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# How I Started My \$8K/Month Mission-Driven Food Consulting Company



Maura Rapkin



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ABOUT

BUSINESS

TOOLS

SAVE



Maura Rapkin  
Founder, **Napkin LLC**



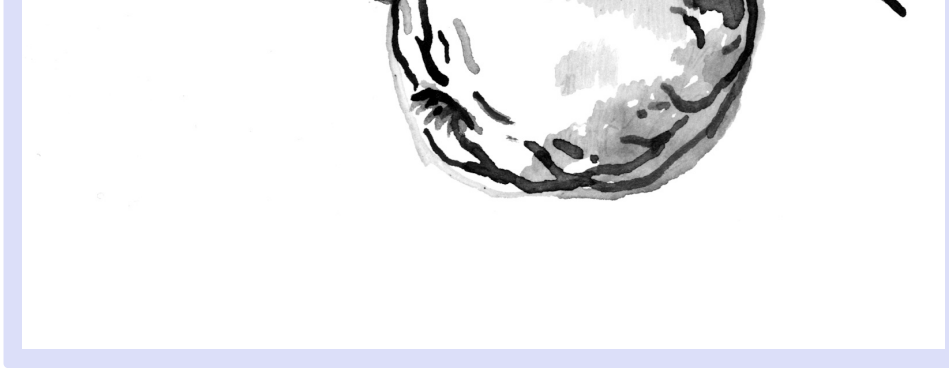
\$8K  
REVENUE/MO  
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FOUNDERS

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EMPLOYEES

Hello! Who are you and what business did you start?





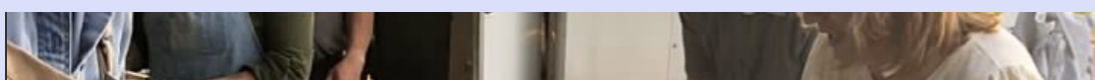
Hi! I'm Maura and I am the owner of **Napkin LLC**. Napkin is a consulting company for mission-driven food and farm people at the cross-section of hospitality, sustainability, and business.

I started my career in 2011 as a sustainability-oriented chef in New York. I worked as a chef and manager in hospitality businesses including Michelin-rated restaurants **The Modern** and **Blue Hill at Stone Barns**, internationally renowned **Breads Bakery**, and premier catering company **Abigail Kirsch**.

I saw an industry in need of solutions for business and employee sustainability, so I decided to go back to school to better understand food systems. I received my **MBA and Master in Food Studies from Chatham University's sustainability program**.

When I graduated, I wanted to find ways to help build a more robust local food economy, and I started my consulting company. I am passionate about conceiving solutions for a socially just, equitable, sustainable, and environmentally conscious food system. I lead Napkin by employing principles of **community engagement** and **enlightened hospitality**.

Napkin LLC considers the greater context in which small businesses function and applies hands-on expertise to help them thrive. Napkin focuses on solutions-oriented business planning while considering profits, hospitality, and sustainability. We work on a sliding scale hourly model, charging from \$50-\$150 per hour based on the client.





Maura helped manage this farm-to-table dinner by Farmer x Baker, in Deep Creek MD - in collaboration with Hideaway Co in 2021

## What's your backstory and how did you come up with the idea?

Pittsburgh 2017:

In my first iteration as an entrepreneur, I planned to make Napkin a hard cider company (that's why my logo is an apple). My mission was the same as it is now, I wanted to build equitability and sustainability in the food system. I was going to do so by growing and purchasing apples that did not need to be sprayed with pesticides (since their appearance was irrelevant and they would be pressed into cider), and selling alcohol which has a high-profit margin for the food industry.

I spent my time in graduate school using this business model to complete my coursework. I partnered with an orchard in the summer of 2019 and had begun the process of starting the cider business. At the point where I was going to begin to invest in the construction of a cidery, I realized my business ambitions were not in-line with the orchard owner who I was working with. I took a step back from the plans and was working on my pivot when Covid hit.

“ If you don't decline work that doesn't align with what you are trying to do, you cannot be free to grow in the way that you intend to.

Pittsburgh 2020:

In January I met a woman with a farm-to-table restaurant in a shipping container, in a public park, the first of its kind in the region. I was excited about her concept and felt like I was floundering with my own idea. I didn't want to take a permanent position as a chef, but it was an easy way to connect back to work.

an easy way to connect back to work.

While cooking for the restaurant, I pitched her the idea that I could help her develop operational systems for her business as well as cook. After a few months of working in this way, I decided I really enjoyed this type of back-end, systems-building work. I decided to try to expand and turn Napkin into a consulting company.

My first new client was the [Chatham Center for Women's Entrepreneurship](#), which hired me on a grant to provide one-on-one business counseling through their platform. I kept busy with these two clients for about a year and a half. I tried to find more small businesses to connect with but began to realize that small food businesses are not the best clients to pitch, to since they are operating on very tight margins.

Pittsburgh 2021:

I began to tell my network that Napkin was now a consulting firm. I was lucky that a colleague sent resources to apply for the [URA Get Online Grow Online](#) program to be a technical assistant. I had figured out how to design my website and create e-commerce solutions for the restaurant, and this organization was looking for folks to help other small business owners do the same.

Pittsburgh and Virtually 2022:

A friend in my network connected me with a consulting firm, [New Venture Advisors](#), that hire independent contractors to work on food systems feasibility studies, and I began to expand my skills from business operations and startup assistance to market research. I love working on this team and still feel like I have the freedom and flexibility to move my company in any direction.

## **Take us through the process of building the first version of your product.**

I had to try a few different types of services before I decided which direction to go. I took on a few recipe development projects, but I didn't feel like those were reaching the systems level that I hoped to operate at. I also teach a sustainable food business class for distance education undergraduates at [Unity College](#). Teaching feels like a nice way to connect to future players who stand to impact the industry.

After trying different types of work, I came up with four services I currently offer through Napkin. They are Production Capacity, System Integration, Hospitality Management, and Demand Generation. Production capacity means I can help a business maximize its ability to produce its product or serve its customers. I can figure out how to make the most of what my client already has and increase efficiency.

System integration means I can help implement organizational tools that might be missing in a client's business to help them operate more effectively. Hospitality management is the practice of understanding the wants and needs of all stakeholders of a business and trying to find a balance to serve those people.

This service is about meeting people and finding sustainable solutions to manage relationships. Demand generation is about implementing holistic business growth strategies to bring in more



revenue. This service is about quality control, branding, and business development.

By sticking to my defined services, I can refine and focus my practices.

## **Describe the process of launching the business.**

I hired a consultant to help me launch the cider company, and she helped me incorporate and get all of my business clerical work in order. This was a cost I was willing to pay because I trusted the consultant and I knew it would help me level up. When I decided to pivot to a consulting practice, it was very easy because all of that was in place and I didn't need to change the company name.

The rest of the work came from asking my friends, family, and google how to do certain things. I needed help writing my first proposal and contract. I have tried not to spend money except on educational, marketing, or networking opportunities.

Occasionally I need to buy a service for work tools. The benefit of an online business is that a lot can be done at no cost, but there are certainly a lot of hours to put in to get to any type of name recognition. I workshoped my website design and offerings with trusted advisors.

I talked to anyone in my network to ask any questions that came up. And that's how I still operate. It has taken a lot of patience and continuous hustling. But I am excited about the progress and am pushing harder than ever now.

## **Since launch, what has worked to attract and retain customers?**

I recently changed the definition of my target customer, and that has helped me begin to feel more momentum with my business. I had been seeking out small business owners, but often they don't have resources to dedicate to consulting. I found success in offering niche subject matter expertise with organizations that help food systems clients through grant funding. So I have set my sights on those orgs as clients, and have begun finding some great networking and partnership opportunities.

This summer I will be hiring a social media and marketing intern to help me bring in new business and hone my outreach skills. My most successful work partnerships have come through my network, so I highly recommend just talking to people about your aspirations and pushing yourself to do projects that seem exciting.



### **MAURA RAPKIN**

#### **General Business Counseling for the Food Industry**

Maura started her career as a sustainability-oriented chef in New York. She worked as a chef and manager in Michelin rated restaurants and high-volume bakeries and catering companies for six years before returning to school. Maura received her MBA and Masters in Food Studies from Chatham in 2019. Upon graduation, she began her entrepreneurship journey. She was working on opening up a hard cider company before Covid. In the past year she has pivoted her company, Napkin LLC, into a consulting company for small, mission driven food



LLC, into a consulting company for small, mission-driven food and agriculture businesses. She offers expertise in product development, general food startup advice, local food systems sourcing and management, operations management, and growth planning.

*My bio on the [Chatham Center for Women's Entrepreneurship](#) website*

## **How are you doing today and what does the future look like?**

Today, Napkin has two steady income streams with consistent projects and a lot of room for growth. We are in the earliest stages of gaining traction. A lot of effort is going into marketing and honing the quality of services.

The intention for the next year is to build a robust roster of clients and keep consistent work in the pipeline. In an ideal scenario, I can start to expand the practice in the next two years.

## **Through starting the business, have you learned anything particularly helpful or advantageous?**

The most advantageous thing I have learned is to learn how to say “No” when you need to. If you don’t decline work that doesn’t align with what you are trying to do, you cannot be free to grow in the way that you intend to.

I started this career path as a chef, and it is something I love to do and something I am good at. Being a chef takes a lot of energy and a lot of time, and it is a labor of love. In 2014 I was offered the best opportunity I could imagine in the restaurant career path, to lead a pastry team with a restaurant group that I admired and enjoyed working with.

I was very torn about what to do, and when I chose to say no, it was the turning point for me. I realized that I had to stop being a chef. That was about 5 years before I actually stopped being a chef completely.

I love the work, the people, and the industry, and I wanted to work on more of a systems level. I had to do some internal auditing and find the other parts of myself that I wanted to expand upon. While I was envisioning my eventual pivot to consulting, I cooked and explored different types of work.

As I started to actually build my consulting practice, I found tension between my time cooking and my time with my consulting work. That tension was uncomfortable, and I eventually realized that I could not expand my consulting skills in the way I wanted if I spent my work energy cooking. I also realized that being a chef felt like it would cap my financial and intellectual growth potential, and I made my plan to shift completely to my consulting work.

## **What platform/tools do you use for your business?**

My website is built on [Wix](#). I use [Instagram](#), and I am trying to get better at it. I also use [repost](#) for Instagram, to repost things I like. I use Excel/Google Sheets for a lot of my systems planning design. I use Word/Google Docs for things like this. I use Canva for designing flyers, stickers,

invitations, etc. I just stated using [Hubspot](#). I like [Trello](#) but I don't feel obliged to check it as much as I should. I love syncing all my Google calendars into Apple Calendar. I use a lot of other tools for clients as they prefer.

## **What have been the most influential books, podcasts, or other resources?**

Books:

Setting the Table, Danny Meyer - If you want to learn how to be a great leader.

The Miracle of Mindfulness, Thich Nhat Hanh - If you want to practice calming your mind.

Uncultivated, Andy Brennan - If you want to consider life as a wild fermenting cider maker.

Podcasts:

Unlocking Us, Brene Brown - If you want to think about how you process information.

On Being, Krista Tippett - If you want to hear how other people think about their work.

## **Advice for other entrepreneurs who want to get started or are just starting out?**

If you are just starting out as an entrepreneur, chances are you have had a creative, leadership mindset for a long time. The best way to do the external work you want to do is to audit your internal self. What are your desired mission, vision, and activities? How can you align your work with the impact you want to see?

I like to put my work into three buckets:

1. Things I am good at and enjoy doing
2. Things I am good at and do not enjoy doing
3. And things I could learn to be better at


I like to try to sway most of my work into the first bucket, leave the second bucket for things that are lucrative but not time-consuming, and use any extra time for skill-building in the third bucket to see if there is something that can fit in the other two buckets.

## **Are you looking to hire for certain positions right now?**

I am looking to partner with other consultants, companies, or organizations in food systems work. I am happy to join or lead projects including startup work, operational systems implementation, capacity building, feasibility studies, online commerce and website design, HR management, sourcing, and business planning.

## **Where can we go to learn more?**

- [Website](#)
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Pat Walls, Founder of Starter Story

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\$12M/YEAR

 Sammy

\$432K/YEAR

 Dorian

\$1.68M/YEAR

 IK

YEAR

 Doug

\$300K/YEAR

 Jim

\$6M/YEAR

 HC

\$1

 Jury

\$1.08M/YEAR

 Aayush

\$420K/YEAR

 Brad

\$132K/YEAR

 M

YEAR

 Jeff

\$168K/YEAR

 Drew

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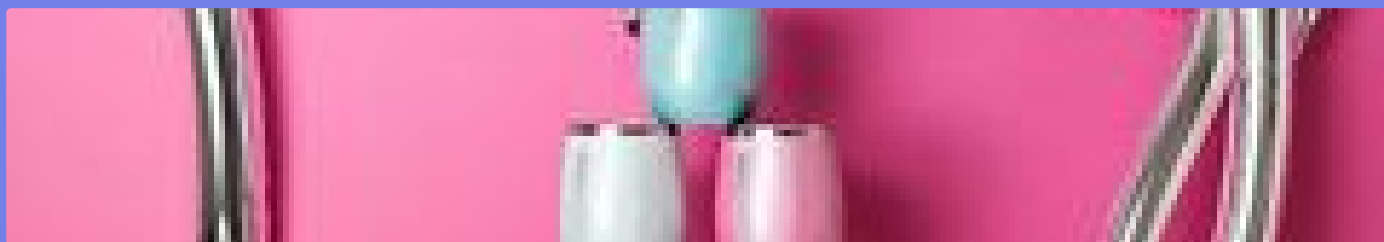
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Chris

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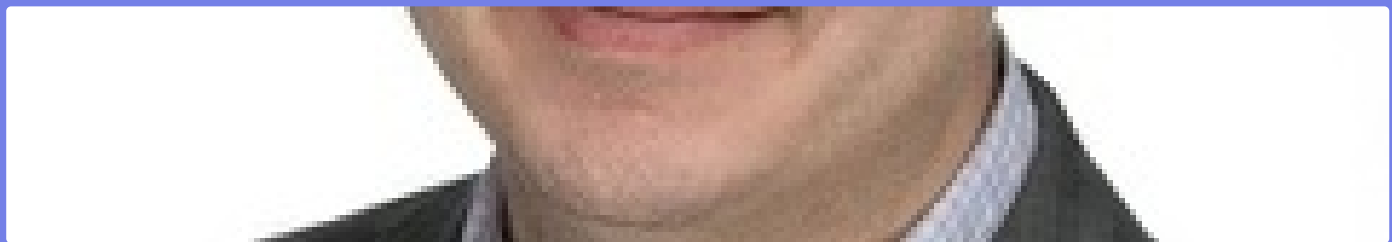
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My First Million

I love this website.



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**Johne Vang**

Be The Match

You can't find this information anywhere else.



**Trent Baren**

Instagram

So much valuable information.



**Bilal Budhani**

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Jamie

Starter Story: Learn How People Are Starting Successful Businesses

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