

AGRITOURISM: FROM CONCEPT TO FRUITION

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No matter what type of farming you do, incorporating agritourism into the farm is becoming common. Creating an experience that you and your visitors will enjoy doesn't happen accidentally. It takes planning, targeted marketing, and an ability to manage a hospitality business in addition to the work of agricultural production. Whatever visitor experience you want to offer on your farm comes with responsibilities that aren't traditionally connected with those of a farmer.

"Agritourism has been evolving for probably 50 years now," Monika Roth, Cornell Cooperative Extension Agent, Agricultural Issues Leader, Tompkins County, said. "There (are) a lot of really good, well-established agritourism businesses in the Northeast."

From its beginnings in direct marketing, including farmers markets, on-farm markets and pick-your-own; agritourism have evolved. Farms of all shapes and sizes are incorporating some aspect of agritourism into their business plans—from tours, exhibits, and classes to pumpkin slings, corn mazes, haunted hay rides, and on-farm parties.

"Agritourism shifted from pick-your-own for price in the 1980s, to pick-your-own for entertainment," Roth said. "Getting to know the farmer, getting to know what happens on farms," and "authentic," not "entertainment-based agritourism" is gaining prevalence today, allowing visitors to discover "what is really happening on the farm."

Agritourism is increasingly being driven by those focused on getting to know their farmer, and where their food comes from, thanks to the local food movement. More people are interested in getting out on a farm for a fun activity and learning experience, and reconnecting with their food roots.

DEFINING YOUR AGRITOURISM

The challenge for farmers attempting to develop any agritourism program is to try to "create an experience that would bring people to their farm," and for which visitors would be willing to pay, while attempting to create "appropriate experiences based on the type of farm," Roth said.

While corn mazes or pumpkin slings don't have much to do with actual agricultural production, they do provide a farm with a substantial opportunity for income by satisfying the public's need for recreational activities while exposing more potential customers to the farm's products. Such recreational visits can also offer educational

opportunities, with educational signs, farm tours or pick your own opportunities enhancing the agricultural and fun-and-games experience.

"Our pumpkin farms survive on what they make in October," Roth said, despite the shift away from entertainment towards more passive or experiential visits.

Catering to the public's desire for recreation in a country setting can help to keep farmers farming and land in agriculture. Whether hosting such an activity once or twice a year on a farm otherwise closed to the public, or adding special events to your farm market, these types of entertainment tourism often allow farms to earn "a substantial amount of their farm income in a concentrated window," typically during peak fall tourism months of September and October," Brian Schilling, Specialist in Agricultural Policy and Assistant Professor of Agricultural, Food & Resource Economics at Rutgers University, said.

Offering "value-added" experiences, typically for a fee adds, additional income streams to farms. For farms seeking to attract families-fee-based, fun children's activities can be a draw. Admission fees to festivals, on-farm dinners, or tours and rental income at a special event venue for private events caters to a different demographic. A café, brewery or winery on the farm, or hosting on-farm dinners, brings in folks focused on culinary agritourism, who are seeking "taste as part of the experience," Roth said.

APPROPRIATE MARKETING

Not all farmers are equipped to handle — or prefer not to handle — the crowds that often come with more intensive entertainment activities. Farmers must actively decide what types of tourism they want to offer, and the size and demographics of the crowds they wish to attract, and plan accordingly, Roth and Schilling emphasized.

"Target marketing is going to define the kind of things you are going to do on your farm," Roth said.

"Target your business to your customers."

Some farmers might like to attract visitors, yet seek to remain low-key, with less of a focus on entertainment. This can be achieved by defining your goals and your target customer, and clearly marketing yourself to that segment of the population. Advertising corn mazes and petting areas will attract visitors seeking a different experience from the more passive experiences such as self-guided farm tours or a pick your own

focused on bringing food home in quantity, and not on the hay rides or festivities.

"Customer volume is somewhat determined by what you are offering," Schilling said, with "fun" activities bringing in more crowds than more passive farm-based experiences. "My fear is if you have a farm that all of the sudden gets in the public's eye, but they don't have the capacity" to handle the resulting surge of visitors.

Appropriately representing your farm, and offering activities that are scaled to the type and number of visitors you can reasonably expect to attend is prudent. Most roadside stands will draw people from about a 10-mile radius, Roth said. But destination farms, where the farm is the reason for a day's activity, draw people from up to 100 miles away.

The amount of time and labor you have to dedicate to developing a value-added enterprise will also play a role in the agritourism approach that best fits your farm. It takes different skills to manage retail employees compared with farm employees, and people are paid differently for retail jobs than for farm jobs, with labor laws varying from state to state, she said.

Agritourism ventures are hospitality-focused businesses. The best agritourism farms feature customer-oriented, knowledgeable employees who can provide excellent visitor experiences. Customer service is a priority. All employees need to be able to enforce farm rules, answer questions and be proactive, responding to potential issues before they happen.

"Hospitality and customer service are paramount. It's important to have staff training" when inviting visitors to your farm. "Employees are an extension of the farmer" Schilling said. "This isn't production. This is the retail service side. It's a whole different business model."

SUCCESS IN AGRITOURISM

One hundred-year-old Indian Ladder Farms in Altamont, New York has developed an ever-expanding agritourism model. Indian Ladder Farms grew its tourism programs incrementally, as a means of bringing people to the farm to purchase their products. It all began with the need to attract a wide demographic to the farm for purposes of supporting the farm's production of food.

"Educating the public about agriculture forms the foundation of everything we do," Laura Ten

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continued

Eyck said of her family's farm. "We want people to be able to come to the actual farm, see the food growing and have the opportunity to pick it themselves or purchase it in the store."

The apple orchard consists of 65 acres and 40 varieties. The farm trials varieties for Cornell University's fruit testing program and has recently planted a high-density orchard with over 1,000 trees per acre. The farm is also one of the few third-party certified "Eco-Apple" growers in the Northeast. The Northeast Eco Apple Project is a third-party certified program which insures that growers are utilizing the latest in integrated pest management strategies, aimed at reducing the use of unnecessary chemical crop protectants. Eco Apple growers are certified by the IPM Institute of North America, and distributed by the nonprofit Red Tomato. The farm has recently been deemed restricted to remain in agriculture.

Agritourism is a big part of how they've remained viable. Beginning in the 1960s with the addition of a retail farm market, the Ten Eyck family began to press cider to attract visitors. Soon they opted to include pick-your-own opportunities, adding strawberries, raspberries and blueberries to the apple crop. School trips, a bakery for cider doughnuts, a café and gift shop, and the newest addition of a farm brewery and cidery have kept their approach to agritourism true to the farm's mission of growing and selling high-quality fruits, and offering value-added products from their crop. Along the way, birthday parties and special events such as "Baby Animal Day," where children can pet, feed and learn about baby animal care, have been added. The summer "Barn School" day program for children bring back visitors regularly and connect farming, food, health and environment in a variety of educational and fun sessions. All sessions of the educational children's classes are filled this season. "Farming is central to everything we do, but if we were to operate just as a farm, without the direct marketing and agritourism, we would probably not be able to stay in business. We are a mid-sized farm and cannot achieve the economies of scale necessary to be successful at wholesale marketing," Ten Eyck said. "The core activity and what really forms the foundation of agritourism is people coming to the farm to purchase items grown and/or made on the farm. Everything else builds from that."

Currently, the farm is expanding into a destination for events such as weddings. But in New York, weddings aren't a part of farm agritourism definitions, and aren't protected activities, raising issues with land use regulations. Indian Ladder Farms has had to seek special permits from the

town to host events.

"Keeping within the state definition of agritourism is another reason to keep our agritourism activities farm centric," Ten Eyck said.

While the special events fall outside of that realm, they offer a unique opportunity to expand the farm operation and capitalize on the scenic aspects of the land. Like other agritourism ventures on the farm, each added attraction offers the opportunity to highlight the farm's products, keep the farm viable, and perhaps allow additional family members a means to support themselves on the farm.

"My father essentially created Indian Ladder Farms retail business, which he continues to oversee along with the farm operation, with help from farm and retail managers," Ten Eyck said. "Indian Ladder Farmstead Cidery and Brewery is a companion business started by my husband and is definitely a means of supporting additional members of the family on the farm."

DUE DILIGENCE: SAFETY AND SECURITY

No matter whether visitors are coming to pick, to shop, to be entertained or to learn about a working farm via farm tours, open house events or even community-supported agriculture arrangements, the farm must be prepared to handle visitors in a safe, secure, hospitable and effective manner. Common areas of concern for agritourism operations include crowd control; on-farm safety; theft; traffic and parking.

Liability insurance is a must, but demonstrating due diligence and foreseeing issues is a requirement, too. Due diligence is not only smart; it is the law in most states, and farmers must demonstrate the "highest duty of care," Schilling said. Agritourism of any type requires that farmers "proactively look for hazards, and remedy or warn," in an effort to keep visitors safe from harm.

"You have to be set up to host visitors," Roth said, and cleaning up hazards and junk is as much a part of safety as it is of curb appeal. "It has to be attractive. It has to be clean."

While you, your family, and staff may be intimately familiar with farm safety hazards, your visitors will not be. Daily and weekly safety checks to ensure that all safety measures remain in place, and that no additional hazards are identified, are prudent. An emergency action plan is essential. Coordinate with emergency responders, and communicate those procedures with all staff.

"Look at the farm through the eyes of visitors of all ages," Schilling said. In most cases, "the farm is not laid out for this (agritourism)," and the tourism program will have to be "retrofitted" to the farm's existing structures, roadways and fields.

If large crowds are to be expected, talk to town law enforcement, consider off-site parking with shuttles, and plan for safe crosswalks as needed. In parking areas, consider roping off a walkway for pedestrian safety. Stripping spots or using cones to direct traffic can enhance safety, too. Plan for traffic control and overflow parking, use visible and clear signs throughout the farm, and have knowledgeable employees readily available and identifiable to guests. Some things, such as weekends and holiday being busier than a regular weekday, are predictable and such peak times should routinely be staffed with additional employees.

Fence off areas not intended to be open to the public, and have someone responsible for routinely monitoring those areas. Post employees in fields, on hay rides and in other visitor venues. Not only do they serve as your eyes and ears, but having visible staff can deter theft, whether of you-pick fruit, farm equipment or infrastructure, or cash receipts from activity fees. Accepting credit cards can also decrease opportunities for theft, and can often increase sales numbers.

Some farms offer pay-as-you-go activity fees a la carte, while still others have one inclusive price for participating in all of the farm's activities. For farms hosting classes, tours or other education-oriented events, fees can be collected in advance to avoid having excess cash on hand.

Whether offering community supported agriculture or pick your own opportunities, some farms have membership fees, both to control crowd size and to keep theft at bay. By charging a fee to belong to a farm, and gain the privilege of participating in some of the activities they offer, the farm is better acquainted with its visitors, visitors are less likely to steal from "their" farm, and the farm can put a cap on memberships and visitors, while gaining up-front income.

The best agritourism operators are "entrepreneurial, not afraid to try something, adaptive, innovative, and always looking at what marketing opportunity exists," Schilling said. Successful agritourism ventures find a model that fits their farm and meets visitor expectations. Those farms that excel at agritourism are willing to adapt to visitor needs, keeping things fresh, while marketing themselves and the experiences they offer appropriately, thereby attracting their target demographic. Once the visitors arrive, these farms are designed to control the visitor experience, keeping things safe and secure, while offering a satisfying experience for the farmer and visitor alike.