

Planning for a Farm Tour: Keeping the Conversation Fresh¹

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Introduction

Inviting the public to your farm for a farm tour is an excellent marketing technique that has been gaining popularity in Florida (James, 2015). Hosting a farm tour allows you to build better relationships with your current customers as well as expose yourself to new future customers. These guidelines can help you best convey your farm's brand and help you plan logistics so your tour runs smoothly.



Figure 1. Participants on a farm tour in Santa Rosa county
Credits: Ginny Hinton, UF/IFAS

Farm Tours as a Direct Marketing Strategy

A well-planned farm tour can educate customers about agriculture as well as provide economic and noneconomic benefits to your farm (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Plan beforehand to tell visitors how you grow your food, why they should buy your food, and who you are as a farmer. These messages communicate to the customer the most important aspects of your farm as a brand.

How You Grow Your Food

This part of the tour is the most straightforward because it involves simply telling visitors what you grow and how you grow it. Show visitors as many diverse areas of your farm as are accessible, such as different fields or pastures, harvesting and processing sheds, tool and equipment barns, and greenhouses. What seems mundane to you can be interesting to someone who works in an office, so include details about small aspects of your operation. You can include

- which varieties of crops you grow,
- how you irrigate,
- which tools or equipment you use for which job,
- how to harvest different crops, and
- the timeline of when you plant and harvest the crops you grow.

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This is also an opportunity to explain your growing techniques to your customers. Visitors are interested in your methods as well as your products. You can include

- fertilization methods,
- soil management techniques, such as cover cropping and composting,
- pest and weed control methods, and
- spacing considerations for planting and harvesting.

Why Customers Should Buy Your Food

Market saturation is an inherent problem with farming; when your tomatoes come into season, everyone else's tomatoes are also coming in to season. Therefore, it is important to distinguish your farm from other farms as well as to distinguish your product from products found in the grocery store or imported from other parts of the country or the world (O'Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2009). As you show visitors around your farm, tell them what makes your farm unique and your product different from others. You can include

- your years of experience in farming,
- your farm's community involvement,
- your farm's production of local food,
- the quality of your growing techniques, and
- a farm stand so customers can buy your products after the tour.

Who You Are as a Farmer

One of the reasons customers might buy your product is that they feel as if they know you as a farmer. They feel good about supporting a farmer who is knowledgeable, hardworking, and passionate. Sharing your story with customers is a great way to connect and build relationships. To learn more about telling your story, the EDIS series on crafting your story is recommended (edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc217). Some basic tips for telling customers who you are as a farmer are provided here:

- Tell visitors a little about yourself and your family.
- Do not blame others for your hardships. Instead discuss challenges and how you are trying to overcome them.
- Make visitors feel comfortable asking hard questions.
- Be honest with your answers.
- Share easily viewable pictures of you and your family on the farm.

Logistical Considerations for Farm Tours

Planning ahead for logistics can save you some trouble down the road. Consider how to prepare your visitors for the tour, how you will address their comfort and safety, how to best present the information you wish to communicate, and how to improve for your next tour.

Communicating for Your Visitors' Comfort and Safety

- When advertising for your farm tour, include instructions to your visitors about what to bring, such as closed-toe shoes, hats, sunscreen, and water bottles. Also tell them what to leave at home, such as pets, jewelry, nice clothes, or cameras, if you do not want them taking photos of your farming operation.
- Put up signs or otherwise direct visitors where to park. Block any areas of the farm where you do not want people driving or walking.
- Be a good host by considering your visitors' comfort during the tour. Depending on the weather, offer water or coffee to drink. Make sure to gather people in the shade on a warm day. Let visitors know where they can use the bathroom by providing signage or telling them its location as the tour begins.
- Give visitors CLEAR safety instructions before entering production, harvest, and processing areas. If you have a U-Pick operation, make sure include these instructions for how to pick before entering the production field.
- Consider posting signage about the liabilities associated with visiting an agritourism venue as detailed in Florida Bill Number S 1106 (Florida Department of State, 2015). Signs are available for purchase from the Florida Agritourism Association at <http://operator.visitfloridafarms.com/store/>.

Presenting Information

- Try to incorporate something hands-on for the visitors, like tasting crops in the field, seeding a soil tray in the greenhouse, or even identifying and pulling weeds.
- Avoid the use of jargon (bushels, acres, PPM (parts per million), BMPs (best management practices)). People may have heard of terms that you are familiar with, but might not know what they mean. Take time to explain what you are talking about.
- Make sure your speaking volume is loud enough. This may mean using a portable speaker or public address

system for the day. This depends on the size of the group, the weather, and the area you are visiting.

- If you are showing visitors a noisy area, explain to them what they will see before entering the noisy area, and then answer any questions when you leave the noisy area.
- Continue the conversation after your visitors leave by encouraging them to follow your farm on social media.

Tew, C., & Barbieri, C. (2012). The perceived benefits of agritourism: The provider's perspective. *Tourism Management*, 33(1), 215-224. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2011.02.005

Reflection and Improving Your Next Tour

- Ask visitors for feedback by providing them an opportunity tell you what they liked and did not like about the tour. Whether face to face, on paper, or online, gathering feedback will allow you to improve future tours.
- Reflect on your tour. Were there materials that you needed but did not have available? Did a portion of the tour take longer to set up than you anticipated? Would you have benefitted from writing talking points beforehand? Make a list of materials, time frames, and staffing necessities and have it on hand for the next time you host a tour.

Summary

Preparing the message you want to tell your customers about how you grow your food, why customers should buy your food, and who you are as a farmer could help develop your customer base. By preparing for your visitors' comfort and safety, clearly presenting information, and reflecting on the tour once it has ended, your tour will be much more likely to run efficiently. A little planning can go a long way in ensuring that you and your visitors get the most out of your farm tour. For more information about farm tours, visit the EDIS publication *Expanding Florida's Farming Business to Incorporate Tourism* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fr242>).

References

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