

AG Strategies

Agriculture Business Strategies

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Providing Farm Tours

The purpose of this factsheet series is to help producers and processors understand the key elements needed to manage a business. This factsheet discusses some of the basic components and strategies of providing farm tours.

Ray and Louise raise alternative livestock, as well as purebred and traditional livestock. They also process products or livestock grown on their farm into value-added products. Now, they think others would be interested in touring their farm to see what kinds of things they do.

The concept of providing farm tours is not unique. It has been happening for many years, in many different locales. What has changed over the years is the number and type of tours offered. In our highly urbanized society, agri-tourism has gained popularity. People are interested in getting back to their roots and learning how their food is produced. Consequently, many producers are seizing this opportunity to provide a farm life experience by offering tours of their farms. Farmers are also interested in seeing and learning about the technical side of other operations and many farmers are willing to share their ideas and techniques.

After a farmer has determined that their farm has something unique to offer, there are still many questions to answer. Bringing forward those questions and helping the farmer assess their readiness for this venture is the purpose of this factsheet.

Points to consider

Questions to ask before proceeding

- What does my farm have to offer? Step back and look at your farm from the eyes of someone who lives in the city. Take an inventory of what you and the area have to offer potential visitors.
- Do I have any products to sell to visitors or will I simply be showing them the facility? Will there be any spin-off revenue for the farm as a result of a tour?
- Are there any other attractions in the area that would interest a tour group? Can I partner with any of my neighbours to provide a whole day of activities for visitors? If a partnership can be formed with other farmers or even within the community, the spin-off effects will benefit all involved.
- Do I want people visiting my property on a regular basis? This requires a large commitment on the part of family to be available when they otherwise may not have been.
- Do I enjoy talking to groups of people? A fear of public speaking is common, but there are many self-help guides available to you. There is also support from within the community. An example is the Toastmasters organization. Becoming a member of this type of club can help you gain the confidence you will need.

- Am I prepared to do the extra work required to prepare for a tour? Tours typically last 30 minutes to one hour or more, depending upon what you have to offer. Preparing for a tour can often take two to three times longer than it takes to actually provide the tour.
- What size of group can I handle? Can a motorcoach or bus holding 45 to 55 people access my property and turn around easily? Are there bridges, road weight restrictions or structures that bus drivers need to be aware of? Is there a suitable place to park a bus or several vehicles?

Family buy-in

Because this venture affects your whole family, make sure family members are included in the designing of the business, as well as the delivery and co-ordination of the tours. Let them be a part of the brainstorming sessions. They may have some ideas that haven't been considered.

Target market

Who do you want your clientele to be? It is important to determine this at the outset. Many people can provide technical information to other working farmers, but are unable to adjust their presentation style to accommodate seniors or children. If you are planning to offer a hands-on experience, different people will be attracted than if you are simply speaking to them about your operation.

Advertising

Determine how people and tour companies will find out that your farm is available for tours. Will you rely mainly on word-of-mouth or will you prepare formal forms of advertising? If brochures are prepared, who will they be delivered to – seniors associations, livestock associations, 4-H groups and tour companies? The answers to these questions are directly related to whom you have decided on as your target market. Do you want to consider offering complimentary orientation tours to associations and tour companies so they can find out what you have to offer?

Safety and risk management

Ensuring safety for guests during a farm tour is paramount. Many dangers exist at a farm operation. These need to be brought to the attention of tour participants. This can be done in a couple of different ways.

Clear signage

Clearly indicate on signs throughout the facility any potential hazards which may exist. These might include uneven ground or low doorways. Also clearly indicate where visitors are not allowed to go on your operation.

Clearly outline expectations

As yours is an operational farm, visitors need to understand at the outset what your expectations are regarding their safety. Prior to arriving, ensure that any requirements for special clothing (i.e. closed toe shoes, sunscreen and bug spray) are communicated to the tour operator. Upon arriving, make visitors aware that signs, locks and rope barriers are used throughout the facility for their safety and protection. Handle all transgressions diplomatically.

Liability insurance

Contact your local insurance carrier to discuss obtaining additional liability insurance. The risks associated with providing walking tours or horseback tours are different, and result in different insurance premiums. Safeguarding your operation from lawsuits needs careful consideration. You may also want to consider seeking legal advice in this area.

First aid

In addition to having someone on hand who knows basic first aid and CPR, always have a well-stocked first aid kit available.

Charging a fee

Many farmers believe there is nothing about their farm that would interest others enough that they would want to pay to see it. Recognize the experience you are providing is a product; an item of value for which there are associated costs. Some factors you need to consider are:

- the amount of time it took you to develop the tour
- your expertise
- the experience you are offering your visitors
- associated costs

It is reasonable to charge a nominal fee. A fee of \$1 to \$5 per person is common. The fee covers the costs associated with the time and effort you have put into the tour. Generally, if a tour is long (an hour or more) or if a snack is provided, the cost is near the upper end of the scale.

You may be able to expect some revenue spin-off for other products that you have for sale on your farm. For example, if you are raising livestock, you may be able to sell your government-inspected meat or other value-added products to some of your visitors. However, many tour companies are reluctant to pay an additional fee for the tour when they co-ordinate technical tours that may result in large sales for the farmer.

Facilities

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” As an ambassador for the farmers in your area it is important that your facility has curb-appeal and is neat and tidy. Before the tour group arrives ensure that any garbage is picked up and unsightly items are removed.

It may also be important to provide washroom facilities. This depends upon the number of people in the tour group and the length of time they spend at your farm. If the majority of your tours are bus tours, it may not be necessary to provide an additional washroom as most coaches have washroom facilities. However, if you are providing snacks or if people have been touching animals, they may want a place to wash their hands. Do you have a washroom available outside of your home? If not, do you want 40 to 50 people using your private bathroom? In some cases, you may want to rent portable units.

Provide easy access and well-marked walkways for the areas of your farm where people will be walking. Ensure you have good lighting in the yard and near doorways. If your facility is not accessible for persons with disabilities, this needs to be made clear before the tour. Check that you have secure fences between farm animals and visitors.

Ensure that you have adequate garbage cans available.

Staff

Well-trained, friendly and helpful staff help to promote the positive impression you are trying to portray. Ensure that a sufficient number of staff are available on the day of the tour to help with the tour and answer questions.

Legal considerations

Make sure you are complying with all municipal by-laws before you proceed. Work closely with your municipality to ensure there are adequate directional signs on major highways and at major intersections.

Farm-fresh products for snacks will add to your goodwill and help create a positive impression of your operation. However, if you are providing food or snacks, check the health regulations by contacting the regional health authority or public health inspector.

Availability and timing of tours

Clearly define in all your advertising or through discussions with tour operators when you are operating tours. Include the months or seasons of the year, as well as times of day. Clearly state that all tours must be arranged ahead of time. Determine how you are going to handle cancellations. You need to determine how much notice is required before a cancellation fee is charged.

Preparing the presentation

It is important that the person giving the tour presentation can comfortably speak to a group of people. It is acceptable to have your key points written on cards so that you don't forget to cover all the items of interest.

Be flexible when preparing your presentation. Develop a tour program that is flexible enough to be altered to meet the needs of each group. For example, your language and presentation style may be different for seniors than it is for school children or working farmers who are interested in technical information.

Select three to five points that you want to reinforce throughout the tour. Educate the tour group about the industry and the way of life rather than romanticizing the farming industry. Speak about what you know and limit your comments to your farm.

The tour

Greet all tour groups as they arrive. Part of the first impression you leave with your visitors relates to how they were greeted when they arrived at the facility. If possible, use the public address system on the bus. This allows you to be heard by all the members of the group and grants you a captive audience.

Explain who you are and outline all safety precautions and expectations of the group. Prepare your visitors for regular farm environmental hazards such as odours, flies, dust or loud noises.

Provide those on the tour with some history about the farm before you move into the presentation.

Allow plenty of time for questions. These can be answered as they arise, or at the end of each part of your presentation. Remember that these people are seeing many things for the first time. This is your chance to inform and educate.

Walk at a pace that is appropriate to the group's size and age. It may be necessary to have an additional staff member at the back of the group helping to keep the group together.

At the conclusion of the tour, ask for an evaluation from the tour operator/contact person. Use these comments constructively and look for ways to improve on future tours.

Escort the tour group back to their transportation. Thank them for their visit and encourage them to return.

References

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Technical resources

Julieanne Schmidt
Jac's Journeys Travel Service
Tofield, Alberta

Susanne Eugster
Creative Western Adventures Ltd.
Calgary, Alberta

Laurel Griffin
Out West Agricultural Tours
Cochrane, Alberta

Anne Roberts
Westwind Tours
Calgary, Alberta

Marsha Scharf
AgriTours Canada Inc.
Guelph, Ontario

Vic Lund
AgriTours Canada Inc
Cardston, Alberta

Jim Marshall
Anderson Tours
Sherwood Park, Alberta

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Elite Wild Boar Farm
part of: Barnyard Adventures
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