

Promoting Your Agritourism Business

Part of a How-To Guide for Successful Agritourism Enterprises

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Introduction

The basis of any promotional program is product excellence. If your product or operation is excellent, promotion will enhance your sales. If your product is poor, all the advertising in the world will not help. So, before you do anything to promote your business, take a good, unbiased look at your product. Ask family, friends, and even strangers to give you truthful feedback. Is your product excellent in all regards? If it is not, delay the start of your business until you have perfected your product.

Let's assume your product is perfect in every way and you absolutely know people will love it if they give it a try! How do you let the public know what you have to offer and, more importantly, get them to try it? By promoting your product! Promotion is defined as *helping to grow or develop in order to succeed*. You did not begin this venture to fail. After all the preparation you have done thus far, you *want* to be successful. We will be using the term "promotion" and "advertising" interchangeably, as they are basically the same thing.

New businesses often have limited operating capital. When creating their budget, they focus on expenses such as rent, utilities, insurance and other basic costs of operation because they do not want to overextend their resources. They often fail to allocate any of their budget for promoting their operation because they feel advertising is too expensive. They feel that promotion is something they can do later, once they are established. Don't fall into this trap. It is imperative that you establish a solid customer base as soon as possible. Promoting your business immediately upon startup will increase your chances. Advertising is an investment in your business in that it will bring customers to you. Always remember, you advertise when money is tight and you have few or no customers.

Once you are established and business is good, you may be tempted to advertise less to save money and concentrate on your repeat customers. However, your market is constantly changing. Old customers die or move away. New potential customers who have never heard of you move in, so you will always need to promote your business..

There are numerous ways to do this and all are not expensive. Signage, paid advertising, self-generated publicity, discounting, product sampling and word of mouth referrals are just some of the ways you can draw customers to your operation. Your promotional plan will most likely include a combination of several of these. Your goal in all promotion is to pre-sell your product and to make it very easy for your customer to find you.

Whatever your business, be creative in developing your advertising and enlist a professional if needed. If cost is an issue, you may want to enlist the help of college students who are pursuing an advertising/marketing career. Work with local schools and colleges in setting up an intern program so that students can get a hands-on experience working with you for course credit. Always remember that you are the best salesperson your business has. After all your hard work in getting it started, don't be afraid to brag on it! Also, remember that people are often reluctant to inquire about your product. Be

friendly and initiate the conversation to talk with anyone who pauses at your display or shows interest.

Signage

A Business without a sign is a sign of no business. This should be the very first promotion you do. You would be amazed at the number of new businesses that overlook the need for a sign explaining what they do. After all the time, money and planning you spent developing your business; you do not want your customers having to search for you! You want to include the essentials, but be careful not to overload it with information.

Here are a few pointers regarding what to include on your sign:

First, state the name of your business, LARGE enough for people to see it. . If your business's name does not make it obvious what you do, add a brief explanation. For example "Joe's Farm" tells your customer who you are, but not what you do. A better sign would be "Joe's Farm" "Pick- Your- Own Vegetables". You should have pride in the name of your business. But what you want your customer to remember is what you offer and how to reach you. Make your sign as professional looking and as informative as possible. If you have a logo, include it and give it as prominent a position as your business name. Unless you designed it yourself, you probably spent a fair amount having your logo created. Utilized to it's fullest; it serves (or should serve) as immediate recognition of your business.

Include your hours of operation. There is nothing more frustrating than driving to a business and finding it closed. List the days and hours when you are open. If you are a seasonal business, say so. It also never hurts to state *when you are closed*. You would think people would understand that if you aren't open, you're closed. However, we all digest only part of what we read so it never hurts to spell it out.

Include a phone number where you can be reached. Drive-by customers will often call later. You want them to be able to talk to you.

The overall size of your sign may be dictated by your location. If you are in town, you may have ordinances to follow. But, if you are out of the way, you want a sign large enough to easily be seen, and possibly directional signs along the way.

Paid advertising is usually the first strategy one thinks of in terms of promotion. In advertising, you are trying to call attention to your product and make people want to try it. There are many advertising mediums. Radio, television, magazines, direct mail, yellow pages, billboards and the Internet can all be effective. Just remember, to increase your odds of someone seeing or hearing your message, it must be consistently repeated. You

cannot do sporadic advertising and expect good results. Paid advertising can be expensive, but effective and repeated advertising can yield results.

Publicity is non-paid advertising for your product. It can produce big results without a big expenditure because your cost is mostly in time and materials. Be creative in thinking of new ideas. You can contact local television stations and newspaper Lifestyle, Community, or Food Editors. Offer them tours, interviews or samplings and ask that they write articles about your enterprise. Offer free tours to local schools or church groups. Speak at local functions and civic meetings. Sponsor seminars or demonstrations. Place roadside signage. The list is endless, but all of these will put you in the public eye.

Discounting is most often done in the form of coupons or quantity discounts. Discounting can help you attract price-sensitive and first time customers. It can also help you to track the effectiveness of paid advertising. The downside of discounting is the expense of producing and distributing coupons combined with reduced profit on sales.

Product sampling includes a free trial of a product or service. It is especially effective with food products. The advantage is that sampling the product often produces immediate sales. Event sampling can often be through hosting various groups or organizations.

Word of Mouth referrals can be some of your most effective advertising, but you should not rely on this as your sole method of promoting your business. You do, however, want to work toward creating positive word-of-mouth by making sure all of your customers are satisfied.

Whatever promotional methods you choose, continually monitor their effectiveness. Talk one-on-one with your customers and ask them how they discovered you and why they decided to patronize you. In addition, use written questionnaires to determine which type of advertising attracted them and what specific information sparked their interest. You may often find that your customers found you through a combination of your advertising methods.

Assess each promotional method you use to determine your *cost per customer*. This will give you the true “cost” of your advertising. After scrutinizing your promotional methods, identify which are working the best for you. Then modify your promotional plan to maximize your efforts.