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AGRI-TOURISM: Farm Visitors Can Be Your Key to Success

by B.Z. Smith, creator of The Foothill Farmlands ARTS Festival

Orchards laden with fruit. Sunflowers turning toward the light. Woolly sheep and cattle grazing nearby. Farming is a good life! So why not share this pastoral scene with others?

Increasing numbers of family farms are unlocking sustainable income through Agri-tourism. These events bring visitors to tour working farms. Not only do your guests enjoy a day in the outdoors, but they go home with a new understanding of life and work on a small farm. At the end of the day Ag-tourists go home with bags, boxes and buckets of delicious home-grown delights, perhaps picked with their own hands. Agri-tourism events are in high demand all around the country. This growing industry provides good reasons for you to consider an agri-tourism project for your small farm.

SEVEN BASIC STEPS—By following these key steps well in advance of your first "Day on the Farm," you'll be opening doors of potential earnings and welcoming new customers:

- ? Pick Your Date
- ? Get Permits & Insurance
- ? Recruit Loyal Volunteers
- ? Plan Your Program
- ? Prepare Your Site Preparation
- ? Market & Advertise
- ? Know Your Budget Plan

PICK YOUR DATE— Check out your community's calendar to see what else is going on around the year. You have to know your competition. Your local newspaper, community website or chamber of commerce should have published calendars. Try to pick an otherwise slow weekend, or "piggyback" on a big community event when you know visitors will already be in your region. A Christmas tree farm could be ready to ride the tail of your town's annual Santa parade or a Christmas Crafts Faire. You could even work with the big event's promoters to do a little co-operative advertising. Ask if you could pass out coupons or fliers at the larger

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event to draw folks to the farm. Building alliances is always a plus in Agri-tourism.

Of course, choose a time of year when your farm is at its visual peak! You don't want to invite visitors to the iris farm in August when there's nothing to see. And let's skip the turkey ranch tour anytime after Halloween. Those farmers and the ill-fated birds are pre-occupied!

It's wise to give yourself plenty of lead time to plan and prepare. Allow at least eight months to get everything in order. Even for a small event, you'll appreciate the advance time.

Setting your date is a pivotal decision. Sometimes it seems impossible to find the perfect spot, but you'll want to optimize your chances of success. Once you've established your corner on the calendar, then folks will be planning their activities around YOU!

GET PERMITS & INSURANCE—What if you had everything planned and purchased only to discover that your county government was going to stop you? Counties vary from state to state on what they require for hosting special events. Do you need a special use permit? What about beer & wine licenses if you plan to sell libations? Does your Road Department need to be informed to plan for increased traffic? And don't forget the Health Department for food permits. Most counties will gladly help you find the answers to these questions. In our county the Planning Department and Economic Development Offices will answer questions.

Be sure to contact your insurance provider as soon as possible. You'll want to make sure that your policy has adequate liability coverage. Some insurance companies provide for the purchase of special event policy riders. Find out early and build that into your overall budget plan. You want to be sure you're protected just in case your horse steps on some little kid's foot!

About three months ahead of your big day, make the Neighbor Courtesy Call to let them know about your plans. Maybe they'll want to join in, or maybe they'll plan a day away. Either way, letting them know your plans is the neighborly

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thing to do, and it will set a precedent for other
activities.

RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS—Who are the hard-working folks who want your farm to be a great success? Invite them to help! Friends, family, neighbors, even your local scouts and 4-H kids are all good sources of help. With volunteers to help with preparations and staffing for your Farm Day, you can keep your time and energy on the Main Event—Your farm and its products.

The scope of your day's program will determine how many volunteers you may need. In our community we've hosted several Agri-tourism events. At one event we needed only three volunteers to staff an information table. At another we had over 30 volunteers helping with arts activities, parking, set-up, clean-up and much more.

Is there some creative planner in your cadre of pals? That person could help outline the whole event from start to finish. Maybe you'll even discover a Farm Day coordinator. With careful long-range planning, you can anticipate your volunteer needs. When it's all over, just remember to find a special way to thank your helpers. For our biggest event, I even had a volunteer to help me write thank you's!

PLAN YOUR PROGRAM—What are your visitors going to do? How long do you want them to stay? One quick rule of thumb is to "Keep the kids happy!" If the little ones are having fun, Mom and Dad will stay. And you know what will happen if Junior is crying or bored: That car will drive away fast. So, the second rule of thumb is "Leave them wanting to come back next year!" If people are smiling on the way out (and if you've captured their contact information), you can expect them to return again.

What makes good programming? It's all up to your own imagination! When our community produced its first major Agri-tourism event, The Foothill Farmlands ARTS Festival, our seven participating farms offered garden tours, horse-shoeing demonstrations, wine production tours, hayrides, Master-Chef demonstrations, children's art activities, storytellers, jazz concerts and Plein Aire artists in the orchards painting. Your creative ideas and community resources are your only limitation.

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A word of caution, based on personal experience: Avoid going overboard. Each extra activity is its own layer of stress, expense, planning and potential confusion. And keep in mind, the longer your guests stay, the more comforts you'll need to provide: Food, water, bathrooms and shade. But you'll be ready because you've thought about...

PREPARE YOUR SITE—Safety first is the cardinal rule for all events on your property. Second comes comfort. Some basics to keep in mind are

- ? Entrance and Exit routes with easy access onto roadways.
- ? Safe pathways for walking—Fairly even ground will help people get around easily. Be sure all your tools and hoses are safely tucked away to prevent accidents. What about wheelchair access?
- ? Parking—If you expect more than 10 cars at a time, design a Parking Plan.
- ? Handicap Parking near your events.
- ? Restroom Facilities—Port-A-Potties are not that expensive. Fortunately nowadays they are pretty tolerable. Thank goodness! Try to get portables with handwashing features or handicap access.
- ? Daytime events only at first. No need to worry about lighting.
- ? Have a rain contingency plan.
- ? Have drinking water on hand and a first aid kit.
- ? Consider picnic tables and a shaded area.

MARKET & ADVERTISE—Today's marketing opportunities are abundant, but do require some strategic planning. Everything from postcards and fliers to websites, blogs, "Facebook" pages and other social networking sites all help you get the word out. Plus, print media and local radio stations still have strength, especially in rural communities. A nice feature article or radio interview goes along way. Whenever possible, try to establish a rapport with a local reporter or newscaster. If that person takes a special interest in your farm, you'll be way ahead in the P.R. game. The earlier you start your marketing campaign, the better. Organizing a small press kit that tells your farm's story will be a rich resource to use year after year.

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Ideally you'll launch into the Agri-tourism business within parameters of your over-all business plan. You should have an idea of who your target audience is and what you hope they'll buy. Select a target community for your print media advertising campaign, perhaps the closest urban center. Our community of Tuolumne County, CA, is just an hour's drive from an urban center of approximately 400,000 people. At a recent Farm Tour Day, most of our urban visitors came from that region. Radio spots, newspaper ads and a nice newspaper feature story caught their interest.

And then there is location! One of our local farms, Hurst Ranch, sits right on a state highway. A month before our first Foothill Farmlands ARTS Festival we stretched an attractive vinyl banner on their pasture fence. Hundreds of cars saw that banner every day, and it created a lot of buzz.

Your program plan needs a good spin. Perhaps you'll have a local celebrity chef or a favorite band on hand. Be sure you've set your activities and a tentative schedule before you start advertising. The day's activities will be a big draw, so you want to include that information in your publicity campaign.

Don't forget to contact your local Visitor's Bureau! They exist solely to get people to visit your community. Since, you're providing fun things for tourists to do, they should help spread the word.

Marketing can be very expensive, so remember to take advantage of all free and/or inexpensive publicity outlets. Folks need to hear or see things at least 10 times before they make a commitment to come. Persistence, creativity and patience give good results.

KNOW YOUR BUDGET—Whether it's a huge Harvest Festival or a small gathering of farm friends, an event's budget drives the day. Your best bet is to keep it simple, especially at the outset. Each step will have inherent costs. Keep track of your expenses and your new profits.

There are some basic fix costs. Permits and insurance riders will be your first expenditure. Marketing and

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advertising will come in second, and will be your largest cost. When it comes to your site preparations, plan for the long-run investment. Whatever you do, don't skimp on safety because that never pays! Creature comforts, like porta-potties and drinking water, are a high priority.

Your programming budget will be your most flexible expense. It's a good idea to look for the cheapest way to go in your first year or two, then let the program grow. Look for folks who can donate time or talents. Local musicians or artists might enjoy a day on your farm to promote their own work.

Of course, costs vary from one region to the next. Work up a preliminary budget in advance of making real commitments. Wherever possible, try to work with local suppliers. They'll be grateful for your support of the local guys. These kinds of contacts can blossom into good partnerships. And in all likelihood, on your Farm Tour Day, your local suppliers will be waiting at your barn door with a van full of kids, cousins and grandmas.

BUILD COMMUNITY COALITIONS & PARTNERSHIPS:

Who else in your community would benefit from Agri-tourism? How can you work together? Our community has an association of farmers, [Farms of Tuolumne County \(FOTC\)](#), that works to help farmers share advertising, marketing and promotion. [FOTC](#) also networks with other local organizations, the regional Farmers' Markets, our local Farm Advisor, the Ag-Extension office, and our county governmental agencies to be advocates for our small farms.

FOTC and its volunteers coordinate our annual Farm Tour Day. They also partnered with our local arts council and the [U.S. Forest Service on the Stanislaus National Forest](#) to present The Foothill Farmlands ARTS Festival. We involved many artists, musicians and performers. Plus, the Stanislaus National Forest offered two historic agricultural heritage sites to teach the public about High Country cattle ranching.

Whatever the over-arching theme may be, each farmer determines his/her own program and site preparations. Marketing, advertising and volunteers are all shared.

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IN THE END...KEEP THE FAMILY ON THE FARM:

Plowing into Agri-tourism is a commitment of time, money and creative energy. Cooperative projects with other individuals and organizations in your region can share the workload and cost. Agri-tourism is a great way for you to build loyal clientele for your farm products. You will help promote your region and its farm culture. You will be a positive force to create sustainable income as visitors come to enjoy your farm and your community. Year after year, an Agri-tourism venture can grow, helping you keep the family farm!

Visit these website for more information on Agri-tourism, or "Google" your state for Agri-tourism interests:

California Agricultural Tourism Database:

<http://www.calagtour.org/>

Farms of Tuolumne County:

<http://www.farmsoftuolumnecounty.org/>

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Services:

<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/entertainment.html>

Apple Hill Growers' Association: <http://www.applehill.com>

SIDE-BAR-APPLE HILL IN CAMINO, CA:

To see a dynamic example of Agri-tourism check out [Apple Hill](#) in El Dorado County, CA—One of California's premiere Agri-Tourism destination, second only to the world-famous Napa Valley Wine Country.

About 40 years ago¹⁶ farmers and some UC-Davis researchers picked this foothill region as a perfect place to grow apples: Perfect weather, soil and terrain. Plus, Apple Hill is just a 30-minute drive from a teeming metropolis, California's state capitol, Sacramento. Built-in customers!

Now 55 farms welcome tourists all year long, and the Apple Hill Growers' Association reports their success to be a multi-million dollar industry for this small rural community. What began as Fall apple harvest tours has now grown into a year-round tourist attraction. Visitors drive the 30-mile loop of farms. Not only are there apple farms, but now there are wineries, berry farms, stone fruit orchards, lavender farms, a sheep farm and even a Spa to relax after a busy day visiting the farms. In addition, the Apple Hill Growers works with El Dorado Arts Council to

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bring artists, musicians and performers out to various
farms to everyone's delight.

To travel to Apple Hill, contact the Apple Hill Growers'
Association where you'll find an event calendar, maps and
lots of links to amenities.

(END)