

GETTING STARTED IN AGRITOURISM

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1. Getting Started with Agritourism

Introduction

There is a great deal of interest in agritourism as a niche tourism sector for farms. One reason is that people are looking for an authentic experience that might link them to their past or that teaches them something new. Visitors also want to get away from the stress of every day life and experience a seemingly simpler life. Farm visits offer a day in the country, where guests may pick berries, go for a hayride, sample some homegrown or homemade products, see animals, and learn how farms operate.

The variety of agritourism experiences that can be offered is huge - from farm lodging or farm-based recreation like hiking or hunting, to pumpkin patches, u-pick farms, farm festivals, wine tasting, farm restaurants, agri-entertainment like corn mazes and more. Visitors are willing to pay for these experiences as long as the price is reasonable and they find value in what is being offered.

Agritourism provides an additional source of revenue for farms that allows them to keep farming and increase the quality of life for their family. Many farms with large wholesale operations that have struggled with low commodity prices have turned to agritourism as a way to keep farming and earn a higher return from direct to consumer marketing. Some have reduced their acreages, growing fewer crops but capturing more consumer dollars. Agritourism allows farmers to capture both the consumer's food dollar as well as some of the money spent on entertainment and recreation each year.

Agritourism is a trend that is not likely to go away soon. The growth of wine trails and the wine industry illustrates the potential. Other types of farms are jumping on the agritourism bandwagon and doing very well. As the agritourism offerings expand, the opportunities to attract visitors increases. Collaboration

among farmers to organize farm trails, host farm open houses, and other such joint ventures will strengthen the industry and help grow new agritourism attractions to keep visitors coming back for more.

Agritourism – Is it Right for You?

If you are considering the development of an agritourism enterprise or want to add agritourism as a new enterprise for your farm, the place to start is with a hard-core assessment of your abilities and goals, also consider those of your family members. Discuss the idea, consider the options, assess your skills and time realistically, visit other farms, and most of all, develop a plan.

Start by generating a list of all the possible types of agritourism enterprises you could realistically develop. Write down pros and cons of each including how much work it will take and the cost. Narrow the list by considering which ideas you or family members get most excited about and are most doable. Also, consider what skills and time you and family members will have to devote to developing the enterprise. Think hard about what would work best given the physical resources and location of your farm.

Once the ideas seem solidified, don't assume you and your family are the best judge of what may work or not. Run the ideas past friends and acquaintances, tourism and extension staff, visitors to the area, and business representatives. Get their honest appraisal of the ideas you have selected. Would they visit your farm to participate in activities you are considering offering?

A key point to remember is that agritourism brings people to your farm, so you must enjoy meeting people and plan activities that visitors will want to participate in, all the while managing the situation to avoid risks.

Start with a Plan

An agritourism attraction need not be something different than what you are already doing at your farm, the difference is that you are going to show the public what you do. Many people start by planting a pumpkin crop and offer u-pick pumpkins in the fall or host a maple farm open house when boiling sap.

Once you have identified some agritourism activities that seem doable, that fit with your goals and your farm resources, and that you have time for, list all the tasks or steps to get started. Once done, have someone else review it with you – call the extension or tourism office for input, or enlist the help of a business counselor or event planner. They may identify some details you might have missed.

Develop a launch date for the activity, then work backwards and list all the resources you will need and the tasks that need to be performed to be ready for your “launch”. Make sure publicity figures prominently into your plans as it takes a lot of promotion to get the attention you will need for launching a new enterprise.

Start-up, advertising and promotion costs may outpace your returns initially so be prepared for this. If you have low numbers at first, don't sweat it. If you have organized a high quality experience, that receives favorable responses from visitors, then you will have achieved a measure of success. Remember that word of mouth is a key way to build business, so if you do it right the first time, the next visitors will not be so hard to attract.

Plan a soft opening – a way to get started without a big launch is to plan a small activity targeted at a select group to test your ideas. For example, offer one fall event like hayrides around the farm. Take time to get feedback from visitors about what else they might like to see, do, learn or buy at your farm. Then each year, add in another attraction. This way, you grow your level of comfort with visitors and get to know their expectations plus you don't have all the cash outlay at

once. Grow the enterprise by taking small steps, but don't forget to plan with the big picture in mind. It is important to set income goals that you would like to reach.

Cater to Visitor Interests

Another important activity at the outset is to identify the type of the customers you hope to attract. If you know you don't want school children at your farm, that's ok. But you do need to know whom you want to attract to your farm and then develop your enterprise to cater to their interests. Be selective about your advertising in order to reach the group you want to reach. Each audience you hope to attract will have different needs and expectations and you will need to employ audience specific strategies to attract them.

If you want to attract motor coaches to come to your farm, organized tours are required. You need to plan everything from the greeting when they arrive, what they will do, see and buy, and most of all, the bathrooms. Marketing to tour groups will require a nice brochure describing your farm tour. You will want to enlist the help of your county tourism professional. They know what motor coaches come to the area and how to get them to stop at your farm.

An example of attracting a niche group of visitors is the Finger Lakes Fiber Tour. Two weekends were arranged for knitters that included lodging, food, farm tours and workshops. Where do you find knitters who will come to the Finger Lakes for such a tour? Start with ads in knitting magazines, knitters websites, and yarn stores. The weekends were both sold out. For more information about the tour, check the following website: <http://www.fingerlakesfibers.com/>.

There are many niche market opportunities that can easily be targeted if you have the right offering that caters to their interest.

Key Ingredients for Success with Agritourism

- Evaluate your time and talents and those of family members who will help
- Make sure there is a point person to plan the enterprise
- Make sure there is an enthusiastic, energetic person involved that likes interacting with people
- Start with solid, well thought out ideas for activities you will offer
- Plan the activities thoroughly before opening
- Start small and get feedback
- Grow a little each year
- Know whom you want to attract and what they expect
- Tailor promotion to specific audiences
- Offer something to see, do and buy
- Set goals for income so you can measure progress and track costs vs returns
- Minimize all the potential risks, plan for emergencies
- Have fun!

2. Visitor Expectations for an Agritourism Destination

Having visitors at your farm and adopting a tourism orientation is likely to take your farm in directions you have probably never considered. There will be times you are “open” or “closed” and may need to enforce those hours by turning potential customers away. There will be expenses for bathroom facilities and beverage inventory for thirsty patrons. In addition to all the farm chores, there are tasks to keep the premises in top condition to stay attractive and safe.

This chapter provides a list of typical visitor expectations for almost any agritourism destination. After reading it, you will have a better understanding of what visitors are generally looking for. If you know their expectations, you can formulate your plans to meet their needs.

In every county, the local Chamber of Commerce or Tourism Agency office refers visitors to local attractions. Staff at these offices are familiar with the types of visitors that come to the county and region and can provide good advice to farmers interested in knowing more about what visitors expect from tourism destinations.

The people who visit your farm are not farmers and have little understanding of farms in general. However, many visitors will generally expect the following:

- The main farm area is clean and well-maintained.
- The farm has sanitary public bathrooms with a toilet and sink.
- Parking is easy to find and adequate.
- Visitor facilities are safe and accessible for all visitors, especially small children, older adults and people with disabilities.
- The farm accepts credit or debit cards, particularly if an ATM is not nearby.

- The farm meets the visitor’s image of a farm.

Clean and Well-Maintained Farm Visitor Areas

Many visitors will not be surprised to see farm implements and materials around the farmyard, but farm junk and salvage equipment should be removed from the premises or stored far from visitor areas. Building exteriors should be in good condition; a newer coat of paint indicates pride and reinvestment in the farm. Children’s toys and family play areas will attract young visitors, so be sure to keep family property separated to avoid confusion for visitors about where they are generally permitted to go. Livestock fencing should be intact and labeled to indicate a possible hazard if it is electrified.

The practical effect of maintaining a neat appearance is added labor. Responsible individuals in the farm operation should be assigned clean up duty or make a point to hold everyone responsible for their own tidiness. If this seems like a burden, remember that every visitor who turns away due to “curb un-appeal” is lost income for the farm. First impressions have a huge impact on visitors.

Sanitary and Accessible Bathrooms

Farm bathrooms are typically functional little rooms tucked into a back corner of the barn, dotted with motorcycle posters, and not really meant for visitors. Farmhouse bathrooms are meant for family use. Neither is going to be appropriate for the public.

Visitor bathrooms at your farm must be clean, uncluttered, bright, fully-supplied, and easily accessible. Within 2 minutes of

getting out of their car, many tourists are looking for a suitable public bathroom; children and older travelers particularly. They often expect separate facilities for men and women, but will accept a unisex bathroom. They would prefer to find the bathroom easily, without having to ask where it is or if it is locked. Since this is often the first room they will visit, they will be judging your hospitality immediately. Even though it is a farm, visitor bathrooms must sparkle. For special events or seasonal needs, a clean portable toilet is acceptable.

Parking that is Easy to Find

Farm owners and their employees generally park wherever it is suitable in the farmyard, so farms rarely have designated parking areas. Visitors, who unfamiliar with the layout of farmyard, need clearly marked visitor parking areas. Signs directing visitors to proper parking areas should be posted at the entrance, and anywhere the farm driveway divides. If your farm has more than one driveway, use a sign to direct visitors to the proper entry. Chances are they will not figure this out for themselves at a typical farm, unless you provide good signage.

Visitor parking signs are typically designed with green lettering on a white reflective background. Pre-printed aluminum signs are inexpensive (\$15 - 20). If you are only hosting occasional events, mount signs on portable stands.

Do not assume visitors will know where *not* to park. They may park in front of a hay barn, behind an idling tractor, in front of the equipment shed, or in the middle of a cattle laneway. Use signs to restrict visitor parking and vehicle access, such as around a milk house, chemical storage, or in front of an equipment shed. A farm is unfamiliar territory for visitors so clear signage is important for safety reasons.

Accessible Farm Visitor Areas

As an agritourism destination, you will be hosting visitors of all abilities. Expect some visitors in wheelchairs, with walking assistance, or strollers, as well as visitors who cannot see, hear, or speak English very well. For all farm events and activities that are open to the public, be prepared to accommodate a wide range of visitor abilities.

Once your farm is open to the public, you should reduce barriers to access to where it is readily achievable, or "easily accomplishable and able to be carried out without much difficulty or expense" (Section 302 of the Americans with Disabilities Act). For example, door thresholds should be level, ramps should replace or augment steps, bathrooms should have grab bars, and narrow doors should be widened where possible to 36 inches. You would not be expected to put an elevator in a historic barn to provide access to upper levels. All new construction should be barrier-free; meaning any visitor with physical limitations can still access all visitor areas.

Credit Card and Cash Access Services

Many tourists will expect your farm retail operation to accept major credit cards for admission fees, farm product sales, and activity fees. For these travelers, it is a matter of convenience. For the farm, it usually leads to much greater sales. Plan on building credit card fees into the prices you charge, or set a minimum for credit card use (such as \$10 minimum).

If a credit card terminal is not in your plans, make it easy for customers to use other payment methods, like cash and checks. Figure out where the nearest ATM machines are to the farm and post these locations. If someone writes a check, make sure it is clear to whom the check should be written and post a small sign at the checkout with the farm name and any other instructions. (e.g. Make checks payable to "Willow Valley Farm" and include a phone number).

The “Look” of Your Farm

Since childhood, most non-farmers equate red barns, animals in pastures, blue overalls, and pitchforks with their idea of a farm. Many paying tourists will seek a destination that meets that image, to experience it first hand. Many want to see the farm they knew in their bedtime storybook. Agritourism destinations that meet this expectation will be rewarded with plenty of visitors.

People in the agriculture industry know better; few modern farms reflect the “Old McDonald” image. If you operate a modern orchard, dairy, or horse breeding facility, you should make it clear from the start that your operation is not like a storybook farm. Promote your farm as a modern, efficiency-driven business that integrates new technology with old-fashioned farming principles. Avoid projecting a cutesy image; rather, educate the visitor about the realities of modern farming. They have invested time and effort in getting to your farm and will not appreciate being misled by promotional literature that does not match the experience they will have at your farm.

Checklist:

- ___ Farm visitor areas and entrances are clearly marked
- ___ Junk and salvage equipment is out-of-sight
- ___ Visitor comfort facilities are cleaned regularly and stocked
- ___ Promotional material projects an accurate image of the farm
- ___ Visitors can easily determine restricted areas of the farm
- ___ Hours, days, or season of operation is indicated at the entrance
- ___ Farm accepts credit cards or makes cash/check commerce easy
- ___ Parking areas are clearly marked and safe for visitors
- ___ Barriers for people with disabilities are minimized

3. Customer Relations

Farms are in the farming business, but agritourism is a people business. Your new job as an agritourism destination is to host visitors who will also be customers. The idea is to have them so engaged in your farm that they will gladly hand over money for the experience of visiting your farm. This chapter describes ways to make the visitor experience as good as possible without a lot of wasted effort and without becoming a slave to the enterprise.

Day-to-Day Visitor Service

Each day your agritourism enterprise is open, you should establish a set of standard practices, to make sure customers will all have a good experience.

Before opening:

- Make sure road signs and parking signs are easy to see
- Check bathroom supplies
- Sweep up any debris in visitor areas
- Check inventory of refreshments and sales items (if applicable)

During open hours:

- Every customer is greeted with a smile, even if it's has not been a day worth smiling about. Welcome them to the farm using the farm's name: "Hi there, welcome to Goose Hill Farm."
- Wear name tags or apparel to make it clear who is part of the staff at the farm.
- Let each customer know you will help them with any questions about the farm or the tourism activities they have come for. Customers will usually wait for instructions, yet some will assume they know where to go and what to do for fun on your farm.
- Stick to the opening and closing you have posted.
- Pay attention to constructive comments from visitors. Phrases like "well, we finally found it" hint at the need for better signs.

Hours of Operation

Even though your farm is probably a 24-hour operation most times, your agritourism entity will have defined hours and days of operation. Some farms select just one weekend each year to host visitors, such as for an educational open house or farm festival.

Visitors appreciate regular business hours, such as "12 Noon - 8 PM, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday" mostly because they are easy to remember. Avoid changing your hours of operation frequently or posting hours that vary greatly from day-to-day, which can confuse even dedicated customers.

Visitors have become accustomed to seeing a conspicuous sign or flags in front of wineries and ice cream stands to indicate they are open. It can be tough to determine whether an agritourism destination is open just by looking at the farm from the road, so use similar signs or flags to give a strong visual cue that you are open for their business.

Handling Difficult Customers and Naive Questions

People who visit farms are doing so in part because they want to learn more. What they do know has come from the evening news, children's storybooks, movies, and distant memories from family farms they visited years ago. Since their knowledge is limited, they may ask odd questions about things that seem obvious to you.

Each customer is a living and breathing marketing opportunity for your agritourism operation, so it is important to show respect and empathy for their point of view, no matter how naive their question. Restate their question to start, and then give them a brief answer.

Here are some examples:

A visitor at a dairy farm points to a field of oats and asks, "How is your hay growing?"

Farmer: "We do grow hay, and use it to supplement our grain crops. In fact, this is a field of oats, one of those grains we use in our feed. And, by the way, our hay crop is a little short this year, so we may have to buy more feed."

At a u-pick apple orchard, a customer asks about picking apples, "I'd like some green apples for making pie."

Farmer: "You might enjoy the Northern Spy apples we will have later in the season. If you would like, we have a list of our apples and whether they are good for baking, sauce, or fresh eating throughout the apple season. This way, you can buy the best apples that are in season for pie-making."

Near a young goat pen, a parent tells their child, "All the hornless goats are females," not realizing both sexes had been debudded.

Farmer: "If you are looking at their horns, it is actually hard to tell which are boys and which are girls. We want them all to be safe around the feeding pens, so we prevent the horns from growing on both the boys and the girls, or the bucklings and doelings as we call them."

It is possible that you will be faced with very challenging questions from visitors about animal welfare, the use of chemicals on crops, animal medications, and other touchy topics. If someone with an extreme point of view visits your farm, you must realize you will not change their mind. They have a lot of emotion in their point of view, are not likely to compromise, and are basically very difficult to have on the farm. If you find yourself confronted with an extremist on an issue related to your farm, one of the only decent things you can do is to act conciliatory.

Here is an example:

A visitor to a dairy farm open house confronts the herd manager about tail docking. "You should be ashamed for the pain and mutilation you are causing these animals! I am going to call for a humane

officer to investigate your farm immediately!"

Herd manager: "Sir, I understand your point of view since I am around these animals all the time. Tail docking is not illegal and helps to keep our milk supply clean and safe. Your point is well taken, I have thought about this quite a bit myself. In fact, I oversee the process to make sure it is done as well as possible for cow comfort."

It will take time and practice to become a good people-person. If that is not your forte, find a family member or employee who is willing to be a point of contact for visitors.

On the whole, customers will be polite, receptive, and interested in your farm. Nonetheless, there are some that will create challenging moments in your day. With good service as a priority, along with instructional signs and a friendly approach, you will build positive visitor relations that result in repeat visitors.

4. Income Sources in Agritourism

Agritourism is being promoted as a way to generate additional income for the farm, and there are many highly profitable agritourism enterprises.

This chapter describes twelve possible income sources for farms that are becoming agritourism destinations. Use these as guidelines for making your specific plans. An agritourism business plan is the best way to show how the income streams and the new expenses balance to provide a profit center.

Income sources in Agritourism

1. Admission fee
2. Tour fee
3. Sales of fresh farm product to expanded customer base
4. Sales of processed farm product
5. Craft / souvenir sales
6. Activity fee
7. Class / skill-building fee
8. Tasting fee
9. Facility rental
10. Show fee
11. Farm lodging
12. Food service

Admission Fee

An admission fee is charged to participate in events and activities, or tour special areas of a farm operation, in the same way you pay to enter an amusement park, museum, or sports event. You would probably not charge admission to a retail area (like a farm product shop), but to a more restricted part of the farm, such as entry to a milk parlor viewing deck. A general admission fee is usually used in place of other fees like tour or activity fees.

Many agritourism destinations host events, on one or several days during the growing season. For example, a maple producer may host a festival at the start of the season or a sheep farmer may host a wool spinning and knitting event.

A portion of the revenue for special events comes from admission fees. Tourists have become accustomed to paying to participate in events, particularly when there are very unique features they would not normally get to see.

Admission fees for agritourism range widely, depending on the uniqueness and extent of the experience – from \$1 to \$40. The admission fee is usually scaled where adults pay the standard fee (e.g. \$5.00), students and seniors are discounted (e.g. \$4.00), and youth are discounted additionally (e.g. \$3.00 ages 5-12). The standard admission may have a bonus amount for additional features (e.g. \$2.00 extra for an extended vineyard tour). Customers appreciate a maximum family fee or other group discounts.

One strategy for leveraging other income from the admission fee is to offer a corresponding discount on products purchased. For example, a \$5.00 admission fee to a "Dairy Day" on a dairy farm can entitle the visitor to \$3.00 off any product made by the farm, such as cheese or maple syrup. The farm would retain the \$2.00 difference and earn more from the retail sale, and the customer would feel like they gained value from their admission fee.

Tour Fee

A tour fee provides the visitor access to the services of a knowledgeable guide or at least a guidebook for self-directed tours. A tourist paying this fee desires information about and access to farm areas restricted to other visitors. In return for their fee, the farm would provide a ticket or badge indicating their status as a paying participant in the tour. Like the admission fee, the tour fee is usually scaled to different audiences and group sizes.

Self-guided tours are generally free, however, group tours often involve significant staff time to prepare and host the tours. Fees may vary with the group. School groups may be charged per child or a flat fee per class. Group tours for adults or families can also be based on the size of the group. Motorcoach tours will often negotiate a fee that they build into their package and pay a lump sum.

Sale of Fresh Farm Products

Although it is pretty obvious, part of the rationale of having visitors come to a farm is to sell them fresh farm products at retail prices. For example, U-pick farms charge customers to pick fresh fruits or vegetables, based on volume or weight. With greater interest nationally in local food sources, there is ample opportunity to invite visitors to buy directly at the farm.

The agritourism entity at your farm is often intended to expand the customer base. For example, a maple producer might have stagnant sales of syrup and is looking to boost the number of bottles sold. An agritourism activity like an open house during sap season, a woods walk, or a class about maple candy making can expand the customer base, since there is an additional attraction to the farm. In most cases with direct marketing, more customers mean more sales.

Sales of Processed Farm Product

Many farms have expanded into production and sale of value-added items. Processed products such as jellies, pickled products, dried fruit, sauces are often a better retail item for visitors since they can be transported with less concern about spoilage or breakage. Sales of these products are enhanced when visitors can experience the farm first-hand.

A few products can be processed in a home kitchen, but most require a processing license. Check with your State Department of Agriculture regulations.

Craft/Souvenir Sales

In addition to farm product sales, farm owners can capitalize on the sale of souvenirs like t-shirts, ornaments, crafts, and rural antiques. Many agritourism operators have expanded into gift shops but this requires a lot of inventory and more management. It could be justified once the farm is attracting lots of visitors. A challenge is to make sure the gifts do not become a distraction from the farm, which is the main purpose of agritourism.

Activity Fee

Why do some farms have corn mazes? The answer has little to do with boosting crop sales. A corn maze is a proven way to collect activity fees from farm visitors.

Following are examples of activity fees farms can charge:

- \$1 for a handful of crackers to feed the goats
- \$2 for hay wagon ride
- \$15 for a dozen worms, a fishing pole and tackle for an afternoon of farm pond fishing
- \$15 for an archery course circuit
- \$20 for a short horse riding session
- \$4 for a trip through the corn maze
- Etc.

Class/Skill-Building Fee

Educational tourism opportunities are on the rise because many tourists prefer to stay active and mentally engaged, even on vacation. Many nearby residents and neighbors will also take advantage of classes a farm might host. There are no practical restrictions on the classes a farm might offer.

Here is a sampling:

- Horse farm offers a clinic for families buying a horse for the first time
- Grain farm has a bread-baking class
- Fruit farm shows visitors how to make jam, jelly or fruit syrups
- Grape farm hosts a wine making class for beginners

- Small dairy farm hosts a homemade cottage cheese making class
- Herb grower hosts a class to make herb-growing containers or drying culinary herbs
- Vegetable farmer offers a cooking from the garden class

The point of hosting a class on the farm is to charge a fee for the experience and expertise. It is good to relate the class back to the farm for additional sales income.

Tasting Fee

Farms that grow or produce a wide variety of edible products might consider having a fee-based tasting experience as part of their agritourism income stream. An orchard might offer samples of unusual peach and pear varieties, or historical apple varieties. Since these experiences are uncommon, the visitor is often willing to pay for the opportunity.

In the apple example, the orchardist could host a weekend tasting at various points in the season. Guests would pay \$2 - 5 each to taste an array of fruit varieties they have never experienced before, or perhaps never heard of. Other farm products suitable for tastings include cheese, herbs and edible flowers, melons, heirloom tomatoes, berries, grapes and farm processed products.

Health Department regulations may require that foods for tasting be prepared in a sanitary kitchen and perishable items must be refrigerated.

Facility/Grounds Rental

Another way a farm can earn money from visitors is by renting out the farm setting. Empty barns can be used for dances, classes, country weddings, family reunions, birthday parties, church activities, meetings, picnic shelters, banquets, and other special events. Rental rates can range from a few

hundred dollars to thousands per day, depending on location and services provided.

The use of working farm facilities for non-farm rental really requires a business plan that documents projections for income and expenses, and how they will balance

for the coming years. Additionally, the business plan will help you think through any additional services the farm can provide, like catering, the use of tables and chairs, food products, and farm tours.

One of the most important aspects of renting barns and farm grounds for non-farm use is cleanliness. Visitors will seek a true barn atmosphere, minus dust, odors, farm noises, mud and "rural character." The building must be structurally sound over every square inch, and should have in-house restrooms for large crowds. If food service is planned, running hot and cold water and kitchen facilities will require a Health Department permit.

Show Fee

One way farms earn income from visitors is charging a show fee. Common in equine competitions, show fees reimburse a farm for expenses to conduct a show or competition, plus provide a small profit. The show fee amount varies from farm to farm, depending on the sophistication of the show, expense of equipment and materials provided by the farm, and going rates in similar venues.

Craft shows, food concessions, or other invited vendors and groups add variety and interest at a farm festival. By inviting outside groups, the farm has less set up involved and more activity at the event. A booth fee for vendors is normal and vendors selling taxable items must have a sales tax authority certificate.

Farm Lodging

As part of an agritourism enterprise, you may be considering hosting visitors for overnight or weekend stays. On-farm lodging can be in a cabin, in the farm house, or in any structure inspected and approved for overnight occupancy.

The income from guest lodging may not be significant, since there are many expenses associated with keeping guest areas clean and sanitary. If you are a very busy farmer and generally have a hard time keeping up with things, then you will need to hire someone else to handle the upkeep and hospitality end of things.

Food Service

Farm visitors need to eat, especially if you expect them to stay for any length of time. Food sales might be an informal snack (cheese and crackers, donuts, fruit, ice cream) or part of a planned café-style meal (sandwiches, wraps, grilled food). Some agritourism destinations operate full-service restaurants.

Like lodging, there are significant food-service expenses related to facilities, inventory, equipment, and labor, but sales should net a modest income to augment other sources of income for your agritourism entity.

Culinary tourism is becoming a popular past time for *foodie* tourists. Cooking demonstrations and classes, coupled with a farm tour, dinner and farm lodging, provides a high value experience for a food tourist. Attention to detail is required but the result can be delicious.

5. Agritourism Liability and Questions to Clarify With Your Insurer

Scenario

In cooperation with a local festival, you offered to have tourists come up to your farm for hay wagon rides around the farm. They all pay the \$2.00 hayride fee, pile on board, and enjoy seeing the cornfield, the barnyard, and a visit to your collection of unused tractors. One enthusiastic teenager hams it up by climbing onto an old tractor for an action photo. The seat of the tractor bends down suddenly while he climbs onto it, spilling him backward onto the rusted 3-point hitch. Another visitor uses their cell phone, gets an ambulance to the farm promptly, and proper medical treatment begins. What now? This could mean thousands of dollars in expenses and trouble for your farm if you are found liable for the injury. It's going to take a lot of hayrides to pay this one off, right?

Managing risks to prevent incidents at agritourism operations is a very important consideration. Although scenarios like the one described above are scary to think about, they should not prevent you from meeting your goals as a tourism destination.

Liability insurance exists to help you mitigate losses in the event of a mishap on the farm. An agritourism operation may require a separate policy or a rider on your existing farm policy. You may also structure your agritourism operation as a separate business entity, thus shielding farm and personal assets from agritourism business losses.

Remember that liability is different than a lawsuit. You can still have a lawsuit filed against you if someone is seeking a legal remedy to a specific problem. Liability is a determination of who is responsible.

In New York State, a person on your property is a trespasser (no legal authority or permission), a licensee (permission to enter, but not paying), or an invitee (they are compensating you for use). Agritourism guests who are paying for their experience on your farm are invitees.

You are obligated to exercise the highest duty of care toward paying customers. Inspect your property for hidden dangers, remove or warn of hidden dangers, keep the property in reasonably safe repair, anticipate foreseeable dangers and take actions to prevent potentially harmful situations.

For example, concealed barbed-wire fences, chemical storage rooms, deteriorating barn flooring, or inadequate fencing around aggressive farm animals all pose known or foreseeable hazards to someone who is compensating you for use of your property. In the scenario described above, a barrier or sign warning to stay off the tractors might have helped prevent the accident.

You have many options and approaches to make sure the visitor areas on your farm are reasonably safe. The first is to designate a defined farm visitor area with signage. Use directional signs that clearly show a visitor entrance, visitor parking, and other public areas. All other zones of the farm should be posted to warn against unauthorized entry, using terms like "Staff Only" and "Restricted Area - No Visitor Entry."

Once the visitor area is designated, inspect the roadway, check fencing, evaluate pedestrian areas, and look for possible access to hazards like ponds and farm equipment. To the extent possible, remove anything in the vicinity that could pose a danger to non-farmers and visiting

children, who will not inherently know what is hazardous and what is not.

Explain to visitors that it is very important that they remain in visitor areas on working farms. U-pick operations have a much larger area to consider, but visitor areas are still restricted to designated fields and orchards.

Talking to Your Insurer

Insurer involvement in your agritourism plans should begin when your planning starts. Most farm insurance agents want to support your operation, even if it involves agritourism; they should never be “the last to know.” They will explain what is and is not allowed under your current policy. Additional terms of insurance can be specified in a rider, which can be used to amend your coverage to supplement your basic farm and home policy. You may need a completely separate insurance policy to cover the agritourism activities.

Start the conversation by asking the following questions:

- As an insurer, do you understand the proposed agritourism plans?
- To what extent does this policy cover product liability, premise liability, operations, and contracts?
- Would a \$1 million umbrella policy provide adequate coverage, or should we insure to a higher level?
- Are farm employees covered under this policy?
- Would guests have to sign anything special to be covered under this policy, or would a waiver form be necessary?
- Should groups be required to show evidence of insurance?
- Is a property inspection necessary as part of the terms of the policy? If so, what might be inspected?
- What coverage levels would you recommend for liability (product, premises, operations, personal, and contracts)?

Separating the Agritourism Entity from the Farm

An agritourism operation on your farm is probably not covered by your existing farm liability insurance policies. Whether and how to minimize the exposure of the farm assets to problems faced by an agritourism enterprise will involve your insurance carrier, an attorney, and possibly business structure filing fees.

The decision should be deliberate and with your full understanding as a farm operator.

One way to manage risk in agritourism is to set up the enterprise as a Limited Liability Company (LLC). This business structure means that contractual obligations and liabilities are incurred by the LLC, not by the farm or family. For example, moneys owed to someone who successfully wins a lawsuit against the agritourism operation extend only to the business assets as part of the LLC.

To set up an LLC in New York State, you will need to prepare, sign and file your Articles of Organization with the Department of State. You are not required to have a lawyer involved, but since it is a binding legal matter, you should take advantage of professional legal assistance. Make sure an LLC provides the appropriate tax management strategy; the LLC will need a taxpayer identification number. The LLC may also need a Certificate of Authority to collect sales tax on taxable items, and licenses to engage in some business practices.

You do not have to set up a separate LLC to engage in agritourism. Check with your insurance carrier about the best way to meet your goals from income diversity and risk management.

In summary, try not to let fears of possible incidents hamper your agritourism plans. Manage the risk by controlling visitor access to the whole farm, working with your insurer, and having adequate liability insurance in place as a backup.

6. Marketing Your Agritourism Enterprise

If you don't plan how you will market your agritourism enterprise, it's like throwing a party without sending invitations. And sometimes invitations alone may not do the trick. A multi-pronged marketing plan will be needed to attract both local customers and tourists.

Marketing needs to be part of the process of planning the enterprise. It is important to consider your target market – the kinds of people or groups you want to attract to your farm operation – right from the get-go. Your target market will impact the look of your farm and the activities and services you offer. For example, if you plan to be a pick-your-own farm, the layout of the farm fields is important. If you want to develop a farm bed and breakfast, the clientele you are targeting may want a home-stay experience, but that does not mean they want to be exposed to your personal clutter; everything should be clean, neat, and in top-notch condition. School groups or scouts may be less concerned with clean and tidy, but they will want a fun and interactive experience. Each target group has different expectations that you need to consider in planning your operation and for marketing it. To reach the specific target market you hope to attract involves proper placement of your advertising and promotion efforts.

Most agritourism enterprises are located in rural areas, where customers are few and far between. To be successful at attracting visitors, an agritourism enterprise must become a destination - a place where regional visitors will intentionally visit. Eventually, visitors from afar will travel with the intention of visiting your farm.

Becoming a destination farm does not happen overnight, but it will NOT happen without marketing. A key part of marketing never to be overlooked is what the visitors who come to your farm will say. If they had a good experience, you can bet they will be raving about it to

friends and family. And likewise, they will also rave about a bad experience. So, before opening doors to the public, make sure you have an experience that is going to create a positive "buzz". If you are not sure if you are ready for prime time, invite selected groups to visit. Start with a group that is familiar and who will be honest. Ask them what they find interesting about your farm operation and what could be improved. Then make those improvements and delve into your marketing plan.

Agritourism Marketing Milestones

1. Identify your target audiences. For each group, list the places and ways you can reach them. For example, youth may be a major target audience for your farm – where can you find youth? Start by contacting school district offices to see if you can get permission to promote school tours. Home schoolers often seek unconventional educational opportunities for kids; and the way to find out about them is to search the Internet or ask school guidance staff. Scout groups, sports teams, school clubs, local camps, church youth groups and 4-H clubs are other ways to connect to youth. Marketing to youth also links you to young parents who are a great visitor group to target. They love to have a place to take kids that offers an educational and entertaining family outing. A colorful promotional brochure and cover letter mailed to groups is a good way to start out, and a follow-up phone call is a good way to personalize the approach.
2. Define your target area for promotion. A farm agritourism experience provides an excellent opportunity for day-trippers so start by focusing media outreach in communities within one hour's drive of the farm. Target major population centers. Start with a weekend open house to test the draw

from communities within your target area.

3. Promotion includes press releases and calendar announcements. Don't pay for advertising if you can get free coverage. Farm stories can be written to address many media angles. For example, send an announcement about your "new" agritourism enterprise to the business editors of area papers. Human interest stories might include your child's egg business or vegetable garden. Become the media expert on weather's effect on crops - call area TV stations and invite them to your farm to see the apple crop, the giant pumpkins, grape harvest, etc. Contact food editors to let them know what's in season and encourage them to feature recipes for those products. Most farm events can be listed free in event calendars found in papers, on the radio, TV, internet listings, etc. One story in the paper or a short radio or TV segment is worth thousands in advertising dollars. Don't be shy about cultivating a relationship with the media in your area.
4. Advertise selectively to get your name out. Advertising can be expensive so be selective with how you spend your money. For example, if you are a new nursery business, many papers have a special spring gardening issue to advertise in. Or for a farm market, place an ad appear on a cooking page and highlight what is in season fresh from the farm. Many newspapers publish summer supplements that list things to do in the region. List your farm agritourism destination in these summer papers because both local folks and visitors pick them up.
5. Contact your Community Chamber of Commerce or County Tourism Agency. This is a valuable connection that you should make as soon as you start formulating your agritourism destination plans. Your local tourism professional can tell you about the kinds of visitors that come to the area, share ideas for marketing, advise you on how to develop your visitor

experience so that you meet their expectations. They will also include your farm in county tourism brochures, on websites, and market your destination to travel writers, hook you up with tour groups and promote your farm at travel trade shows. There may be a few associated with some of these services. Agritourism combined with eco-tourism, edu-tourism or culinary tourism is hot...so make sure you make the tourism office your first stop for promotional assistance. Regional tourism agencies are another resource that offer similar services to members.

6. Build your marketing image and presence. This includes: developing a logo and unifying marketing theme that captures your standards and what you have to offer. Creating a colorful, eye-catching rack card that can be placed in tourism offices and at other tourism outlets in the area and most importantly, develop a website. These days, travelers search the web for places to visit. If you do not have your own website, at minimum have a page on your county tourism site if it is offered.
7. Other free outlets to list your farm: One place to make sure you are listed is NYS Dept. of Agriculture guides. Touch base with your county Cooperative Extension office as they often get calls from groups or individuals who want to visit farms. They may also publish listings of you-pick farms, farm markets, and agritourism destinations, and may be looking for a farm where they can host educational events. Also, extension staff can help you with business planning and marketing ideas for your agritourism enterprise. Additionally, they may be able to provide you with media listings so you don't have to create your own list.

8. Participate in community events. It may cost a fee to set up a table at a community festival or other community event, but reach out and take part. A booth that promotes your business, features products you have to sell, provides a discount coupon for farm products sold at your farm are all good ways to get exposure. When you are first getting started, getting out in the community is a good idea.
9. Signage is a great investment to promote your business. A sign with the farm name, hours, days and season of operation is a communication tool for all to see that pass by. A permanent year-round sign with your season of operation provides a year-round reminder to come back when you are open. A seasonal or temporary sign is not as effective. Check the signage ordinance in your community for placement and size requirements. In addition to a sign at the farm, the other place for a sign is the main roads leading to the farm. Placement may be an issue and you should find out what the rules are. Your State Department of Transportation may have an agricultural signage program for posting Tourist Oriented Directional (TOD) signs in rural areas.
10. Putting it all together in a plan. As you can see, it takes some effort to do marketing outreach but it will pay off. All of the strategies you plan to use to promote yourself should be organized into a marketing plan that includes: who your target market is, where and how you will reach them, your promotion and advertising plan for the year, and a list of the connections you need to make to get your name in front of the public. Take time to plan out the whole year in the fall and winter prior to the next season. Generate the ideas for press releases, write the stories, do the outreach to get yourself listed in county brochures because if you wait till the growing season, you will have missed the deadlines and won't have the time to invest in promotion. Planning your promotion should be a fun and creative exercise that will be rewarded if you take the time to do it in advance. You don't have to hire a marketing agency and spend a lot of money. Check in with your county Cooperative Extension, Chamber and Tourism staff for assistance. For a list of helpful contacts, see the appendix listing.

7. Agricultural Tourism Publications and Web Resources

"Agritourism in New York: A Market Analysis," Duncan Hilchey and Diane Kuehn. Available from <http://www.nysgextension.org/tourism/tourism/agritou.htm>; several other documents can be found via this link.

[Agritourism in New York State, Opportunities and Challenges in Farm-based Recreation and Hospitality](#), Duncan Hilchey, 607-255-9832. (May be out of Print)

Agriculture Innovation Center - Missouri Department of Agriculture
<http://www.mda.mo.gov/AgBusiness/resources/agritourism.htm> 1-866-466-8283
This site has a fairly comprehensive list of resources some of which you can access from their site - some of the resources on their list that I found most useful are listed below.

[Agritourism](#), Virginia Tech, Publication Number 310-003, 2001. Available on line at:
<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/agritour/310-003/310-003.html>

[Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California](#), Hillary George, Ellen Rilla, U. of California Ag & Natural Resources Publication 3484. Available from UC Davis Small Farm Center - (530) 752-8136. <http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/agritourism/agritour.html>

[A Primer on Agritourism and Ecotourism Start Ups and Management](#), Desmond Jolly. Available from UC Davis Small Farm Center - (530) 752-8136.
<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/agritourism/agritour.html>
The Center has published a series of very practical agritourism operation fact sheets. Many useful titles. Check them out.

[Marketing on the Edge, A Marketing Guide for Progressive Farmers](#). Available from the Canadian Farm Business Management Council, 888-232-3262 or www.nafdma.com - look under publications in bookstore.

[North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association \(NAFDMA\)](#)
www.nafdma.com -- 1-888-884-9270
This is the number one organization promoting Agritourism and Farmer to Consumer Direct Marketing. Annual Conferences and tours focus heavily on entertainment farms and agritourism destinations. For exposure to a world of opportunities - attend their annual conference/tour.

[Reap New Profits: Marketing Strategies for Farmers and Ranchers](#). Available from Sustainable Agricultural Network, www.sare.org/san/htdocs/pubs

[Sell What you Sow! The Growers' Guide to Successful Produce Marketing](#), by Eric Gibson, 1994. New World Publishing, 503-823-3886, www.nwpub.net

[The New Agritourism, Hosting Community and Tourists on your Farm](#), by Barbara Berst Adams, 2008. New World Publishing, Auburn CA, www.nwpub.net

ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Center
www.attra.ncat.org -- 1-800-346-9140
ATTRA has an extensive list of publications if you have not discovered them, you will find many useful titles. Look for the publication: Entertainment Farming and Agri-Tourism - Business Management Guide - this is a good overview of what is involved.

USDA-NRCS

www.nrcs.usda.gov

They have a publication entitled Alternative Enterprises and Agritourism (not accessible via the web). Check with your county/regional NRCS office and ask them to get you a copy.

Jane Eckert, Eckert Agrimarketing

www.eckertagrimarketing.com

1-314-862-6288 or email EckertAgriMkting@aol.com

Jane has several publications on promotional strategies, is available for consultation and is now offering farm webpage design services.

The Legal Guide for Direct Marketing, Neil Hamilton. Drake University Agricultural Law Center, 515-271-2065.

County and State Tourism Offices – be sure to contact the local tourism office our Chamber of Commerce for assistance with your agritourism enterprise. State offices often have additional resources and professional advice.

Information compiled by Monika Roth, Feb. 2008