

People everywhere have a growing interest in what they eat and where it comes from. As a farmer, you can play a role in educating them about farms and the working landscape, while gaining exposure for your farm through offering farm tours. Tours can be designed for large or small groups, for elderly or preschool-aged people, and for professionals of a specific trade or curious consumers. What do you need to know to put together your tour? This chapter will offer some tips.

Organizing Your Tour

Provide a clear place to park and a comfortable gathering area out of the wind and rain. Friendly signage helps. Let your visitors know that they are welcome guests who are supposed to be there.

Make sure you have the right infrastructure (outhouses, handwashing stations, parking) and use signs to direct people to the appropriate places.

A little hospitality goes a long way: warm tea on a cold day, strawberries, fresh bread, or cookies. No matter what else is going on that day, be on time (early), and be “present” when speaking with the group.

Introduce yourself and what you do on the farm.

Set the tone at the beginning. What will guests see? Can they interrupt you to ask questions? Where is the restroom? How long will they be on their feet?

“ When I develop a tour with a farmer, I stress the importance of sharing your personal story: how you got here and why you’re doing it. Aside from the hospitality aspect, this is priority number one. Visitors need to connect with you before they can connect with your farm.”

— Chris Howell, Vermont Farm Tours

Get to know your guests by asking them to introduce themselves. What brought them to the farm? Provide name tags!

Make sure your customers are comfortable. Keep them dry and well fed. If the tour is longer than an hour, or you have someone in the group with mobility challenges, make sure you provide seating at some point during the tour. Even standing for an hour can be tiring.

Organize your tour in a sequential way, so it’s easy for guests to follow the processes you are describing. When they get home that day, will they be able to explain to a friend how your product is made?

Eye contact is important. Make sure to situate yourself so that the group can look at you without looking into the sun.

Guests will love seeing, hearing, smelling, but above all, *tasting* your farm fresh product. It may be the most significant memory they leave with. Tastings can range from simple to complex (cut-up tomato slices to tomato and sea salt pairings).

Consider sanitation, and make sure you're not offering samples after guests pet calves or hold chickens. Build in time for hand-washing, and make handwashing facilities easily accessible.

Leave time for questions, and instead of giving all the information, have guests come up with it themselves. Asking questions will encourage guests to think and





A farmer and guest on a field walk during a farm tour in Plainfield, Vermont.

SELF-GUIDED TOURS

With good signage, a well-marked trail, or a map, you can also offer self-guided tours, but make sure someone is on the premises to greet visitors and answer their questions. Give visitors a map of your farm that points out interesting buildings, rough terrain, or areas that are off limits. You can also write a scavenger hunt that is unique to your farm and fun for all ages. Make sure you communicate clearly about any safety hazards on the property before sending guests off on their own! Read more about on-farm safety in “A Guide to Successful Agritourism Enterprises,” in this series.

“ We clean up enough to be safe, but not enough to hide what we do. It’s important to show people what real farming is.”

— Scout Proft, Someday Farm, East Dorset, VT



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Costs to be Sold / Variable Costs

Consider a farmer evaluating how many one-hour farm tours she would need to host in order to break even on investments in farm infrastructure totalling \$4,000 in *fixed costs* (costs that don't vary with the number of tour visitors; see table at right). She estimates each tour will incur \$80 in *variable costs*. Based on the break-even analysis, if the farmer charges \$100 for each tour, she would need to offer 200 tours to break even on her infrastructure investments.

Now the farmer needs to ask herself some questions: Are 200 tours feasible? Does that match her expectations in terms of time commitment? If she raised the tour price to \$150, how many tours would she need to give to break even? (Answer: 58) Would this higher price be acceptable to consumers? Would it be competitive with other farm tours offered in her market area?

Break-even analysis allows you to examine alternative "what if" scenarios to determine tradeoffs between various price points and the number of product units that need to be sold to achieve a desired financial return.



Develop a Farm Tour

This area is intended for developing a farm tour plan. It is a large, empty rectangular space defined by a thin vertical line on the left side and a thick horizontal line at the bottom. The rest of the page is blank white space.

What is the weather for the day?

Do you have enough sheltered space to go ahead with the visit in inclement weather or will you cancel? Postpone and reschedule?

Is your farm visible from the road and clearly marked?

Will cars/buses know where to turn in and park?

Is parking area clear of equipment and well marked?

Have you roped off and labeled dangerous areas where you don't want foot or car traffic (manure pit, machine area, pond, equipment)?

Will everyone be able to get around the farm?

When using a public road, use escort vehicles with flashers to lead and follow the hay wagon to warn traffic. All tractors should also be equipped with a fire extinguisher, flashlight, first-aid kit, and communication equipment.

Ensure that equipment guards are in place and properly chained, lubricated, and free from defects.

Never use more than one wagon per tractor. The use of multiple wagons can lead to "snaking," which can cause sideswiping or even overturn wagons. Loading and unloading areas should be as flat as possible, with a clear field of view to reduce the possibility of passengers jumping in front of moving wagons. The loading and unloading platform should be designed to allow visitors to load and unload quickly, easily, and safely. Employees should be stationed to assist participants when loading and unloading the wagons. Training is essential for all staff involved in the operation of the hayride.

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures that persons with disabilities are afforded equal opportunity in employment, transportation, commercial facilities, and accommodation in public places. Businesses are required to comply. If a farm offers events open to the public, the farm may need provide access for disabled individuals. For example, a person in a wheelchair may not be able to roll from the parking lot to the site if the ground is deeply rutted. If more accessible routes can be easily installed, the law may require it. The ADA does not require that every individual feature be fully accessible, and it does not require that business owners completely remodel at great expense. Exactly what a farm should do to satisfy the ADA depends on when the farm began operations, the nature of the event, and the cost of retrofitting facilities.

At a minimum, farmers should check to see that folks in wheelchairs are not prevented from attending the event or using a restroom. Installing smooth, wide pathways accomplishes this goal. (This is also good practice to avoid injuries to people who are not disabled.) Farms should also consider renting at least one handicapped accessible restroom facility.

To avoid ADA issues, farmers might do some extra research to see what else may be required.

Chances are, you already know everything you need to know in order to craft a fun, interesting farm tour. The challenge lies in developing a budget, marketing the tour, and finding the time to make your farm visitor-ready. Think outside the box about creative partnerships that could draw in additional customers, and as always, have fun! Your farm, family, and market are always changing, so make a plan for evaluating your tours regularly and adjust as needed. This flexibility will bring resilience to your business and is critical for helping your farm reach its overall goals.

Also in this series:

How To...
