

CPA Info #158

February 2009

Lessons Learned from the Agritourism in Action Educational Bus Tour

Megan L. Bruch
Marketing Specialist

On November 11, 2008, 54 agritourism operators, farmers interested in agritourism and industry partners embarked on a 3-day tour of 11 agritourism operations in Tennessee, Kentucky and Indiana.¹ Called the “Agritourism in Action Educational Bus Tour,” the event enabled participants to network with agritourism operators who participated on the tour or served as hosts, gain ideas about new products and attractions and learn how to better manage and market their operations. This fact sheet summarizes nine of the main lessons learned on the tour.



Tour participants at Honeysuckle Hill Farm in Springfield, TN.

1. Start small and grow smart.

Several of the operations visited have been in business for decades and have numerous attractions and a large number of visitors. Entrepreneurs from each of these larger operations stressed that the business did not grow

to its current size overnight. Tips on how to grow included:

- Do only as much at a time as you can do well
- Plan and evaluate...evaluate and plan
- Listen to customers for ideas on ways to expand
- Make sure expansion plans meet the operation’s mission, values and goals as well as compliment what is already offered
- Figure out what works...if something does not work, then move on to another idea

2. Utilize resources creatively.

Tour participants saw first-hand many creative uses of available resources at the operations visited. This allowed entrepreneurs to utilize existing items to help them reduce costs and maintain agriculture authenticity. Examples included the use of:

- An empty greenhouse as a school tour classroom
- A grain bin as a children’s play area with a corn box, etc.
- A barn as a classroom, retail store, farm market, restaurant...
- Tobacco sticks as part of a fence
- Old equipment as photo opportunities, product displays, decorations and landscaping



Beautiful landscaping utilizing antique planter at The Berry Patch and Garden Center in Austin, KY.

¹ The operations visited on the tour included Honeysuckle Hill Farm in Springfield, TN; Jackson’s Orchard and Chaney’s Dairy Barn in Bowling Green, KY; Montgomery Farms in Underwood, IN; Stream Cliff Herb Farm in Commiskey, IN; Huber’s Orchard Winery and Vineyards and Joe Huber Family Farm and Restaurant in Starlight, IN; Hinton’s Orchard and Farm Market in Hodgenville, KY; Dennison’s Roadside Market in Horse Cave, KY; The Berry Patch and Garden Center in Austin, KY; and Habegger’s Amish Market in Scottsville, KY.

3. Work to earn repeat customers.

The importance of repeat customers was stressed by many of the host entrepreneurs. Many of these operations are off the beaten path and work hard to earn a good reputation. Suggestions on how to earn repeat customers included:

- Offer high quality products, service and experiences
- Offer unique products and experiences
- Develop a brand for your enterprise
- Develop a customer database and use it to communicate with customers

4. Dazzle customers with displays.

It was apparent that the operations toured spend a lot of time and effort developing dazzling displays. Visually-appealing, functional displays will help products sell.



Attractive product displays at Huber's Orchard, Winery and Vineyards in Starlight, IN make shopping a delightful experience.

(More information on developing effective product displays is available on-line at <http://cpa.utk.edu/workshops/directfarmmarketing/index.html>)

5. Waste not.

Several operations visited on the tour direct marketed fruits and vegetables from their on-farm retail markets. They have utilized second-quality and excess produce to make jams/jellies, salsa, ice cream, breads, wines and more. Products that were once waste are now adding value.



Value-added products produced by Hinton's Orchard in Hodgenville, KY.

6. Want not.

A couple of operators mentioned the challenges they were having in starting to charge for an activity or service after offering the same activity or service for free. It is important for entrepreneurs to carefully evaluate pricing strategies as some things can be difficult to change once customers are used to them being a certain way.

7. Details may make it or break it.

Attention to detail adds value to the farm visit experience. Good attention to detail observed on the tour included:

- Appeal to customers senses (cleanliness, visual appeal, enticing aromas)
- Tie the operation's theme/image together (artwork, trash can covers, materials used)
- Develop locations for photo opportunities (include farm name, Web site and year)
- Provide information to customers
- Make staff available, friendly and knowledgeable
- Utilize directional signage
- Make announcements to customers by using a public address sound system
- Create something unique/memorable

8. Get involved in the community.

Community involvement has benefited several of the operations toured by helping them create awareness of their business and earn a good reputation in the area. Entrepreneurs encouraged tour participants to join local and regional chambers of commerce and tourism organizations, cross promote other agritourism and tourism operations and include other local products in retail markets.

9. Communicate with family/partners involved in the business.

Agritourism operations are often family owned and may include many family members. Having open and frequent communication among these family members is vital according to successful entrepreneurs. Some tips for successfully working with family members included:

- Involve everyone in planning and decision making processes
- Keep everyone informed of current activities and future plans
- Develop and communicate a succession plan

Programs in agriculture and natural resources,
4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences,
and resource development.

University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture,
U.S. Department of Agriculture
and county governments cooperating.

UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.