

Marketing



Demand is growing among tourists and local community members alike for experiences that help them deepen their connection to the food they eat and the farmers who grow it. Bringing visitors to your farm can be a good way to promote your products and develop lasting connections with customers. Marketing on-farm experiences often has two layers: 1) promoting the

on farm-experience, and 2) promoting farm products or offerings once visitors are at the farm. Whether you're trying to sell cooking classes, farmstead cheese, CSA shares, a farm stay, or something else, this chapter will walk you through best practices in marketing. We hope you will find it useful for taking the next step in promoting your farm.

Who is Your Target Market?

Customers you identify as most likely to purchase your product(s) are your target market, so you need to understand who they are. What are their demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnic background, marital status, income) and personal information (interests, hobbies, values, attitudes, behaviors, lifestyle)? Where do they live and how do they access information? Are they neighbors? Tourists in a nearby town? Do they spend time on travel apps? Combine all this data to develop a single customer profile, then focus your marketing efforts on this profile.

The Five P's of Marketing

"Marketing is a process of ensuring that customers' needs are identified and met in order to generate value for the business." Strong marketing can set you apart and ensure that your outstanding products and experiences are enjoyed by those they are intended for. The "Five P's of Marketing" give structure to a marketing plan and encourage you to be inclusive as you consider your product, price, placement, promotion, and positioning.

PRODUCT

What you offer your target market

- Goods: Vegetables, meats, value-added products, maple, baked goods, handcrafted items...
- Experiences: Tours, classes, farm stays, dinners, tastings, playdates, festivals, weddings, retreats...

Remember *all* the "products" experienced by visitors, including:

- Signage
- Employee courtesy (each guest can influence 100 other potential customers)
- Visual appeal and cleanliness of the farm (view the "product" through the eyes of your customer)
- Convenience and availability of parking
- Recipes or information on how to cook/prepare farm products
- Ancillary services (e.g., accepting credit cards, food for purchase, bathrooms, accommodations for those with special needs: the elderly, persons with disabilities, parents with strollers)



Fat Toad Farm, Brookfield, Vermont (photo courtesy of Yelp)

Customer Service Tips

Guests may come to your farm as part of a wider tour of the area. To be most accommodating, make sure you and all of your employees can answer these questions:

- What other attractions should I visit while in the area?
- What accommodations are available nearby?
- Are there any good places to eat?
- Where is the nearest gas station?
- What is it like living in this community?
- Are there any special events happening in town?
- Are there retail stores nearby?
- What other farms can I visit?

In addition, make sure your staff can answer basic questions about:

- Farm history
- Farm size
- Farming practices
- Organic practices
- Use of GMOs
- Use of pesticides or antibiotics

SOURCE: Adapted from Michigan State University Extension Bulletin E-2064.

Can you accept credit cards?



If you have an Apple iPhone, iPad, or Android device, you can purchase a mobile credit card processor that allows you to swipe credit and debit cards as long as the device is connected to the Internet via a 3G, 4G or a wi-fi connection. Square is a popular credit card processor

with small businesses. Others include: Payline, Shopify, and ShopKeep. Google various processors to find comparisons and reviews and decide what's best for your needs.

PRICE

What you charge for your products

“ Charge charge charge! When we do farm tours, we charge. We do a sliding-scale fee. 95% of the time people pay on the top end, sometimes above what we’re asking.”

– Participant, 2013 Vermont farmer focus group

Setting an appropriate price point for each product or experience is critical. It’s also essential that you pay yourself fairly. There are two approaches to pricing: be a low-cost leader or provide a “value-based” product or service. As a low-cost leader, you are a margin-driven business requiring a high volume of sales. Your customers don’t expect quality; it’s a bonus, not a requirement. With a value-based approach, customers are willing to pay what they consider a fair value for the quality and unique features and benefits they anticipate from your product. “Fair value” varies with the target audience. What is considered expensive to one might be considered cheap to another. Therefore, you need to know what is driving *your* target market’s purchasing decisions and what *these* individuals consider a fair value for the features and benefits of your product so you can price your product accordingly and convey an message that will resonate with these customers.

To help you identify your starting price points:

- Know your full costs.
- Conduct a break-even analysis to determine your costs of production. See [Estimating Breakeven Sales for Your Small Business](#) from Purdue Extension or [Financial Management: Budgeting and Pricing for Agritourism](#) from Rutgers Extension.
- Don’t be afraid to charge a fair price for what your product is worth.

Understand the market landscape around you:

- Analyze competitors’ pricing
- Examine trade publications
- Conduct research on target customers’ willingness to pay for the products/experience

PLACEMENT & DISTRIBUTION

The distribution channels you use to reach your target market, or how visitors will access your products and experiences

With an agritourism business, one goal is to sell farm experiences which can only be offered on the farm. Another goal may be to stay connected with farmers through sales of other products after they have left your farm. Therefore, your farm itself is a distribution channel, and your website with an online shop, or online event registration system may be others. When inviting guests to the farm, make sure it’s safe and welcoming.



- Minimize risk of injury to farm visitors
- Maintain a high level of aesthetic appeal
- Make it easy for visitors to identify:
 - Driving directions to the farm (Make sure your address is accurate on your Google listing. If directions to your farm are different than what Google and Waze show to users, be sure to clearly state that on your website.
 - Days and hours of operation (Make sure your website, Google listing, and social media accounts all clearly include your hours of operation.)
 - Product availability for seasonal items
 - Restroom facilities
- Communicate with clear signage, as visitors may not be familiar with all farm products offered:
 - Place displays at eye level (don't make guests bend down), and mark all items in your displays
 - Offer preparation tips and recipes
 - Identify and direct visitors to areas that are open for pick-your-own
 - Provide clear signage identifying crops
 - Designate children's "pick-your-own" rows
- Provide benches for resting and areas where children can play.
- Consider accessibility issues and the needs of parents with baby strollers, elderly visitors, and persons with limited mobility

PROMOTION

The strategies you use to raise awareness of the product or experiences offered to your target markets

There are an overwhelming number of places where you can display your farm brand and many methods for promoting your farm's offerings. Prioritize your promotion strategies around *your* customers, based on what you learn from your customer profile. Where and how are they accessing information?

Look for opportunities to minimize expense and maximize investment. Do a cost-benefit analysis for each strategy to select the mix that uses your marketing dollars most efficiently. How many people will it reach? What does it cost? Will it directly generate sales or just build awareness? Focus on action-oriented messages that engage the audience.

“ We had a fellow who worked for CBS stay with us very early on. He said, ‘Whatever you do, make sure what they see online is what they see when they get there.’ That was such wise council.”

– Southern Vermont farm stay operator

Once you get customers to your farm, make it standard practice to ask them how they learned about you. This will help you determine whether your marketing is effective and where you need to make adjustments.

Spread the word about your agritourism offerings! Get attention through...

- Social media
- Press releases
- Road signage



Fat Toad Farm does an excellent job of keeping its social media pages alive with images of its goats, farmers, and products. It has strong engagement with fans and can keep its customers informed no matter where they live.

- Speaking engagements
- Community events
- Travel and tourism websites and blogs
- Radio or television
- Print media (newspapers, magazines, visitor guides)
- Rack cards/brochures
- Product packaging
- Branded merchandise (hats, cycling jerseys, totes, mugs, water bottles)
- Point-of-sale signage and displays
- Your website
- Industry memberships
- Community calendars and parent-oriented calendars and websites.

Keep your customers up to speed with:

- Your farm website — make it interactive! Have a photo gallery or videos where visitors can virtually tour your farm.
- Email newsletters. Use an email service (e.g., Mailchimp or Constant Contact)
- Direct-to-consumer mailings
- Social networking tools
- A blog on your website
- A guest blog — consider volunteering to be a guest blogger for journals and social media accounts associated with agriculture and tourism.

Explore paid and free marketing options, and be open to unlikely partnerships. These might include collaborations with a hotel in town, a ski resort nearby, a restaurant to whom you wholesale produce, arts and crafts organizations that could co-host an event, a neighboring farm, or your school. You might collaborate with area artists/professionals to provide complementary services, such as a yoga class or weekend retreat that includes preparing a healthy meal and a simple fiber arts workshop. Who within your network is a relevant partner to help market your farm, based on your customer profile? Nearby businesses or farms? CSA members? A chef with a wide following? These partnerships can offer you access to partners' markets, in addition to your own.



Friends at Shelburne Farms, Shelburne, VT, proudly wearing their branded t-shirts.

Feedback

Always respond to customer feedback, positive or negative. TripAdvisor has great customer service and can help you respond to a negative review if one crops up.

Valley Dream Farm



Valley Dream Farm in Cambridge, VT offers farm dinners every week during the summertime. They partner with Smuggler's Notch Resort to promote and register attendees for the dinners. The farm also partners with local chefs who are eager to cook for new guests, using the freshest ingredients. Valley Dream Farm is an example of how strong partnerships can yield delicious results!"

A Word about Photos

Photos can make or break your marketing efforts, particularly in this era of social media. When using photos in social media or in publication, remember...

- Only use images that are clear, not blurry.
- Crop photos to cut out unattractive piles of clutter or junk. Share images that showcase the clean and safe parts of your farm.
- Sometimes less is more. For example, when taking a photo, ask yourself, “Will the viewer be able to instantly know what my subject is?” Also, instead of sharing four photos of your just-picked carrots, choose the best one.
- When posting photos of food, make sure it looks appetizing. Ask yourself: If the person viewing the photo couldn’t read the caption or taste the meal, would he or she want to eat it?

“ High quality photography is really important for creating a brand, a look, and a trusting audience. Especially if you have put time and money into a website to draw customers, the importance of good images is paramount.”

— Natalie Stultz, Natalie Stultz Photography, South Burlington, VT

“ There seems to be a stronger interest from people coming to take pictures of whatever they find interesting. The more we add in the farm, like a mural, a piece of art, an interesting landscape design—anything unusual or unique draws people attention. In general there is a stronger longing to come to farms, to the countryside. It feels like they want to escape from all the crisis in the world, to recover a sense of belonging and sanity.”

POSITIONING

The process of creating a unique impression for the operation in the minds of your customers

Start by asking yourself, “How do I want my customers to describe my farm?” What adjectives would you want them to use? “Friendly”? “Casual”? “Sustainable”? This process is commonly referred to as brand development.

Once you’ve determined what kind of “brand” you have, make sure all your marketing materials reflect that brand. Keep a consistent look and feel across:

- Signage on the farm
- Advertising and promotional materials (print and online)
- Employee apparel
- Contact information — email, voicemail, etc.

Branding also involves messaging: conveying your unique selling points to your audience(s). To focus your message:

- Identify the key items that are unique to your farm business
- Narrow them down to 4–6 business points, succinctly describing what you offer
- Determine how they align with what your target audiences need or want
- Use these key points to develop your messaging across all of your marketing platforms

— Amy Todisco

Hartshorn Organic Farm and Vermont Food and Farm Tours, Waitsfield, VT

Elements of your “position”:

- Features that set your product or experience apart from your competitors’.
- Length of time your organization has been in business (e.g., a family-run farm for over a century)
- **Unique people** involved in your operation
- **Location** (e.g., in the heart of prime bird-watching habitat, within an hour of a lake, off the beaten path, etc.)
- **Size of your operation** (e.g., a small, intimate inn on a working farm; a 5,000-tap sugarbush, etc.)
- **Benefits** of your product or services (e.g., catch the peaceful spirit of the outdoors, restful solitude and tranquility, fulfill a childhood dream, etc.)
- **Services** of your organization (e.g., outdoor recreation for young singles, family programming, elderly friendly)
- **Price** (e.g., an affordable family adventure)
- **Reputation**
- **Lifestyle-defining aspect** of your offering (e.g., escape the ordinary, etc.)



Farm sign at Essex Farm, Essex, NY. (Vera Simon-Nobes)



Sugar House Creamery, Upper Jay, NY. (Vera Simon-Nobes)



Sugarbush Farm is a 550-acre hillside farm located in central Vermont. The Luces are the second, third, and fourth generations to live on this land. They produce cheddar cheese and maple syrup, and give sleigh rides in the winter and early spring. Today the farm is operated by Betsy, her husband Larry, and their sons Ralph and Jeff. It's the Luce family's goal to keep the farm a working, active operation.

In 2013, Betsy Luce was named Vermont Travel Person of the Year for her exemplary work encouraging travelers to visit the state, promoting the Vermont brand, and preserving, protecting, and promoting Vermont's many attractions. Their farm is open year round for tours and product sampling. Unlike some farms, they do not charge for tours.

"We try to make up some of this by having donation boxes near where we show our video and in our chapel. And of course we sell grain for our goats and calf which certainly bring in more than the grain costs," Betsy says. "When someone calls and asks the cost for a tour we tell them it's free until they find some of our products that they can't live without!" Luce notes that you can never tell when visitors arrive whether they will spend \$1 or \$150, so it's imperative that you treat all guests the same. Even those who can't carry product home that day may place a follow-up order later.

Betsy has learned the impact of having a family member give a tour, rather than a staff person. Guests want to meet a "real farmer," she says; "it makes them feel so much more connected. We

find that with bus tours we usually end up selling several hundred dollars more per bus if my sons or I do the tour rather than one of our employees."

One of the barriers Sugarbush Farm has faced is its location, which is three miles off a main highway, half of the distance on dirt roads. Temporary signs help people find the farm, and without them, many guests tell the Luces they would have given up and turned around. Once guests arrive, staff spend the extra time talking to them and drawing on a local map to show them places they can go after their visit.

TripAdvisor and Yelp have driven approximately one-third of their visitors to the farm, according to Betsy, but her strong local business network has been a key to getting visitors.

"We try to visit all the B&Bs, local stores that cater to tourists, hotels, gas stations, chambers of commerce, and visitor centers as often as we can. We usually show up with some cheese or maple syrup as a thank you for them referring business to us," Betsy says. "We work hard to post on Facebook every week and to send emails to all our tourist contacts when something special is going on like maple sugaring or sleigh rides, and we try to get our business mentioned in publications."

To learn more about Sugarbush Farm, you can sign up for their newsletter or visit their Pomfret farm outside of Woodstock. You'll be welcomed warmly, with a chance to take the maple walk through the woods, meet farm animals, and sample their cheese and maple syrup.

WRITING A MARKETING PLAN

A marketing plan is your roadmap to success. Components of the plan include: market research and analysis, marketing and financial goals and objectives, strategies you will implement to reach your target audience, budget, monitoring and evaluation, a contingency plan, and a checklist to put the plan into action.

The marketing matrix table on the following page is a tool to help you prioritize your marketing activities based on return on investment, time frame, and budget.

1. After completing the table, prioritize your marketing activities for the upcoming year based on those with the highest ratings. To determine if you will complete all the activities, look at the total projected budget. Does it come in within your anticipated budget for the year? If it exceeds your budget, downsize your list of activities by removing activities from the bottom up (removing lowest priority first) until you meet your budget. Keep the removed activities as options to reconsider in future years or in case something comes up and you need to replace one of your activities for this year.
2. Now that you have your list of activities, reorganize them based on deadlines so that you have a calendar to follow, and identify who is responsible for completing each action so there is accountability. Know who is focusing on what and when over the course of the year, and take the time to check in every so often to make sure the work is getting done.
3. At the end of the year, evaluate each tactic. Did it produce the desired results? What worked, what didn't, and why? What should you keep doing? What should you replace with something new?

The most important components of your marketing plan are following up, reviewing, and refining! Once you have put the plan into action, how did it go? Are you reaching your overall goals? Are you achieving your objectives for each marketing strategy? What is working, what isn't, and why? What should we replace with a new effort?

You may work very hard on marketing, but there will always be some things that are out of your control. The goal is to mitigate the risk by knowing as much as you can about your product, your audience, and the environment around you, then adapting your plan, product, and approach as you see things changing. Some of the things that may change:

- General economic conditions
- Competition
- Substitute or complementary products and activities
- Federal, state, and local laws and regulations
- Trends in target market characteristics, including age, income, and cultural and ethnic composition
- Evolving consumer preferences
- Social trends

Understanding the nuances of marketing may seem complicated at first, but chances are you are already doing several things to attract the attention of customers. Translating their attention into business, then developing loyalty with them is worth every moment of your time. Marketing is about communication, thoughtful planning, experimentation and adjustment. Make a plan for evaluating your marketing plan regularly and adapt when necessary so you will know if you're on track for meeting your goals.

Sample Marketing Matrix

Tactic	Deadline	Responsibility	Cost	Strategy: Penetrate Existing Market	Strategy: Expand Target Market	Revenue Opportunity (direct sales)	Branding Opportunity	Overall Rating
Develop logo	3/1/2015	Marcia	Graphic design/ ownership fees \$ XXX	X	X		X	3
Develop story	3/1/2015	Rose	Hours to complete \$ XXX	X	X		X	3
Develop marketing brochure	3/1/2015	Rose and graphic designer	Graphic design, marketing consultant, printing \$ XXX	X	X		X	3
Distribute brochure	5/1/2015	Rose, CTM, PPD	Hours to complete, postage, travel, distribution contracts (CTM, PPD, VT Welcome Centers, etc.) \$ XXX	X	X		X	3
Secure in-kind product donations, sponsorships	6/22/2015	Rose	Cost of goods donated \$ XXX	X	X		X	3
Attend Vermont Buy Local Market at VT Farm Show 2015	12/19/2014 registration due 1/28/2015 show	Lou and Stephanie	Hours, travel, cost of goods sold, cost of booth decorations/ equipment \$ XXX	X	X	X	X	4
Create t-shirt with farm logo for customers	3/1/2015	Rose and graphic designer	Cost of t-shirts \$ XXX	X	X	X	X	4
Train Staff	4/1/2015	Rose	Hours to complete \$ XXX	X	X	X	X	4
Develop on-site signage	5/1/2015	Rose and graphic designer	Hours to complete \$ XXX	X		X	X	3
Create list of prospective customers	2/1/2015	Rose	Hours to complete \$ XXX		X		X	2
Contact prospective customers	3/1/2015	Rose	Hours to complete, travel, cost of brochures, telephone, postage \$ XXX		X	X	X	3
Plan tastings at coops	1x/month starting in January	Lou and Stephanie	Cost of samples, supplies, hours, travel \$ XXX	X	X	X	X	4
Overall marketing budget			\$ XXX (Add up total costs)					

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- Develop a Farm Stand
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Assessing Your Farm for Agritourism

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Business & Financial Planning

REFERENCES: “What Is a Business Plan?” from “Agritourism in Focus: A Guide for Tennessee Farmers,” University of Tennessee Extension, Center for Profitable Agriculture. “Choice of Business Entities” and “General Regulations” from “A Legal Guide to the Business of Farming in Vermont,” University of Vermont Extension and Annette Higby Esq., 2006. “Budgeting” from Roth and J.A. Hyde. “Partial Budgeting for Agricultural Businesses,” G.W. Penn State Agricultural Research and Cooperative Extension, 2002. “Navigating Local Land Use Regulations” from Agricultural Marketing Resources Center, 11111 NSRIC, Iowa State University. THIS CHAPTER was based on the Rutgers Extension training module, “Financial Management: Budgeting and Pricing for Agritourism.” It was adapted in 2014 by Barbara Noyes Pulling, Rutland Regional Planning Commission. Land use content was written by Barbara Noyes Pulling, Rutland Regional Planning Commission, with support from Stephanie Smith, Vermont Agency of Agriculture. Reviewed by John Ryan, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and Sam Smith, Intervale Center. Chris Granstrom, Lincoln Peak Winery; Jordan Von Trapp, Bliss Ridge Farm; Peg Elmer, Community Resilience and Chairperson of Farm to Plate Agricultural Land Use Planning Task Force; Dean Pierce, Director of Planning and Zoning, Shelburne, VT; and Lisa Chase, University of Vermont Extension.

Offering High-Quality On-Farm Experiences

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