UNDERSTANDING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

From a business perspective, transitioning from traditional agriculture to agritourism can be quite a challenge. One of the biggest challenges is successfully creating a product that customers (tourists) want. What products and/or services should be created and sold? In regard to agritourism, as with all forms of tourism, the product is the experience.

As an agritourism venture is planned or refined, it is important to remember that people are not visiting a farm or participating in agritourism just because fresh produce is grown there, or because they can go through a corn maze. People are visiting for the experiences—experiences that are unlike those of their everyday lives. So, how can farms create enjoyable and unique experiences?

The Experience Economy

Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest that our economy has evolved into an experience economy, meaning that consumers seek out experiences and are willing to pay a premium price for the right experiences. The authors use coffee as an example to illustrate the experience economy. How does the experience economy relate to agritourism? Let's think about corn. Traditionally, a farmer might sell his/her corn as a commodity to a wholesaler. However, if that same farmer allowed visitors to come to the farm to pick their own corn, purchase fresh, hot, roasted corn-on-the-cob to eat, and run through a corn maze, the farmer is likely to garner $7-15 dollars per visitor. The farmer has transitioned from selling his/her corn at market price to creating memorable experiences at a premium price for guests. This unique experience is more valuable to customers, and sets the farm apart from other attractions or recreation options in the area, which keeps customers and visitors wanting more.

When working to create the experience, it is important to put yourself in the visitor’s shoes. Visitors who are coming to a farm for fun are probably not from a farm and may not have very much experience with agriculture or the farming lifestyle. Once the visitor steps foot on your farm, they become your guest! As such, good customer service and making visitors feel welcome is the first step.
Creating the Customer Experience

Creating meaningful experiences for visitors isn’t simply about entertaining them, it is about engaging them. A successful agritourism business should create experiences to engage its visitors on several levels and in different ways. Think about how you might create experiences to help engage visitors in the following ways:

1. Create ways for visitors “TO BE”
   How can you create settings that are inviting to your guests? Create spaces and settings that encourage visitors to come in, sit down and stay for a while. Consider creating spaces that are inviting, comfortable and interesting. This might include incorporating rocking chairs, hammocks, a wood burning stove, or rustic decorations.

2. Create things for visitors “TO DO”
   Can you create activities that allow guests to become completely immersed in their experiences? Are things that participants can actively do? Think about ways you can encourage guests “to do” something outside of the ordinary.

3. Create opportunities for visitors “TO LEARN”
   Are there educational experiences you can create that would allow guests to absorb information and events in an interactive manner? Opportunities for guests to exercise their “creative muscles” can be created by posing questions to guests, and allowing guests to ask questions, as well as encouraging active participation in educational activities. What do you want guests to learn from the experience? What information or activities will help to engage guests in the exploration of knowledge or skills? Can you tell about the history of your farm? Or interesting stories about your farm?

4. Create opportunities for visitors “TO HAVE FUN”
   Create opportunities for guests to smile, laugh, and enjoy themselves. When guests are entertained, they are not really doing anything but responding to the experience. If guests are entertained, if they are having a good time, they will want to stay longer. What can be done to entertain guests and encourage them “to stay”? How can you make experiences more fun and enjoyable?

Below are some other strategies for creating memorable experiences:

1. **Theme the experience.** Is the agritourism experience family-friendly? Food-oriented? Focused on crops or animals? If so, be sure to carry that theme throughout all aspects of the experience.

2. **Provide positive cues.** Consider incorporating music, highlighting charitable events and causes the farm has sponsored, and illustrating how the farm is environmentally friendly.
3. **Eliminate negative cues or move them to a designated area.** Ensure that smells that may be unpleasant for guests are down-wind of areas where guests might congregate. Keep chemicals and unattractive visuals out of the eyesight of guests.

4. **Mix in memorabilia.** Do you have old photos or equipment that could be put on display for guests?

5. **Engage all five senses.** Never underestimate the importance of sights, sounds, smells, touch and tastes. Consider having taste tests (for example, store bought tomatoes versus farm-grown, vine-ripened tomatoes), or other opportunities for active participation.

**Conclusion**

Creating a fun, enjoyable, entertaining and educational experience for guests can be one of the most rewarding aspects of an agritourism venture. The experience created for your guests should be one that is unique and reflective of your personality, your farm’s personality and the story you want to tell and share with others. Unfortunately, there is no tried-and-true recipe for creating a great experience. However, with a creative imagination, a friendly personality, a strong customer service ethic, and attention to detail, worthwhile experiences can be created for guests. Happy, satisfied guests will come back again and tell their friends and family!

“To sell Jill Jones what Jill Jones buys, you've got to see your destination through Jill Jones' eyes.” (paraphrased, author unknown)

**Biography**

Stacy Tomas is an Assistant Professor and Tourism Extension Specialist in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management at NC State University. Her research focus is on consumer behavior and tourism marketing, with a special interest in visual quality, service quality and tourist satisfaction. From her research, she works to contribute to the understanding of what constitutes satisfying tourist experiences and to provide managerial suggestions on engineering positive experiences for guests. Through NC Cooperative Extension, Stacy works with county cooperative extension field faculty across the state to develop and promote sustainable tourism. In collaboration with community leaders and business owners, she works to develop rural, cultural and nature-based tourism as a means for community and economic development.