

CREATING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

TIPS FOR AGRITOURISM ENTREPRENEURS

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INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from traditional agriculture to agritourism can be quite a challenge. One major challenge is successfully creating the product customers (tourists) want. Traditionally, the product a farmer produces is rather obvious. For example, a farmer may decide to grow soybeans based on the farm resources, underlying demand and expected prices, and then work to produce a high-quality, high-yield crop in the most efficient manner. For agritourism entrepreneurs, the overall consumer product is less tangible. As with all forms of tourism, the product for agritourism operators is the customer experience.

Regardless of the type of tourism, people generally travel and vacation for one or more of the same set of reasons:

- Spend time with family or friends
- Rest and relax
- Have an adventure
- Improve their health and well-being
- Take a break from their everyday lives
- Learn something new
- Reminisce (nostalgia)
- Mark a special occasion (such as a birthday or anniversary)

As an agritourism venture is planned or refined, it is important to remember that people do not visit a farm or participate in agritourism only because fresh produce is grown there or because they can walk through a corn maze. People visit for the overall experiences. Those who choose to visit an agritourism operation are likely seeking a new and enjoyable experience, unlike what happens in their everyday lives, and may be unfamiliar with the farm lifestyle. They may be seeking a connection to a local farm, to understand and appreciate where their food comes from, to gain a better understanding of the farming lifestyle, or to reminisce about childhood experiences on a farm. They also may be searching for travel opportunities closer to home that can be accomplished in a day or two.

When developing an agritourism operation, it is important to carefully craft the experiences you create for your customers. This publication will help you understand the experience economy and view your farm from the customers' perspectives. It provides tips on how to add value to your agritourism product by creating meaningful customer experiences and purposely telling your story.



UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

Welcome to the Experience Economy! As visitors have more and more choices about where to go and what to spend their time and money doing, it is important to make your business unique and provide experiences customers will perceive as valuable and worthwhile. Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest our economy has evolved into an experience economy, meaning consumers seek out unique and engaging experiences and are willing to pay a premium price for the right experiences. The authors use coffee as an example to illustrate the experience economy and describe how businesses can create unique experiences and gain higher profits by enhancing the experience. Coffee beans, as a commodity, sell for approximately \$1 per pound. When those beans are roasted, ground and sold in packages as a good, the consumer price rises to 5-25 cents per cup. The coffee can be served at a diner, with service (someone brews and serves the coffee) for 50 cents to a dollar per cup. However, coffee can also be served in an espresso bar or upscale coffee shop for \$2-\$5 per cup. Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue that buying the cup of coffee in the last scenario involves individualized ordering, personalized creation and consumption of the coffee in a warm and inviting atmosphere. The cost of this cup of coffee includes the experience.

As an entrepreneur moves from marketing a commodity to offering an experience, they are customizing a product to better fit customer needs and differentiating a product from others in the marketplace. This makes them more competitive in the marketplace and better able to demand a premium price for their product — the customer experience.

By creating meaningful experiences, businesses can engage and guide customers to help them connect more personally with the business, form memories and even transform. Transformative experiences are highly customized, personalized experiences where customers do something unique or learn something new in such a way that has a positive, lasting impact on the customers. A transformative experience helps a customer “grow.” Through meaningful experiences, agritourism has the potential to guide customers to transform their perceptions of agriculture and food and fiber production systems.

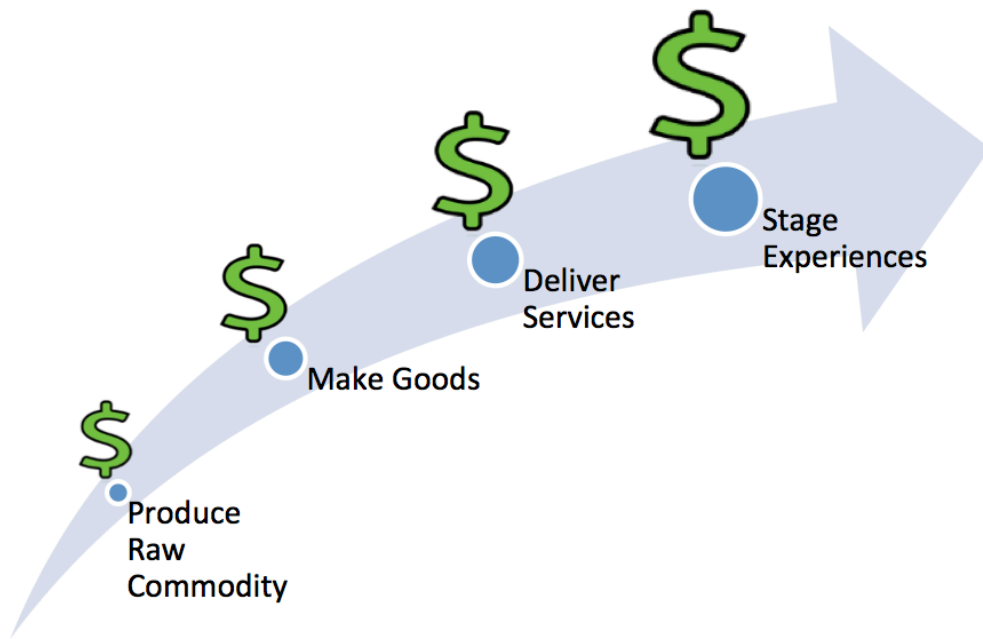


FIGURE 1. *The Progression of Economic Value (adapted from Pine and Gilmore, 1999)*

Consider an example from farming and agritourism. Traditionally, a farmer might sell his or her corn as a commodity to a grain elevator. The same farmer may explore adding a service component to the corn by bagging it to feed squirrels and other wildlife, bundling corn stalks together, or offering dried ears of corn for decoration. Alternatively, the farmer may grind the corn into corn meal and grits. The price of a bushel of corn increases when it transitions from a commodity to a good. If that same farmer allowed visitors to come to the farm to pick their own corn for wildlife feed, purchase fresh corn cakes to eat on site, learn about how corn is produced on the farm, or work their way through a game in a corn maze or shoot a corn cannon, the farmer is likely to garner \$7-\$15 per visitor in admission fees and product sales. The farmer has transitioned from being a price taker, selling his or her commodity to a wholesaler at market price, to a price maker by staging a memorable and, perhaps, transformative experience for guests at a premium price. This unique experience is more valuable to customers and sets the farm apart from other attractions or recreation options in the area.



PRODUCE RAW COMMODITY



MAKE GOODS



DELIVER SERVICES



STAGE EXPERIENCES

FIGURE 2. *Agriculture-Agritourism Example of the Progression of Economic Value*



VIEWING YOUR FARM FROM THE CUSTOMERS' PERSPECTIVE

"To sell Jill Jones what Jill Jones buys, you've got to see your products through Jill Jones' eyes." -paraphrased, author unknown

The quote above, often used in marketing classes, demonstrates the need to understand the customers' perspective. It is important for farmers to view the farm not through their own perspective, but through the eyes of tourists, and think about why people might want to visit the farm and what unique, educational and fun experiences can be created. Many tourists in today's economy have "been there and done that." As a result, tourists seek unique and authentic experiences, personalized attention and activities tailored to their needs and interests.

Pink (2006) suggests that for businesses to remain competitive, they have to see their businesses differently, in a more creative and thoughtful way. He also suggests that some of the most successful businesses today have developed "six essential aptitudes," or talents, and use them to enhance the customer experience.

THE SIX ESSENTIAL APTITUDES (ADAPTED FROM PINK, 2006):

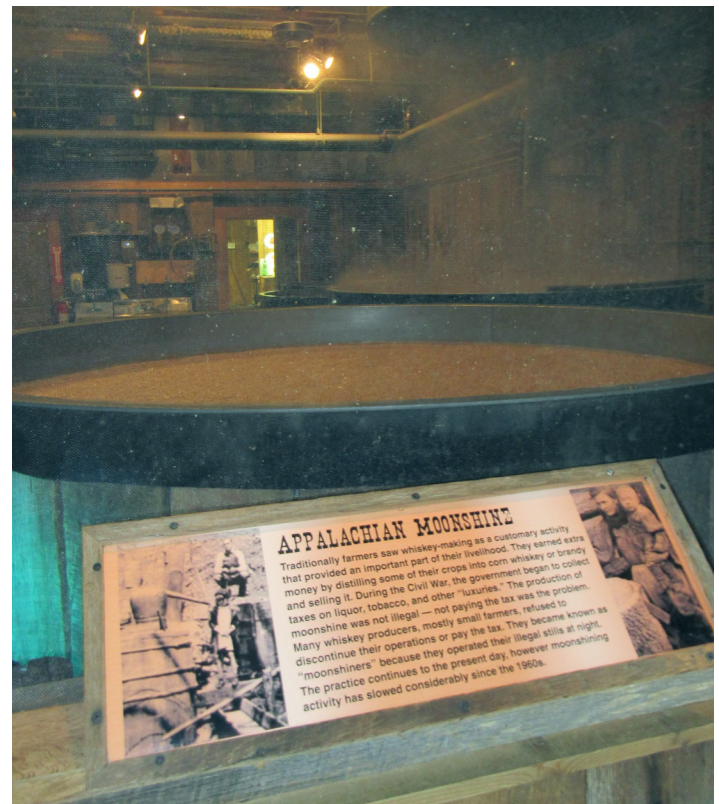
1. DESIGN, not just function.

- Businesses can no longer merely create products or services that are functional. They must create something that is also beautiful, whimsical or emotionally engaging.
- Think about places where you have enjoyed being. What was it about these places you liked? For example, was it the scenery, the way the staff treated you, the ambiance created by the decor or the music in the background? Are there ways you can incorporate similar features on your farm? Additionally, think about places you have been that you did not enjoy. What was it about these places you did not like? For example, was it the lighting, crowded spaces, the way the staff treated you, an undesirable smell, clutter or filth? Are there ways you can learn from these negative experiences and ensure you do not create similar situations on your farm? The goal is to learn from others. Try to put your own unique spin on what worked well in other places and avoid what did not.

(ABOVE) *Lucky Ladd Farms in Eagleville, Tennessee, goes the extra mile to create a unique ambiance of fun and wonder with special landscaping touches throughout the farm. These touches are consistent with the experience and image they want to create for customers. What special touches could you add to your farm that are consistent with the experience you want to create?*

2. STORY, not just argument.

- We live in an era of information and data overload. To cut through all the clutter, set yourself apart by telling a compelling story — your story — rather than only trying to persuade customers. The power of the story sets you apart from the competition.
- For example, the history of your farm is unique to your farm. No other farm has exactly the same story. Share fun, interesting or significant stories about your farm, your animals or your history with visitors.
- It is important to be consistent with your roots — focus on what your farm is about and how you can transform that into both an experience and a story for which consumers are willing to pay.
- Visitors often enjoy hearing and asking questions about the farm, history, crops, livestock, products, equipment, production practices and so on. Not all farmers enjoy interacting with people. If you do not enjoy talking to visitors, make sure you have staff members who are knowledgeable about the inner workings of the farm and enjoy interacting and sharing the farm story with visitors.



Visitors to Ole Smoky Tennessee Moonshine in Gatlinburg can see the product being made firsthand and read signs about the history of the product and the production process. What is your story? How can you share it with guests?

3. SYMPHONY, not just focus.

- Successful businesses see the big picture, focus on relationships and pair new combinations of products and services to meet the unique needs of its customers.
- For example, a traditional grain farmer might focus on efficiently producing a quality crop with high yields while keeping input costs in check. When venturing into agritourism, it becomes important to look at a farm as a destination and consider everything tourists might need for an enjoyable experience. This might include places to sit and rest, access to food and beverages, spaces for children to play, clean restrooms, baby changing stations, locations to purchase products and souvenirs and excellent customer service.



This map of Granddaddy's Farm in Estill Springs illustrates how the Dixon family has developed a symphony of products, services and amenities for guests. It is displayed to help guests find the fun activities and quality farm products offered and also points out where guests can find food and drink, restrooms, first aid and picnic tables. How can you create symphony to meet your visitors' needs?

4. EMPATHY, not just logic.

- Not only is it important to understand farming and business concepts, it is equally, if not more, important to understand what draws people to the farm as visitors and what they are seeking. It is vital to build relationships with visitors and demonstrate you care for others by being a good community member and supporting local endeavors. This requires the ability to imagine yourself in their shoes, as someone visiting your farm as a guest seeking a fun and entertaining experience. Show your visitors you care about them and you care about the community in which you live.
- For example, ask your visitors questions, such as where they are from, what their family is like, what they usually like to do for fun, and what brought them to your farm. Take photos of your visitors having fun or invite visitors to submit photos they took at your farm and post them on the walls, your website and social media for others to see. Consider donating to or sponsoring local charitable events. Take photos of your involvement and share those with visitors as well.

This sign at the entrance to Oakes Farm welcomes guests and thanks them for spending the day at the farm. It also invites guests to share their pictures on Facebook and Instagram by using hashtags on their posts. How can you welcome guests and thank them for visiting? How can you build relationships with customers?



5. PLAY, not just seriousness.

- While there is a time to be serious, it is important to remember that visitors have chosen a farm for their leisure experience. They are seeking an opportunity to escape the monotony of their everyday lives and have fun.
- It is important to show visitors you are having fun opening your farm to guests, and you are encouraging them to have fun with you. Make sure you and your staff smile, laugh and have fun with guests. Doing so helps visitors have fun, too.

Bryan Keller from Keller's Corny Country takes his job seriously as Kernal Keller. He is the kettle corn cook and takes his job to a whole new level. He might be stirring with a passion or playfully announcing a hot, fresh batch of the sweet, salty treat. All the Keller's Corny Crew members work to create a corny experience for the farm's guests. In this photo, Bryan is making a batch of kettle corn at a neighboring farm for a special tour for agritourism operators. How can you incorporate play into your agritourism operation?



6. MEANING, not just accumulation.

- Given that we live in an age of material abundance, when traveling or spending a day having fun, many people look for ways to connect with others and find meaningful fulfillment in their lives. Positive enjoyable experiences help to add meaning to our lives and enrich our understanding of the world around us.
- For example, create opportunities for families to have special moments together. Perhaps that means adding picnic tables for a family to have a picnic together, inviting families to play together, or creating fun photo opportunities. Or, if you donate to special or worthy causes, consider asking your visitors to join you. For example, if you donate some of your produce to a local food bank, consider offering your visitors the opportunity to purchase some of your produce (at a reduced rate) to be given to the food bank as well.

Autumn Acres has created a beautiful fire pit complete with benches and a photo opportunity for families and groups to enjoy. This space gives guests a meaningful experience and opportunities for lasting memories. How can you provide meaningful and memorable experiences on your farm?





CREATING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Creating meaningful experiences for visitors is not simply about entertaining them, it is about engaging them. A successful agritourism business should create experiences to engage its visitors on several levels and in different ways. Think about how you might create experiences to help engage visitors in the following ways:

1. Create ways for visitors **TO BE**.

How can you create inviting settings for your guests to just “be”? Focus on creating a setting encouraging visitors to enjoy their surroundings and let go of all their responsibilities and stress. Design spaces and settings encouraging visitors to come, sit down and stay for a while. Consider creating inviting, comfortable, interesting and authentic spaces. For example, include rocking chairs, hammocks, a wood burning stove or farm-related decorations.

(ABOVE) A comfortable and inviting scene has been created for visitors to Fender's Farm. Tasty treats may be purchased to enjoy in this warm space. The fireplace and rustic decorations beckon guests to come in, sit down, relax and stay for a while.

2. Create things for visitors **TO DO**.

Can you create activities to allow guests to become completely immersed in their experiences? Are there things participants can actively do? Think about ways you can encourage guests “to do” something outside of the ordinary.

(RIGHT) A mother, son and niece are engaged in watching, petting and feeding various types of animals at Lucky Ladd Farms in Eagleville, TN. Their smiles and looks of wonder illustrate their joy and fascination with the experience.



3. Create opportunities for visitors TO LEARN.

Are there educational experiences you can create to allow guests to absorb information and events in an interactive manner? Opportunities for guests to exercise their “creative muscles” can be created by posing questions to guests and allowing guests to ask questions, as well as encouraging active participation in educational activities. What do you want guests to learn from the experience? What information or activities will help engage guests in the exploration of knowledge or skills? Can you tell about the history of your farm? Or interesting stories about your farm?

(RIGHT) Guests at the annual Tojo Creek Gourd Gala in Lebanon, TN see various types of gourds and are given a demonstration of how to make a birdhouse and other items from gourds. These guests had the opportunity to buy beautiful handcrafted items, learned about the steps involved to create them, and got to meet farmers who raised them and artists who created the items. Tojo Creek Gourds offers workshops on the farm to walk guests step by step through the creation of a gourd art item.



4. Create opportunities for visitors TO HAVE FUN.

Create opportunities for guests to smile, laugh and enjoy themselves. When guests are entertained, they are not really doing anything but responding to the experience. If guests are entertained, if they are having a good time, they will want to stay longer. What can be done to entertain guests and encourage them to stay? How can you make experiences more fun and enjoyable?

(BELOW) Guests at the annual Oakes Daylilies Festival in Corryton, TN are enjoying live music provided by a trio of musicians. Some visitors sit and relax up close to the music while others enjoy the delightful sounds as they tour the gardens and select purchases from the nearby greenhouses.





TELLING YOUR STORY

If visitors are coming to your farm, it is important to remember you are creating an experience for them, even if you do not realize it. Additionally, even if you are not purposefully telling a story, a story is being told by you, your employees and your farm.

- What experiences are being created on the farm? What stories are being told by you or your employees? (Intentionally or unintentionally?)
- What stories are your guests telling about their experience on your farm? (Remember, positive word-of-mouth is the most effective form of promotion.)
- What stories would you like to tell? What ways can you tell that story?

When constructing buildings, roads or bridges, experts create a detailed, engineered plan to accomplish the task. Similarly, visitor experiences can be engineered. Engineering an experience begins with deciding what impressions you would like visitors to have of their visit to your farm, and then working to ensure your visitors have experiences that match those impressions. The products you sell, the services you offer, the employees you hire, the physical layout of your farm and the signage you display can provide signals and cues creating the experience you want your visitors to have. In other words, through purposeful planning and attention to detail, you can tell your story and help your visitors have positive, fun and enjoyable experiences while visiting your farm.

Below are some other strategies for creating memorable experiences:

1. Theme the experience. Is the agritourism experience family-friendly? Food-oriented? Focused on crops or animals? If so, be sure to carry the theme throughout every aspect of the experience, and reinforce the importance of those themes.

(ABOVE) Sweetwater Valley Farm uses their dairy theme everywhere from their farm museum to their dairy tours to their retail cheese shop to their promotional materials. What theme fits the experience you want to reinforce for your customers?

2. Provide positive cues. Consider incorporating music, highlighting charitable events and causes the farm has sponsored, and illustrating how the farm is environmentally friendly. Highlight all of the positive aspects of your farm and all you do on the farm. For example, if you donate to a local charity or special event, share photographs of your involvement, or create a sign stating “Proud sponsor of XYZ event.” Create signs highlighting all of the good agricultural practices you engage in.

(RIGHT) This sign informs visitors to Ole Smoky Mountain Moonshine about a charitable organization they support and invites customers to get involved. How do you support your community? How can you invite your customers to get involved?



3. Eliminate negative cues or move them to a designated area. Ensure that smells that may be unpleasant for guests are downwind of areas where guests might congregate. Keep unattractive visuals out of the eyesight of guests.

(LEFT) The cleaning crew left their supplies near the front entrance to this retail shop, creating an unprofessional atmosphere. What are some possible negative cues you need to be aware of at your farm? How can you eliminate them?



4. Mix in memorabilia. Do you have photos or equipment telling the story of your farm to display for guests? Can you tell the history of your farm or share insights into how things were done on the farm “the old-fashioned way” and how and why technology or processes have evolved? Do you have examples to show to your guests?

(RIGHT) Gentry's Farm in Franklin displays historic farm equipment and structures with signage telling the story behind them to visitors. How can you tell the story of your farm, your family or agriculture on your farm?



5. Engage all five senses. Never underestimate the importance of sights, sounds, smells, touch and tastes. Consider offering product samples such as different varieties of peaches or apples¹ or other opportunities for active participation that will engage your visitors.

Green Door Gourmet offers cooking demonstrations and product samples in their retail store to engage customers with all five senses. How can you engage all of your customers' senses?



¹Operators should be sure to understand and follow regulations pertaining to food sampling. Tennessee operators should contact their local health department for more information.

CONCLUSION

Creating a fun, enjoyable, entertaining and educational experience for guests can be one of the most rewarding aspects of an agritourism venture. The experience created for your guests should be one that is unique and reflective of your personality, your farm's personality and the story you want to tell and share with others. Unfortunately, there is no tried-and-true recipe for creating a great experience. However, with a creative imagination, a friendly personality, a strong customer service ethic and attention to detail, a worthwhile experience can be created for guests. Happy, satisfied guests will come back again and tell their friends and family.

Of course, additional challenges come into play as additional services are incorporated and experiences are offered. There are no guarantees of success, and farmers should develop business, marketing and risk management plans to more fully understand the potential costs, risks and rewards of offering experiences on the farm.

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