

## Agri-tourism a New Canadian Phenomenon



"Agri-tourism" is a new phenomenon attracting attention across Canada. Ideas and suggestions are based on a collection of personal stories from people who saw the opportunities and felt the benefits of agri-tourism. Farmers who participate in agri-tourism open their farms and their hearts to their urban neighbors, who benefit from the worthwhile, learning experience. Not only are the eyes of children opened wide to farm animals and the food chain, but farm visitors are entertained by a chance to enjoy

the fresh air and to ponder memories of when parents and grandparents lived on the farm.

Look at this wondrous product of agriculture and the people who grow our food and create countless jobs for others. Now step back and see agriculture from other people's point of view. They see cellophane wrapped products in long white coolers, milk in three bags and potatoes in brown bags. These consumers don't see the long hours, the investment of land and equipment or the back-breaking labor. Farming is often a thankless job, but most farmers wouldn't change their way of life for the world. Nothing takes the place of the excitement as a seedling comes through the soil, when the sick cow recovers or while looking out over a field full of color. Although we do not want to romanticize farming, we do want to educate our urban neighbors about our industry and way of life. Agri-tourism is our opportunity to do just that. It is a way to provide guests with the chance to see the great investments in a farming operation; the cycle of planting, nurturing, harvesting; and the process which products take from field to table.

"If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got." -- Donna Lyons, Alliston Learning Center

Farming is a business and a way of life. Agri-tourism is simply another branch extending from the strong trunk of agriculture. Open your heart and mind to new and different ideas. Dare to dream and write down every new idea that comes to you. Use your family as a sounding board and include them in a brainstorming session. They will also become involved in this venture. What can you do as a family to bring people to your farm?

Don't limit yourself. Instead, be creative, have fun, enjoy. Agri-tourism is only a concept. What you add to the concept, in relation to your farm, makes your farm unique, different, and entertaining. Your ideas will bring people to your farm. Delivering on your promises will bring them back. Implementing your ideas to become a part of agri-tourism will bring positive change to your farm.

Change is not negotiable. It is inevitable. At a time when change seems constant, people are evaluating what they have done, what they need to do, and how they are going to do it. In many cases people need to make a change in order to survive. Agriculture and farming are no exception. In a time of change, agri-tourism makes

sense. It offers an opportunity for farmers to diversify, promote their commodity "as traditional industrial and agricultural jobs decrease, a growing awareness exists within rural communities of the benefits that can be gained from developing tourism as part of their economics" (Tourism Works for America Report, p. ) Agri-tourism in rural areas is an economic diversification initiative for farmers. The economic activity affects neighboring communities as well as the farmers. Not only will people visit your farm, enjoy a farm vacation or take home a buffalo roast, but the spin off effect into your community will be profitable. The local gas station, antique shop, grocery store and restaurant will also benefit from increased consumer traffic.

Agri-tourism is a marriage between two of the largest industries in Ontario: agriculture and tourism. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs defines agri-tourism as "**the economic activity that occurs when people link travel with the products, services or experiences of the agriculture and food system**".

It is a concept that works for large and small, traditional and non-traditional farms. Although this new partnership is not for every farm, or for every farmer, it is growing in popularity and catching the attention of travelers, the media, and individuals seeking an adventure.

### ***Why Visit A Farm?***

If you lived on a farm and have farmed for most of your life, you are likely wondering why people would pay money to visit a farm where you live and work daily. Why would urban dwellers want to stay on a farm, milk cows, ride a horse or pick stones?

Agri-tourism appeals to people who have lost touch with the land. More and more people want to see, touch, and taste what the farmer and the land have provided. They flock to farmer's markets throughout Canada to get a little closer to the product produced by the farmers and the land.

In 1988, the renaissance began. Back then, there were only 60 farmers markets in Ontario. Now there are 130. Health conscious consumers want to know where their food comes from and how it gets to their table. Consumers are willing to pay for true freshness and also want to meet the farmers who produce their food. Agri-tourism is a concept that develops naturally from the values of today's consumers. Besides these consumers, the graying population is interested in farm visits. These people long to return to a place and lifestyle they knew so many years ago. "Nostalgia, adventure and education are the primary reasons people are interested in agricultural tours. Older adults remember growing up on or near a farm," (Courier, April 1993, p. )

As a result of trends in our society, the popularity of farm visits will continue to rise and tourism dollars will flow into rural areas.

"When you think tourism, do you still see nothing but images of high rise city hotels? Think again, approximately 50% of the \$4.5 billion spent by Ontario tourists in 1991 were spent in rural locations" (Thomas, 1995 p. )

Demographics showing the potential for attracting more urban dwellers to the finer parts of Ontario are great. Farmers account for only 3.2% of Canada's population

(Canada Yearbook 94). With over 96% of the population living in urban areas, we have a large group of individuals who may be interested in visiting rural communities and farms. Is your farm one of these?

### ***What Do You Have To Offer?***

#### **Questions to consider**

There are several questions farmers must ask themselves before beginning the journey down the agri-tourism road.

- What does my farm have to offer?
- What products can I sell to visitors coming to my farm?
- Do I want people visiting my property on a regular basis?
- Do I like talking to people and answering their questions?
- Am I prepared to do the extra work necessary to prepare for a visit of 47 seniors on a bus tour?
- What other attractions are in the area?
- Are there other farms in the area willing to work as a partner on this project?

Other farm tours or rural attractions will encourage visitors to spend a day in the area.

- Do I want to hold major special events for large crowds or do I want to host small groups of visitors?
- Am I prepared and is my farm ready for animal rights activists who might visit my property?

If your enthusiasm is still high after answering these questions, then it is time to proceed.

First, stop thinking like a farmer.

Put the crops, the weather and your equipment out of your mind for a few minutes. Don't linger to hear the latest radio reports on prices or the changes of the marketing board. Farming is a business but think about the tourists, the guests. They are looking for a new experience. They want to see how farmers live and grow their own food. Freshness and environmental issues are important to your visitor. Agri-tourism gives farmers an opportunity to offer accurate and current information to those individuals who are completely removed from agriculture. Some of those individuals may be children who benefit from educational experiences on farms.

"While our farm has always been open to host groups from OMAFRA and various associations, our school tour program began 5 years ago. Having been extensively involved in a number of Agriculture in the Classroom events and activities locally and provincially, I was aware of the interest that teachers, students and other groups

had in being acquainted with a real working farm. We felt our operation offered numerous opportunities for children to be involved in an educational experience.

From the beginning, we designed a program that was educational in nature. As taxpayers and parents, we often questioned the validity of some of the field trips our children experienced. Therefore, we wanted our program give a true picture of the present agriculture and yet be a meaningful experience that hopefully might plant some seeds of understanding in the minds of our future citizens.

Being a real working farm, we continued to stress that the daily operations of the farm must happen. Animals must be fed and cared for, planting or harvesting cannot be interrupted. However, the safety of our visitors is vital. Precautions are taking to ensure a safe visit and experience". Diane O'Shea, O'Shea Farms.

Analyze your strength and weaknesses to discover what your farm has to offer potential visitors. Do you own a portion of a Precambrian Forest or raise angora goats? Do you grow pumpkins? Have you thought about a pumpkin festival or Halloween events that would be successful in your area? It is vital that you take inventory of what your particular property and area have to offer guests. What you take for granted might be very exciting to your urban neighbors.

It is important to inform your visitors about what you have to offer on your property. While you take your guests on a tour of your property, explain modern farming concepts and how it affects their lives in the city.

"It's tough to climb the ladder of success, especially if you're trying to keep your nose to the grindstone, your shoulder to the wheel, your eye on the ball and your ear to the ground."-Author Unknown

### ***Safety, Insurance, Facility Issues***

#### **Insurance**

"What about insurance-should we buy additional coverage?"

This is the first question farmers ask themselves. Being involved in agri-tourism is a huge responsibility. You are potentially liable for any mishaps occurring on your property on the day of the visit. Your responsibility continues after your visitors leave. Several days later, someone could claim they suffered food poisoning from a food product purchased on your farm. Protect yourself, your family, your farm, your



employees and your future. Contact several insurance companies and brokers. Remember, agri-tourism is a new concept to the insurance industry, so take it upon yourself to ensure you are adequately covered.

When you are determining how much insurance is enough, consider the number of guests who will be visiting your property and the dangers about which you are concerned. You should be comfortable with your choices and

the amount of coverage you purchase. Talk to other people who have hosted visits on their property to get advice. Don't wait until something happens. Be proactive. Avoid the risk and have the best coverage for your personal needs.

### ***Public Safety***

Your main concern must be the safety of your guests. Although it is not easy, look at your property through the eyes of a guest. Look for ways to make it safe for guests who are looking for a new and safe experience. Your familiarity with the raised step when entering the barn could be a potential risk to the unsuspecting guests who are looking around and not up and down. Make a check list of areas needing your attention.

Seek some help in creating this list. Ask a person typical of your guests to come and wander around. A person unfamiliar with farming will spot potential dangers which may be easily overlooked. Conducting a mock tour is also helpful in identifying problem areas. Watch your guests and see what they enjoy, what they find unique, what they see as dangerous or as potentially risky.

The obvious pits, electric wire fencing, and machinery are easy to spot as dangerous areas. It is the small pot hole, the raised step, the low ceiling that often goes unnoticed and creates problems. Paint your low beam a neon orange and have the guide verbally point out its existence. Develop attractive and visible signs indicating steps ahead. Place caution tape around certain areas or find a way to eliminate the problem. Manure tanks, farm ponds and poison ivy patches are all dangerous to farm visitors. Be aware of the dangerous spots and steer your guests away from them. Not only do you need to be aware of these and other areas, but you need to ask your guests to use caution. Remember, some of your tours may include children or senior citizens.

### ***Facilities***

It is imperative to have clean and adequate washroom facilities for guests. If you are dealing with groups, more than one washroom should be installed. Port-a-potties will work, but as numbers grow, permanent facilities will be necessary. Make an informed decision after you have looked at the costs, your revenue and what your guests need. Also consider what is required of you. Washrooms must be kept clean and properly stocked. They need to be monitored on a regular basis.



Benches and shade trees add value to your property and make guests visits even more enjoyable. Have garbage bins and recycling barrels available for trash. Post clearly marked signs with information about your property, stock and products to enhance your guests' learning experience. These features will help your guests feel more comfortable during their visit.

Don't forget yourself. You may be the ambassador for every farmer in your township, country, or province, so set a good example.

Keep your property tidy and dress appropriately. Manure from head to toe is not going to give your guests a good first impression.

### ***Personal Presentation***

Visit other attractions in or around your area. Take notes. What did you enjoy? What made your experience good, bad, or exceptional? Watch others. Are they having fun? Listen to others. What are their compliments and complaints? Now go back to your property... what would they say about your facility? How do you compare?

### ***Parking***

Make things easy for your guests! Let them know where to park. Provide signs or arrows clearly pointing to parking spaces.

If you are expecting motorcoaches, ensure they can turn into your property and leave safely. Is your lane wide enough? Motorcoaches come in different sizes. The average coach can weigh up to 12.5 tons, stand over 11 feet tall and be 110 inches wide. Is there a flat area where a group of people can get off the bus without having someone stumble and fall?

### ***Target Markets***

The Industrial Revolution and the Great Depression set off a migration. People living in the country moved into town to earn a better living. Even today, more and more people are living in urban centers away from farm land. As a result of these historical migrations, the majority of modern families in virtually every developed nation lack even so much as a grandparent who lived on a farm or who can even remember being back on the farm. (Bennet, 1995, p. )

Agri-tourism's target market includes these people who don't have another opportunity to "Get out of Town". They are encouraged to spend time outdoors and to explore a lifestyle different from their own.

According to the 1994 Annual Edition Tourism Works for America Report," pleasure travel continues to dominate U.S. resident travel, accounting for 70%" of all travel. Of that 70%, over 12% traveled for outdoor recreation. The report goes on to include rural tourism development as a new trend, "...there is a growing recognition of the role played by small towns in the big picture of tourism"

With the trend of "cultural and outdoor activities remaining Ontario's most popular attractions," farm tours provide the perfect fit.

### ***Who Are Your Guests?***

The town or city in your area will have some answers for you. Often the tourism association, the economic development office or the provincial government have statistics and surveys on the number of visitors, demographics of people, money spent and length of stay. Do your homework and find out as much as possible about your guests before they come.

Generally, your guests could be almost anyone. People travel in large and small groups, with families, and as individuals. Travellers are of all age groups and from every economic background.

Students are often farm visitors who gain a new and educational experience from a farm tour. Decide with what age groups you are willing to work. If young children are coming to the farm, encourage chaperones and parents to participate. Arrange a coloring contest or a booklet children can take home. This will provide a connection with parents who see your logo or product. If you are willing to work with teens, provide hands-on activities. Be open to questions and be prepared to answer kindly and without unfamiliar "jargon". Remember, there is no such thing as a silly question.

Senior groups are a large section of the motorcoach travel industry which is bringing large groups to Ontario farms. Encourage tour operators to share information with you about their group before it arrives. Is there anyone with a disability? Will anyone need assistance? Are they a "hands-on group" or do they prefer listening and learning?



Even if some members of your group need some assistance, don't assume they are not ready for an adventure.

Seniors are some of the most exciting people with whom to work. One senior recently said during a farm visit that she was "experiencing adolescence again". Tour operators are not the only sources of senior groups tours. Church groups, retirement homes,

and camps all organize outings and are looking for new places to visit.

Technical groups, such as a group of farmers from another country, are looking for facts. They want to find out what you do and how you do it. Be very specific and ask them questions. What is particularly of interest to them? These groups would rather hear about artificial insemination, your handling of manure, the cost of equipment, and crop rotations than seeing baby animals. Again, be ready to answer questions. Often, it is useful to have three or four guides so you can break into smaller groups.

### ***Meeting And Greeting***

Greet your guests with a warm smile and a strong handshake. Introduce yourself by name and explain your position as a farmer, employee, family member or other title as it applies. This is your private property and most people respect that, but they must feel welcome if they are going to return.

After greeting your guests introduce them to your farm and property. If you have a farm name explain its significance. Talk about how many acres or hectares your farm covers. A brief history about your farm and family is always a point of interest, especially if you have a century home or farm. Many guests are also interested in

rural life and consider your stone house intriguing. All this information gives your guests food for thought.

By now, your guests feel welcome and already feel like they know you and your farm a little better.

### ***Marketing Ideas***

You may have the greatest attraction in the world, but people won't come if you don't tell them about it. Tell people what you have and always deliver what you promise. But don't just meet visitors expectations. Exceed them! This will keep them coming back and bringing their friends. A satisfied customer will sell your product for you.

"Word of mouth is the most powerful form of advertising. If you can provide a product that is of good quality, a little different than the norm, and offer good service along with it then people will talk. Your satisfied customer is your best salesperson. No matter what you are selling, it's imperative that it is exactly what you say it is." Linda Knechtel, The Best Little Pork Shoppe.

Get people talking by providing a site for a community BBQ or event organized by a local non-profit group? This will boost your visibility. Community groups can range in membership size from 5 to 105 or more. They will be the first ones to become familiar with your attraction. The participants of the BBQ or event you are hosting will be another large group which will discover what you offer. By inviting the media, you extend your exposure to include the community. Once these people are at your attraction, take the opportunity to show them your facility. For example, contribute to the community event by conducting a tour of your facility every 30 minutes. Many people will see your attraction and learn what it offers. Soon word will spread about your attraction and the community event you hosted. Both you and the community group will benefit.

**Postcards** with a colorful picture of your product, farm, logo, or people enjoying your property are effective marketing tools. Send them to the media, names on your mailing lists, bus companies, schools, church groups and other potential customers. A postcard is normally less expensive to send in the mail. (Contact your local post office for measurements and cost of postage.) Personalize the front with your slogan or something unique to your farm so guests will associate the postcard with your property. On the reverse side in the top left hand corner, include a generic message which explains what you have to offer. For example, "The Jones Family invites you to explore the most unique Christmas Tree Farm in Thunder Bay. This fourth generation, 300 acre farm has over 30,000 trees with 200 trees planted annually. Guided tours available between May and November. Bring the entire family and pick out and cut your own tree just in time for Christmas." Below the printed message, leave space to jot down your personalized, handwritten message which is a personal touch many guests appreciate.

**Stickers!** They are a great way to market your property to groups and families because children love stickers. Before children leave your property, give them a sticker with your farm name on it. "We visited Smith's Apple Orchard, what a great

day". Children will put this sticker in a visible location. Every time it is seen, you have remind people of your great product.

Food will leave a tasty reminder. If you have an edible product, have a **sample-fest celebration**. For example, if you live on a beef farm, have four dishes of beef, each cooked differently. Offer these samples complete with your recipe and logo.

Create a **photo opportunity** for guests. Be sure your name and logo are part of this idea. A scarecrow (holding a sign which welcomes visitors to Browns Horse Farm), stalks of corn, and a few bales of hay create a back drop for many photos. Use items around the farm to create a unique place for photos. Children, parents and grandparents love to stand behind the plywood and put their head through the hole, transforming themselves into carrots and onions. Again, "peek-through" photo opportunity is not complete if your farm name isn't part of the display. For days, months and years to come, your farm will be part of their memories in these photos.

Develop and display a **photo album** that shows your products, special occasions and farm events. It is amazing how much people like looking through a collection of photographs.

**Displays** in malls, schools, downtown storefronts and at special events are great ways to capture people's attention. If you are involved in cropping, have a 'seed to 'feed display. Take your corn and show the process involved in taking it from field to harvest and then what happens if it is to be used as silage for cattle. Always include items for people to smell and touch. Photos of some of your equipment add to your display.

Contact your **local tourism association** to find out what kind of cooperative advertising opportunities are available. You may be reaching a new audience and a new clientele.

A **newsletter** is a great opportunity to reach potential visitors. Create a newsletter that portrays your image. Be sure to include a personal touch by using recipes and highlighting new product lines. Add extra bits of information such as special events, comments from happy customers, interesting facts you have discovered. Start with one legal size piece of paper double-sided. Be sure your name, logo, and address and phone number are visible and easy to find. Ask readers to send suggestions and comments.

Keep a **guest book**. Invite guests to sign, include their address and comment on their experience. This is a valuable way to find out how people enjoyed their experience and to create a mailing list. When you are promoting your next event, send them a postcard and invite them. Why not have a small door prize or special draw?

On the ballot, people must include their name, address, and phone number to be eligible. This is another way to expand your mailing list so you can contact people who have already enjoyed your property.

There are many ways to let others know about your farm. Use these ideas but also use your imagination to come up with some of your own to market your specific attraction.

## ***New Partnerships***

Partnering provides new opportunities and challenges, according to the Canadian Tourism Council. "Partnerships can be a means to enhance existing products... and emerging market trends. Partnering with non-traditional business can provide you with new opportunities to create unique products and services, new value-added packages and unconventional programs to capture market interests" (Developing Business Opportunities Through Partnering, April 1995) Agri-tourism is all about partnerships. Partnerships between agriculture and tourism, families and neighbors, local tourism associations, regional tourism associations, attractions, businesses and the community. Linking tourism and agriculture with agri-tourism offers a wide variety of resource people and a wealth of information.

Close partnerships with non-traditional partners offer the opportunity to package. Packaging involves adding other partners or attractions to make your property more attractive and easier for guests to include in their day. Rarely do guests go to an area to do just one activity. They want their day full of activities, including meals, accommodation, shops, and walks. By packaging, tourism bureaus and farmers do the research and make it easier for people coming into the area. To our guests, this package seems like an abundance of opportunities: visit a farm, rent a paddleboat, explore rural areas, attend a theater performance, visit the art gallery, take a guided walk, or visit a museum. Give the public as many choices as possible. Invite them back to participate in the activities they didn't have time to try.

Cross-promotion makes sense for farms and our partners. As we work with partners including bed and breakfasts, hotels, motels, restaurants, local businesses, and the Federation of Agriculture, they are in turn promoting agri-tourism. When everyone works together, everyone benefits. Talk to your neighbors! What are they doing? If they are producing apple cider and you are running a bed and breakfast, why not cross promote? Buy their product and promote it as locally produced. In return, ask to display your brochure. Work with your partners... traditional and non-traditional. Here are a few examples:

- Federation of Agriculture or Christian Farmers Association
- Ontario Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism
- Tourism Bureaus (Local and Regional)
- Commodity Groups
- Charitable Organizations
- Lions Clubs
- Libraries
- Hotels and Motels
- Bed and Breakfasts
- Community Organizations

- School Boards
- Farmers Markets
- The Internet
- Women's Institute Groups
- 4-H Clubs
- Junior Farmers
- Neighbors
- Other Attractions in the area
- Local Newspapers
- Group Organizations
- Other Farmers
- Economic Development Groups
- School Groups, ie. Drama club
- College Groups ie. Elderhostel Canada
- Consulates
- Members of Parliament
- Chamber of Commerce
- Business Improvement Associations and Downtown Associations
- Church Groups
- Artist guides
- Media (local, provincial and national)

### ***Media List***

Often your local tourism association or OMAFRA office will already have a list of local media. Call and request the information, or create your own list. Use your local library. An extremely useful book found in most libraries is called Bowdens. The book includes a list of all daily and weekly publications, costs to advertise, and phone and fax numbers. It is imperative to decide where you want to send your information and to whom. If you are looking to target Eastern Ontario and people in a one hour radius, it doesn't make sense to send information to a newspaper in Acton.

Whether you use this information or create your own media list, it should be complete. Begin with a lists of newspapers, television and radio stations in your area. Record the names, phone numbers and fax numbers of editors and news directors which are listed on the editorial pages of newspapers or on the credits after a newscast. The correspondent for your local weekly newspaper should also be included on your media list. This person can suggest story ideas from your area to the editor. Keeping this person informed may result in a story on your involvement in agri-tourism or photos from an event held on your property.

Members of the traditional news media aren't the only ones who belong on your media list. Include editors of newsletters of your Federation of Agriculture, commodity group or tourist bureau. Think about where your guests get their information and include it on your media list. For example, if you host a fundraising barbeque for the local Kinsmen's club, include the Kinsmen's national newsletter on your media list. Other Kinsmen groups would be interested in how your local group organized the event. Perhaps, a Kinsmen group in another part of the province will follow its lead and involve agriculture in its next event.

### ***Getting The Word Out***

#### **Press Releases or Public Service Announcements**

A press or public service announcement (PSA) is often the most economic way to promote your event. However, there is no guarantee your PSA will appear in the paper. News editors may choose to run your PSA as it is written, call you for an interview or for more information or they may ignore the information completely.

How your PSA is written will determine whether or not it earns a spot in the news. Your PSA should include a catchy heading, the date the information is to be released, your name and phone/fax number and the 5 w's (who, what, where, why and when). You will lose the editor's attention in the first three or four lines so keep up all the pertinent information at the top. Keep your PSA one page in length and conclude it with the number-30- at the bottom of the page to denote the end of message. An example of a successful PSA is included.

These are the basics of writing a PSA but there is more. Keep in mind the news media is in the business of informing the public of what is new, not promoting your event. So, tell them what is new.

Are you the first farmer in your township to become a part of the agri-tourism program? Are you expecting an interesting group from another province or country? If you are involved in a new commodity, you may be hosting a large number of groups. That's a story. If you are hosting your 100<sup>th</sup> tour, invite the media and show how your attraction and agri-tourism has progressed since the first tour. If they don't attend your event, send another PSA reporting on the event and make yourself available for an interview. Newspapers, especially weekly newspapers, have few reporters. Sometimes they simply don't have time to cover your event and your report is appreciated.

Different news media will be interested in different types of stories. Write your PSA's accordingly. A daily newspaper will be interested in the unique phenomenon of visiting a farm. Invite the media to take a tour and lots of photos. Your weekly newspaper will likely be located in a nearby small town and its subscribers are

probably your neighbors. They will know about farm tours, but they won't know you are involved or how successful it has been for you. They are also interested in seeing their children in the newspaper so be sure to call the editor when a local school group is visiting. Keep in touch with the television and radio stations you watch or listen to for agriculture news. Some television stations have rural farm shows looking for stories in their area. If you are planning a large event, contact the radio station. It may send its special events and provide news reports back to the station.

If you have some newsworthy information, write a PSA. Don't worry about flooding the newsroom with your PSA's. If you have some interesting information, the editor wants to know. You are only wasting the editor's time and ensuring a place in the blue box if you are sending generic information about which the public already knows. When you are finished writing your PSA, test it. If you find yourself thinking, "so what" and you don't have an answer, rewrite it. However, if you are in doubt, send it out. If it doesn't get in, you haven't lost anything. If it does, then it was worthwhile.

Take advantage of the summer months for publicity. During July and August, councils, school boards and other public bodies are not meeting regularly. They are also not making decisions on which the media is reporting. The news media are looking for interesting stories to fill the space. If you have an idea you think is newsworthy, propose it in the summer months. The only drawback is readership. Advertisers reduce their advertising in the summer months because people go on vacation. There are fewer people at home in the summer reading their ads and a story about your farm. However, some publicity in the summer is better than no publicity at all, which may happen if the editor must choose between your news item and the latest scandal around the council table.

Publicity in the news doesn't cost you anything. Advertising doesn't have to cost a lot either. Most weekly newspapers have a coming events section. At a cost ranging from \$5 to \$10, community groups can list their events. Consider booking one of these ads once every two weeks or once a month. You can advertise an open house, a samplefest, or announce your farm is available for tours by appointment. You may end up with calls from the Girl Guides, church groups, women's institutes or many others. They may become new customers for your farm gate products. Or they may bring out-of-town friends next time. Although the size of these ads is small, the exposure is great. Sometimes, this is the only place to find out about craft sales, a community group's fundraising breakfast or where hockey registration will be held.

Be careful using these small advertisements. If you are expecting a lot of publicity from the newspaper, you might not get it with a \$5 classified ad. You can't buy news publicity by buying advertising space, however, it does earn you some co-operation. News outlets also must meet revenue projections. They won't give you lots of publicity if they consider it a loss of potential revenue.

If you are advertising in specific newspapers and magazines it is beneficial to confirm your advertising and send your PSA at the same time to the attention of the editor.

### ***Special Event Forms***

Don't invite only the locals... invite the entire province. Currently the ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism has a publication called Ontario Events Guide. It doesn't cost anything to be included in the guide except for the stamp to

mail the form. If the description of your agri-tourism event doesn't fit into the defined category, place it under 'festival' and send a note encouraging the Ministry to add an agri-tourism event category to their listing.

Get your event on the Internet. Times have changed and the Internet is a new effective way of reaching people. Events Ontario offers a free listing registration form to get your event on-line.

Cable stations, church bulletins, other organizations' newsletters, portable signs, and the free community events bulletin on television stations also do a good job getting your word out to the public.

### ***A Community Farming Event***

Working with surrounding farms, bed and breakfasts, attractions, and restaurants to create an "open house" type of event is a great way to capture the general attention. Not only is it good for business and exposure, but also a wonderful opportunity to network with others. One word of caution-start small and let the event grow. It is essential to maintain control and the equality of the event.

If you are serious about agri-tourism in your area, call a meeting and bring potential partners together to talk about ways to attract people to your area. That is exactly what happened in Perth County.



In 1994 a group of enthusiastic Perth County farmers realized locals and people from surrounding counties were interesting in seeing what "Agri-tourism" was all about. The Perth County Federation of Agriculture offered to co-sponsor the event and provide \$2,000 and numerous volunteers. Tourism Stratford, the local tourism association also added expertise, advice, and a contact list for local, regional, and national media.

Once port-a-potties were rented for each farm, the Perth County partners had only about \$650 for promotion. Flyers were created and each farmer was encouraged to take 200 to distribute. Flyers reached the CNE in Toronto, the Plowing Match, church groups, local papers, regional papers, community event listings on TV, and local newsletters. Over 50 press releases were faxed to various TV stations, newspapers, magazines and radio stations. The agri-tourism coordinator was interviewed and contacted for more information. People were talking about the event! As tourism Stratford, the Perth County Federation of Agriculture and the participating farms continued to prepare and promote the event, the media expressed more interest, Signs and passports were printed and painted. The locations of the farms were to be a mystery until tour day. This prevented people from dropping in a day or two early to the participating farms. Everyone involved knew the day's success would depend on the weather. The committee felt was organized and covered all the basis, but again, the weather would dictate numbers. The 1st Annual Perth County Harvest Day was a tremendous success. The weatherman provided a warm, sunny day and the participating host farms provided well-organized, fun and educational spots to visit

for youngsters, students, baby boomers, and visitors. Over 1,200 came out to explore their rural roots and visit the mystery farms.

A second Annual Harvest Day was held in October 1995 with different host farms and the same budget. Over 1,500 attended the one day event.

### ***Helpful Hints***

- Contact your insurance broker and ensure they are aware of your event. Be sure you are properly protected.
- The Federation of Agriculture, Christian Farmers and other farm organizations are able to help promote and may have volunteers who will work with you.
- Work with your tourism association. They will be able to help with promotion and offer marketing tips.
- Prepare your media list and fax or mail public service announcements. Invite the press to attend. Give a sneak preview!
- Create a contest involving media. Trivia questions on the radio are a great way to create excitement. Offer prizes such as admission to your farming event or an escorted ride to participating farm...in a limousine.
- Ensure you have proper washroom facilities. Rent a port-a-potty for the duration of the event. Now, they are available with sinks and running water.
- Let your neighbors know there will be extra traffic. They may also be interested in helping.
- Work with existing attractions and businesses. For example, a farmers' market may be interested in participating.
- Involve local celebrities.
- Hands on activities will leave a lasting impression. Plant pumpkins in the spring and invite group back in the fall to enjoy the fruits of their harvest.
- Include a detailed map so getting from farm to farm is not too difficult.
- Post easy to read, professional looking signs for directions.
- Have stations set up on your farm: one to welcome guests, one to explain where your animals are housed, one to point out crops and different equipment, ect.
- Have volunteer or employees on hand to help with crowd control.
- Be ready to answer questions your guests might have. Remember, there is no such thing as a stupid question!

- Signs will provide even more information to guests. A heifer is...A dry cow is...A combine is...Step back and envision you are visiting a new car factory, what question would you ask?
- Evaluation forms will tell you what people liked, what can be changed and what needs to be improved. Encourage guests to include their name and addresses by having a draw for a basket of fresh fruit, preserves, jellies and jam, and fresh flowers. Be sure to keep a record of these guests.

### **Conclusion**

Being a part of an agri-tourism program in your area is very rewarding. Farmers can take an active role in explaining their industry to the consumers. Ninety-six percent of people who eat live in urban areas want to know how their food is produced.

However, it is also a lot of hard work and dedication. Besides organizing tours and teaching about agriculture, you must also cover your costs and generate revenue if your farm is to survive.

Agri-tourism is not for everyone. If you can find balance, work with it. Be unique, offer guests variety, and always invite them back. Find your niche but also work with your partners to make agri-tourism in your area successful. Most of all enjoy yourself when you have guests. Take pride in showing your guests the fruits of your hard work.

By participating in agri-tourism, you are now a part of the tourism industry but you are a farmer first. You are involved in the wonderful industry of agriculture. Why not tell people about it?!