

- Reside in a household that subscribes to an SDTA member company, like Golden West.
- Have a high school diploma or GED equivalent.
- Be accepted into or attending a multi-year program at any accredited technical college or post-secondary higher education institution in South Dakota for the fall 2023 semester.
- Major in a degree/program or field of study that's useful in the telecommunications or broadband industry, or which significantly relies on the use of broadband services and related technologies.

For a sample list of majors eligible for this scholarship, and to apply, visit https://sdtaonline.com/sdta_scholarships.php or scan the QR code.

Scan for more information and to apply!





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Federal Programs Help with Internet Costs

For those who qualify, Golden West members have access to two federal programs: Lifeline and the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). Discounted broadband internet and phone service are available through Lifeline. Discounted broadband internet is included in the Affordable Connectivity Program.

**If you qualify for Lifeline, you automatically qualify for ACP.
If you don't qualify for Lifeline, you could still qualify for ACP.**

Lifeline

Lifeline is a government benefit that provides access to affordable communications services, such as discounted phone or internet service. Those eligible are limited to one Lifeline service per household.

You can receive discounts up to \$9.25/month off internet and up to \$5.25/month off phone services.

For Lifeline, you may qualify if you receive assistance from:

- SNAP/Food Stamps
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or other government programs.
- You may also qualify if your total household income meets the Federal Poverty Guidelines.

For more information or to apply, go to lifelinesupport.org.

ACP – Internet for All

ACP is a government program to help ensure internet for all by providing discounts up to \$30/month on monthly broadband internet. Those eligible are limited to one benefit per household.

For ACP, you may qualify if:

- You, your child, or dependent participate in certain government assistance programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, or other programs.
- You, your child, or dependent already received a Lifeline benefit.
- You received a Federal Pell Grant in the current award year.
- You're eligible based on your household income.

For more information or to apply, go to affordableconnectivity.gov.



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