

# Good to Go!

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## Getting to Yes with Agritourism<sup>1</sup>

*Note: Our workshop will be a myriad of activities and discussions relating to starting up an agritourism business on your farm. The following information is for those attending the workshop – to get onto the same page in preparation for the workshop.*

In the ever-changing role of agriculture in the ever-increasing urbanization of these United States, there are many opportunities to increase net farm income. Some opportunities involve crops, livestock and machinery, while others involve people and most involve all of these. As we strive to increase net farm income in a challenging farm economy, we need to know if we like to work with farm production, farm guests or both so we can ensure our ability to succeed in new farm business ventures.

One such venture is inviting the public to the farm. This has been done for a number of years on the East Coast – and now in the Midwest through experience farms. An experience farm is one that is selling products through direct marketing and based upon the experience of actually being at the farm. Most of these newer experience farms are centered on the fall season, including pumpkins, corn mazes, hayrides and such. Some have existed for some time in cut-your-own Christmas trees; pick-your-own apples or berries and many are adding facilities to rent out for parties and meetings. The newest era involves farm vacations and bed & breakfast operations. This is a logical step to increase traffic and make the experience a year-round income-generating aspect of the farm business.

Here are some thoughts on entering the business of entertaining folks on the farm and some ideas to help get started:

### **Does it fit the mission?**

What is the mission of the farm business? Does this new venture fit into that mission? Especially, if you have livestock, many questions will need to be answered relating to this mission and how it will change or stay the same. When will manure be spread? Will guests be able to watch milking? This is just the start of questions that need to be answered. The basic question to answer, however, is how the new venture will change what is happening on the farm and how the farm operates day-to-day activities. Don't forget about the new duties like cleaning up after others; washing bed sheets and towels as well as giving others direct access to most of the home and farmstead.

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### **Who's buying in?**

That is, who inside the business is buying your idea for this new addition? You must get realistic buy in from all family members and employees. One person can ruin a guest's experience with a rude comment that might seem meaningless or by totally ignoring a guest. One guest will tell a significantly higher number of people about their bad experiences versus their good experiences. This is why the planning process is so important and everyone in the business knows what is going on and the importance of treating guests properly. If a major player is totally against the idea, they will make sure you are not successful even if they are not deliberate at sabotaging the new venture.

### **Who's the people person?**

Welcome to the world of retail – or the next level of retail for your business. This is where someone has to be talking and promoting every minute of every day. If you don't like to work and interact with people, you are researching the wrong addition to the farm business. Retail management is the name of the game. This is very different from what we are used to in agriculture. "The customer is always right" is something that rings a bell in the back of lots of people's minds, but it doesn't mean anything until they have to deal with a very angry customer.

Talking and sharing is an underlying reason why most people come to experience a farm. They are eager to learn and explore. You cannot be shy about what you might or might not tell them. You must be willing to start and carry the conversation and spend time with your guests – because that is why they pay you.

### **Who's the marketing guru?**

Someone in the business has to also like – and maybe even love – the role of marketing. Marketing is more than selling. In agriculture, we all too often send the message that marketing is just about pricing. We teach workshops on how to trade commodities, futures, how to pick the best time of year to sell cattle at the market and so on. We tend to forget all of the stuff about customers and image – the things that are so well done by all other types of businesses. The time has now become critical in all of agriculture that we learn and practice the rest of marketing. If we do not take control of our future, we will continue to be producers of commodities and take the price given to us.

Marketing is the process of getting goods/services into the hands of people to help them solve problems. Yes, solve problems. What problem would I solve for my guests? What about needing to get away or teaching my grandchildren what it was like when I grew up on a farm? But, don't let these limit your imagination. There are several needs to pick from. Why would someone visit the farm? What need are they fulfilling? If you can answer this, then it will help to determine your target market.

Promotion starts with image and branding. Image is so important and many farms are playing catch-up. At times, those driving by may even smell with their

eyes when a farmstead is not taken care of. The sight of old buildings that need repair and equipment that is left out and about gives passers by an image that most farmers would not think they are projecting. It is imperative that all farmers take pride in their farmsteads. Image is indeed everything.

What do customers think of when they think of a farm? I would argue that most think of the pictures in their library books from their childhood. Red barns with white roofs, weed free fields, landscaped entrances, grazing livestock and so on are often positive images of farming. This is the farm image and will say more than you can ever put into print. What will be your farm image? Does your target market favor rustic split rail, colonial picket, or Kentucky style white-board fences? Determining this will keep the family and employees in line on what the big picture for the farm is.

Do you have a logo? A logo is like the cattle brands of the old west. Everybody knew what animal belonged to which ranch – and probably what type of rancher that person was. Branding is the use of a repetitive message in the form of a logo, name, or jingle that brings about an associated memory in the mind of consumers. Branding is how you will build successful relationships with the public. What will almost every 3-year-old-child scream out loud about when they see the golden arches along the road? Almost every one of them will scream “Donald’s” and immediately start to salivate for their happy meal. A logo is a critical component to build for any direct marketing operation so guests and the public will salivate for your service or product.

### **What is the market environment?**

Like many consumer trends, it is a moving target. But, it looks promising. September 11 taught us many things. It changed America forever. A major change is occurring in consumer buying habits – especially in travel and how far people will travel. Another major change expected is additional and higher amounts of quality time with family and friends. Yet another is the move towards Americana. This is the revitalized market that crafters and flag makers have begun to capitalize upon. This creates some wholesome things for farm businesses to capitalize upon, and some things that farm businesses are used to being good at. Many consumers have never experienced what is in their own back yard. Many now want to gain that experience and you can help them solve this problem.

### **What are the rules & regulations?**

Everyone worries about insurance, zoning, traffic, making meals and so on when they first get started in experience type agriculture. While these are concerns, they should not stall your initiative. Insurance is readily available for experience farms, but needs to be investigated properly to be sure proper coverage is attained. Just be sure to tell the insurance agent about each activity you are doing on the farm. Some experience farms require a blanket policy from a separate, specialty insurance company to cover the basic farm policy.

Other regulations surrounding zoning, food preparation, building codes and the like are mostly county based. Just be sure to do the research before you build and add. And, when it comes to county officials – the best advice is to just work with them. Most are very cordial, especially if you ask them before you start any construction activities.

### **Will they come to see my farm?**

If you make it a destination and they will come for the experience. State highway or paved road access could be good or bad, depending upon the image of the operation. There are many examples of successful operations on gravel roads in the middle of nowhere. There are examples of the opposite as well. The one combining thread is good management and having a good management team.

### **How much can you really make?**

I would be rich myself if I could answer this for every farmer that ever asks about adding a new enterprise to the farming operation. Make a budget of what you think income and expenses will be. Pricing is difficult because there really isn't a standard. Whatever is happening on your farm, do not try to sell on the price issue. The experience you provide is why they are paying more than somewhere else. Just like any other crop addition to the farm, an entertainment ventures require planning, organizing, staffing, leadership and evaluation. The farm business can only gain strength by exploring one of these options and hopefully by even adopting them.

### **Experience it for yourself!**

Have you been to an experience farm? What are they doing and what can you learn from them? Some of these farms may require you to travel out of state, but the amount of information you gain from the experience is invaluable. You can also experience both of these – to an extent – on the Internet. You can also experience it by making it happen at your operation. If some in the farm business are unsure about a big move, make a small move. One idea might be to start with some school tours or something else basic to see if you like the outcomes and mostly to see if you and others in the farm business can handle the demands of having people around. Kids are some of the most honest critics you will ever find.