Agritainment

The concept of family-oriented attractions is not limited to popular landmarks and can include small-scale and part-time farmers or residents with underutilized land looking for an alternative business venture. “Agritainment” is simply providing an opportunity for entertainment in an agricultural setting. Visitors or customers can provide a wide range of revenue-generating opportunities for farms. Agritainment creates the opportunity to entice visitors to your farm, provide education about agriculture, and increase your overall profits. Nationally more than 50,000 farms with farm receipts of nearly $1 billion reported at least a portion of their income as coming from agritainment.

Before starting an agritainment enterprise, you need to consider several business management issues. As with any new business venture, there will be start-up costs (land and facilities) and additional expenses for permits, labor, taxes, and insurance. Also, consider your comfort zone: Do large crowds or a lot of noise and activity make you uncomfortable? Can you multitask and manage effectively? Do you want the responsibility of running this type of business? Do you want the public to have access to your property and business? For more information on starting or diversifying a business, see Agricultural Alternatives: Starting or Diversifying an Agricultural Business.

The first step of considering an agritainment enterprise should be to check whether your proposed land use conforms to your local zoning regulations. If your land is enrolled in a program that lowers your property taxes as long you keep it in agricultural use, agricultural reserve use, or forest reserve use (like the Clean and Green Program in Pennsylvania), you should contact your local tax assessors to determine whether the enterprise you are considering will affect your tax status. The original Clean and Green legislation was amended in 2005 to provide that an owner of agricultural or forest reserve land who permits or authorizes a recreational activity on the tract will not lose eligibility for the program because of this recreational use. The act defines these uses to include, among other things, typical activities such as hunting, fishing, swimming, and recreational and agritainment activities. Agritainment activities are defined as farm-related tourism or farm-related entertainment activities that are permitted or authorized in return for a fee on agricultural land for recreational or educational purposes.

Examples of agritainment enterprises include pick-your-own fruits and vegetables, farm markets, festivals/fairs, interactive animal displays, corn-maze enterprises, for-fee fishing, bed and breakfasts, and farm-stay vacations. Many agritainment enterprises have an educational component that may include a farm tour or on-farm museum visit.

The goal of an agritainment operation is to provide entertainment or service the public cannot find elsewhere. It is important to be creative so that your operation is different from any of the other forms of entertainment within your

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local area. For example, if your operation is near a tourist destination, do not offer the same form of entertainment that can be found there. The goal of your operation is to bring a specific type of service to the public, in addition to increasing your income and value to the community.

As with any new venture or enterprise, developing a business plan is another important first step. If you currently have a business plan, revisions will be necessary to consider the impact of the new enterprise. If you have not written a business plan for your operation, more information can be found in Agricultural Alternatives: Developing a Business Plan. Having a written business plan will help ensure that you have considered all issues pertaining to operating an agritainment enterprise and can help in obtaining financing. The business plan will also highlight your marketing plan and help you decide what you will need to charge to be profitable. The business structure and risk management section of the written plan will also assist in making sure your assets are protected.

Marketing

With an agritainment business, marketing and advertising are separate issues. You should concentrate on how to attract customers to your operation and hold their interest for as long as possible. An agritainment operation should offer something for everyone in the family—for example, educational programs for the parents and childcare for the very young, hands-on or video-related activities for teens, and a play area for younger children that is made of appropriate materials that complement your agritainment theme.

Your agritainment operation will need to be eye-appealing, easy to navigate, and, above all, safe. Landscaping should be simple but attractive. The first impression of the customer will be lasting and should be positive. Signs should both direct and inform customers while they are on the property. Determine a central theme for the enterprise and make sure to carry it throughout.

While developing your marketing plan, you should take into account the demographics of your area and how you plan to reach your potential customers. Marketing also means promoting return business. If everyone in your immediate area comes once and not again, you will struggle to remain in business. Providing a fun and educational experience with good value for the money is essential for long-term success.

Advertising

You also need to consider which methods of advertising you can afford and which will best promote your operation. Local newspapers often write human interest stories about local businesses, which can create public awareness for your operation without having to pay for advertising. If you are in a more remote area, a professional advertising company may be an option to consider. They will know how to reach the most potential customers for the least amount of money spent.

After beginning your agritainment enterprise, a short customer survey can determine which types of advertising are most successful. The survey should be completed by your customers before leaving and include questions regarding advertising. It is important that the survey be as simple and unobtrusive as possible. If you do not use a written survey, talk to your customers and question them personally. Mailed surveys and counters at the entrance may also provide valuable feedback about the effectiveness of your advertising.

Paid forms of advertising may include local radio stations, chambers of commerce, billboards, trade associations, and the Internet. Radio advertisements should be targeted at the age-groups that are your primary potential customers. You may need to advertise on several stations to reach all of your potential customers. Joining your local chamber of commerce can be an important source of new customers. Many chambers of commerce include member information in newsletters and materials distributed at chamber events and tourism welcome centers.

Trade associations may have newsletters and publications distributed through channels that will attract many potential customers that you might not otherwise reach. Paid newspaper and magazine advertising will also reach a wide area. The Internet is an excellent method of advertising if structured correctly. An effective website is attractive, easily accessible, contains all necessary information on when you are open, directions to your farm, and is constructed so it is listed very high on search engines. If you do not have the skills to design the website yourself, a professional web designer can be hired at a reasonable cost. If managed properly, social media can also be effective, low-cost way of advertising.

Billboards can be a means of advertising and directing customers to your operation. They should also include hours of operation, directions, and as much information as can be displayed and remain attractive and eye-appealing. Be cautious of using billboards to advertise during the off season unless you advertise when you plan to open for the season. Also, changing hours from those advertised will confuse your potential customers and may cause them not to return when you are open.

Forms of Entertainment Agriculture

In general, there are four types of enterprises: direct sales, education, recreation, and vacation. Most of the current types of enterprises will fall into these categories and will be similar in structure and concept; however, your imagination or ideas may lead to the development of other enterprises. Examples of common agritainment enterprises that fall into these four categories are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct Sales to Consumers</th>
<th>Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm markets</td>
<td>Farm tours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pick-your-own</td>
<td>Seminars</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cut-your-own</td>
<td>Interactive animal displays</td>
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<td>Christmas trees</td>
<td>Youth camps</td>
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information about food preparation as part of the activities.

To enhance the customer experience is to offer recipes and be sure to include these costs in the price. An additional way the containers may be various types of boxes or bags, but provide containers for harvesting and transporting product. Designating specific areas will increase customer safety and inform which crops or varieties are ready for picking.

Pick-your-own or cut-your-own operations are a great way to get a labor force that pays for working on the farm. While you have the public at your farm, offering other activities will keep them on the farm and expand the income potential for your operation. For more information about roadside markets or direct marketing of fruits and vegetables, see Agricultural Alternatives: Developing a Roadside Farm Market and Fruit and Vegetable Marketing for Small-Scale and Part-Time Growers.

Proper location of activities in the operation will contribute to the overall success of the venture. For pick-your-own fruit or vegetable operations, set aside a portion of the farm. While you have the public at your farm, offering other activities will keep them on the farm and expand the income potential for your operation. For more information about roadside markets or direct marketing of fruits and vegetables, see Agricultural Alternatives: Developing a Roadside Farm Market and Fruit and Vegetable Marketing for Small-Scale and Part-Time Growers.

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Providing space for youth and their advisers or families to camp and learn about agriculture is another opportunity. Providing areas for 4-H camps or establishing your own youth camp could provide a rewarding experience. You should provide space for indoor and outdoor activities and sleeping areas. Having hiking or riding trails and bonfire pits will enhance the camping experience.

Recreation
The forms of recreational enterprises you offer the public on your farm are only limited by your imagination and the ability to sell your idea to the public. How you charge for access to venues or bundle activities is up to you. The most important consideration is to provide a variety of activities suitable for a broad range of ages.

By hosting a product-oriented or seasonal festival on your farm you can determine whether your farm may be viewed as an attraction. A good starting point for a festival is to hold a concert with a popular local music group and charge a fee to at least cover your expenses. This will help you decide whether you want to expand this form of enterprise. In an area with concentrated agriculture, having a festival during harvest time may be an excellent promotional activity for your operation. A strawberry, peach, apple, or some other fruit or vegetable crop festival may be a way to attract the public to your farm. Providing music, food, and entertainment constitutes a festival and, with advertising and promotion, can add extra profit to your operation.

Corn mazes are also an excellent form of entertainment agriculture. Corn is not the only crop that can be used for a maze; with some imagination and creativity almost anything can be used. There are many options for both the design and promotion of mazes. You can design, produce, market, and advertise the maze yourself or contract with a company to provide these services for you. Designing and making the maze will require you to become familiar with new technology, equipment, and marketing strategies. If you contract with a company, they may charge a percentage of your income from the maze as payment. They may also structure the contract to provide portions of these services, and the payment should reflect the amount of service provided.

The maze should be designed to provide a challenge for all ages; this may require constructing several mazes to accommodate various ages. By providing a safe place for children to play just outside a for-fee maze, more children could be enticed to the maze. If there is a long wait for your corn maze, the play area provides a source of entertainment and distraction for children, making any wait for the maze more tolerable.

For-fee fishing is another growing industry. The fees charged vary depending on the amount of services offered to the customer. You may rent the poles, charge for the bait, and clean and prepare the fish for transportation. Each additional service provided will add value to the experience and your income. If you are considering this type of enterprise, you will need to contact the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission to obtain a license for a “Class A” lake. Fees for these licenses range from $100 to $500, depending on the size of the lake.

Paintball courses can also be established on your farm. With paintball courses, you will need wooded areas or structures for the participants to hide behind. Again, items like paintballs, guns, protective equipment, and accessories may be provided by you for additional fees. Paintball courses need several acres but work very well on land that is not suitable or desirable for traditional agricultural production.

Farm Vacations
Farm stays and bed and breakfasts are nice for short-term visitors. The visitors may stay at your farm and visit attractions or attend meetings in the surrounding community. Upon returning from their activities they are looking for a quiet place to relax, which could be your farm. You may provide breakfast, accommodations, and possibly trails for them to walk and enjoy the nature and wildlife in your area.

Farm vacations and guest houses may also provide opportunities for the guests to work on the farm. Be sure to make your customers/guests aware of dangers around the farm and permissible activities. Guests may feed animals, help put hay or straw into the storage facility, or participate in whatever other activities they feel comfortable doing. While it may be nice to have people paying you to work, match the activity with the health and skill level of the guest. It is not a good idea to have someone who has never been close to farm equipment and unfamiliar with proper safety procedures operating expensive and dangerous machinery.

Your guests may prefer to just observe the jobs and practices on the farm. This provides an excellent opportunity to educate the guests about your operation. Remember, guests who are unfamiliar with agriculture will ask many questions. Be courteous and explain how and why you do what you do. Their enjoyment will encourage them to return to your farm and they will tell their family, friends, and co-workers about their wonderful stay, which promotes your operation.

Provide facilities separate from your own house if possible. This will help prevent the public from entering your private living space. Separate facilities will also help ensure peace and privacy for the guests. In addition, providing separate facilities may also reduce liability issues.
Risk Management
When you invite the public onto your property for any event, you should have a carefully considered risk management plan. This risk management plan should include safety inspections, a business structure that limits your liability, and adequate insurance. All of these will have an impact on the success of your business should there be any accidents. For more information regarding managing liability on a farming operation, see *Agricultural Alternatives: Understanding Agricultural Liability*.

Before opening for business, have a friend walk through your enterprise to help you look for safety hazards. It is easy to overlook potential safety hazards on your operation because you may not consider them dangerous. For example, an unlocked storage shed may contain items you do not think are hazardous, but a young child on the property may be intrigued by the unlocked door and enter the shed and become injured.

If pesticides are used on your operation, make sure you follow all label directions concerning worker protection and hold your operation to a higher standard of safety. If you are using pesticides on a pick-your-own operation, it is important to strictly adhere to the reentry intervals (REIs) on the pesticide labels. Consider increasing these REIs to provide an even larger margin of safety for your customers. If you are trying to reduce pesticide use, another option is to offer disease-resistant varieties. Even if your customers are not entering production areas, consider applying pesticides when they are not present on your property.

Keeping accurate, up-to-date records on your agritainment enterprise is important to helping you manage risk. Record and document all pesticide applications and animal health issues that may arise. Likewise, keep records of any accident that occurs while guests are on your property. You should record who was injured, how they were injured, the method of treatment, and pertinent information regarding how the accident occurred. At a minimum, your insurance company will need to know this information, so consult your insurance agent for their recommendations.

Record keeping is also critical to the success of your business. You should know how many people visited your farm each day, the number of each item sold, and what venues were visited. Good records will help you analyze the business to determine future options or prospects. There is no substitute for good records in business analysis.

Business Structure
The structure of your business may have a large impact on your liability if someone becomes injured. You should retain a lawyer when structuring your business and follow their advice to minimize your risk. You may want to seek several opinions and discuss the impact of business structure with someone currently involved in an agritainment venture. Seeking their advice early in the development stages can save time and money and provide you with an idea of what may work for you. For more information regarding business structures, see *Agricultural Alternatives: Starting or Diversifying an Agricultural Business*.

Insurance
The insurance plan you currently have for your farm will not be enough for an agritainment venture. If using multiple business structures, each level in the business structure should carry its own insurance. You may also need event insurance similar to the insurance carried by county fairs or other traditional entertainment businesses. Your insurance salesperson can recommend coverage levels necessary for the entertainment you provide. For more information concerning farm insurance, see *Agricultural Alternatives: Agricultural Business Insurance*.

Additional Points to Consider
There are many additional points to consider when planning an agritainment venture. Any land-use regulations or restrictions currently in place must be followed. These restrictions can include the amount of surface able to be paved or noise levels after a certain time. Some municipalities also collect an amusement tax. This is a tax for each person through a gate or who attends what the municipality considers an amusement.

If you are offering food for sale in Pennsylvania, consult the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture for their requirements regarding food preparation and storage. You will need adequate and appropriate seating and tables, a shelter that is suitable for the season, and a system to deal with trash and food waste. When checking your zoning regulations, make sure that food establishments are permitted. Also, adequate restroom facilities will be very important to your customers. Restroom facilities can either be in a dedicated building or portable toilets, but they must be maintained, cleaned, and sanitized on a regular basis.

Providing informative and attractive signs for guidance will enhance the experience for your customers. Signs help keep customers within designated areas, and well-maintained pathways also provide guidance and safety. If you are open after dark, adequate lighting is needed for the premises and parking areas.

Because you will be open to the public, you will need to comply with all regulations concerning handicapped or disabled persons. Your facilities must be designed with this in mind as it will affect your agritainment enterprise from the parking to whatever form of agritainment you provide. You will need to provide handicap-accessible parking and paths. Check with your state and local municipality to determine how you can comply with these regulations.

Remember, you are inviting customers to your operation. Provide a variety of entertainment to encourage return visits. Recognize that you will need to change or alter activities from season to season and year to year and constantly strive to provide value for the customer’s dollar. Always be courteous and inviting, as this will enhance the experience. You are providing entertainment with the opportunity to educate your customers about agriculture. Consider and promote friendliness, courtesy, and safety with your employees because they will be in contact with the public, too. Listen to your customers and provide what they want or need and you will have a successful entertainment business to add to your income and business story.
For More Information


Websites

Agricultural Marketing Resource Center
www.agrc.org/agmrc/business/startingbusiness/agritourismagritainment.htm

Alternative Enterprises and Agritourism: Farming for Profit and Sustainability Resource Manual
www.economics.nrcs.usda.gov/resmanual.html

North Dakota State University
www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/ced/resources/farmranch/introduction/htm

Penn State Extension Guide to Farming in Pennsylvania
extension.psu.edu/farm-business/guide

Virginia Cooperative Extension
www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/agritour/310-003/310-003.html

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