

3. Customer Relations

Farms are in the farming business, but agritourism is a people business. Your new job as an agritourism destination is to host visitors who will also be customers. The idea is to have them so engaged in your farm that they will gladly hand over money for the experience of visiting your farm. This chapter describes ways to make the visitor experience as good as possible without a lot of wasted effort and without becoming a slave to the enterprise.

Day-to-Day Visitor Service

Each day your agritourism enterprise is open, you should establish a set of standard practices, to make sure customers will all have a good experience.

Before opening:

- Make sure road signs and parking signs are easy to see
- Check bathroom supplies
- Sweep up any debris in visitor areas
- Check inventory of refreshments and sales items (if applicable)

During open hours:

- Every customer is greeted with a smile, even if it's has not been a day worth smiling about. Welcome them to the farm using the farm's name: "Hi there, welcome to Goose Hill Farm."
- Wear name tags or apparel to make it clear who is part of the staff at the farm.
- Let each customer know you will help them with any questions about the farm or the tourism activities they have come for. Customers will usually wait for instructions, yet some will assume they know where to go and what to do for fun on your farm.
- Stick to the opening and closing you have posted.
- Pay attention to constructive comments from visitors. Phrases like "well, we finally found it" hint at the need for better signs.

Hours of Operation

Even though your farm is probably a 24-hour operation most times, your agritourism entity will have defined hours and days of operation. Some farms select just one weekend each year to host visitors, such as for an educational open house or farm festival.

Visitors appreciate regular business hours, such as "12 Noon - 8 PM, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday" mostly because they are easy to remember. Avoid changing your hours of operation frequently or posting hours that vary greatly from day-to-day, which can confuse even dedicated customers.

Visitors have become accustomed to seeing a conspicuous sign or flags in front of wineries and ice cream stands to indicate they are open. It can be tough to determine whether an agritourism destination is open just by looking at the farm from the road, so use similar signs or flags to give a strong visual cue that you are open for their business.

Handling Difficult Customers and Naive Questions

People who visit farms are doing so in part because they want to learn more. What they do know has come from the evening news, children's storybooks, movies, and distant memories from family farms they visited years ago. Since their knowledge is limited, they may ask odd questions about things that seem obvious to you.

Each customer is a living and breathing marketing opportunity for your agritourism operation, so it is important to show respect and empathy for their point of view, no matter how naive their question. Restate their question to start, and then give them a brief answer.

Here are some examples:

A visitor at a dairy farm points to a field of oats and asks, "How is your hay growing?"

Farmer: "We do grow hay, and use it to supplement our grain crops. In fact, this is a field of oats, one of those grains we use in our feed. And, by the way, our hay crop is a little short this year, so we may have to buy more feed."

At a u-pick apple orchard, a customer asks about picking apples, "I'd like some green apples for making pie."

Farmer: "You might enjoy the Northern Spy apples we will have later in the season. If you would like, we have a list of our apples and whether they are good for baking, sauce, or fresh eating throughout the apple season. This way, you can buy the best apples that are in season for pie-making."

Near a young goat pen, a parent tells their child, "All the hornless goats are females," not realizing both sexes had been debudded.

Farmer: "If you are looking at their horns, it is actually hard to tell which are boys and which are girls. We want them all to be safe around the feeding pens, so we prevent the horns from growing on both the boys and the girls, or the bucklings and doelings as we call them."

It is possible that you will be faced with very challenging questions from visitors about animal welfare, the use of chemicals on crops, animal medications, and other touchy topics. If someone with an extreme point of view visits your farm, you must realize you will not change their mind. They have a lot of emotion in their point of view, are not likely to compromise, and are basically very difficult to have on the farm. If you find yourself confronted with an extremist on an issue related to your farm, one of the only decent things you can do is to act conciliatory.

Here is an example:

A visitor to a dairy farm open house confronts the herd manager about tail docking. "You should be ashamed for the pain and mutilation you are causing these animals! I am going to call for a humane

officer to investigate your farm immediately!"

Herd manager: "Sir, I understand your point of view since I am around these animals all the time. Tail docking is not illegal and helps to keep our milk supply clean and safe. Your point is well taken, I have thought about this quite a bit myself. In fact, I oversee the process to make sure it is done as well as possible for cow comfort."

It will take time and practice to become a good people-person. If that is not your forte, find a family member or employee who is willing to be a point of contact for visitors.

On the whole, customers will be polite, receptive, and interested in your farm. Nonetheless, there are some that will create challenging moments in your day. With good service as a priority, along with instructional signs and a friendly approach, you will build positive visitor relations that result in repeat visitors.