

CREATING SUCCESSFUL FARM TOURS

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Hosting tours on your farm or ranch gives you the opportunity to promote your products, provides additional income by charging for tours or boosting sales, and helps tell an important story about Oregon agriculture, rural communities and local food production. Below are key topics to consider when creating a successful farm tour.

Decide what to demonstrate on the farm or ranch

The first step in creating a successful farm tour is to identify points of interest on your operation. Keep in mind that general public may have a very different idea of what is interesting to see than you do. Taking a walk around your farm with friends or other producers can help you decide what to highlight on your tour. Create a route around these points of interest while avoiding potentially dangerous or unattractive areas. Your main goals are to entertain your visitors and keep them safe. For example, farm animals always delight visitors but could pose a safety risk. When choosing whether to include animals on the tour, take into consideration their health, friendliness, barn facilities and handwashing options.

Facilities on the farm

Once you have determined the route and points of interest for your tour, take a close look at facilities and access. If you are hosting tours on your farm, you will need to have public restrooms available. If you do not, you can rent portable restrooms for whatever period of time they might be needed. If you do have restroom facilities and are on septic, check that the system can support the number of visitors anticipated.

Another consideration when offering tours is to have ample parking. Upon arriving, your guests should find clearly marked parking and be able to gather in an area out of weather. Make sure the footing is as level as possible to make getting in and out of cars as easy as possible for the visitors. If your farm is open to the public you may need to comply with ADA regulations. For schools and large groups that arrive in buses, there are some additional things to consider. Will this space be available at all tour times? Can a larger vehicle get in, turn around, and out of the space fairly easily? Is the ground going to be soft at certain times of the year, causing the possibility of stuck vehicles? If bus parking is tricky or not possible, make sure you communicate this during the booking process or reconsider the tour size your farm can accommodate.

General farm tours or topic specific

When planning a tour, think about what type of tour it will be. Is the tour going to cover the general aspects of the farm or is it going to showcase a specific area or activity on the farm? For example, if you have an orchard operation with a farm stand where you sell pressed cider, you could give a general tour of the whole operation or a cider themed tour highlighting where the apples are grown, pressing and processing the cider, bottling and distribution. Themed tours are one way to show different aspects of the farm and attract visitors interested in those specific topics. Themed tours may change throughout the year featuring seasonal activities. A few examples of these types of tours are: soil restoration, orchard care, renewable energy, animal husbandry, and crop production.



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Self-guided tours

Organizing a self-guided tour is one way you can offer the tour experience without having to staff or lead the tour yourself. A successful self-guided tour needs good signage, well-marked routes or trails and a map available for the guests to follow. The map may point out interesting things such as buildings or plants and offer guidance, indicating rough terrain and off limit areas. We recommend that there is a person to greet visitors upon arrival and to answer questions. An interactive option for a self-guided tour is a scavenger hunt, a list of locations to visit or items to find on the farm or ranch. This can be an engaging and organized way to have visitors tour the operation without a personal guide. A small prize or incentive may be offered for a completed scavenger hunt such as a drawing entry, coupon, or free gift. While this style of tour requires minimal staffing, it may lose the personal touch of having an actual tour guide. Along with that, lack of supervision may lead to visitors in areas that are not desired or off limits.



Photo: Audrey Comerford, OSU Extension Agritourism

Tours for school groups

When designing a tour for school groups and children, there are a few additional factors to consider. Tours for children should be a faster pace, include activities that are hands-on and educational, and be designed with the age of the children in mind (elementary, middle school, high school). Also, it's helpful to have specific days and timeslots set aside for larger groups when scheduling school tours so you can be prepared with extra staff and activities if needed. When booking group tours, be sure to review the itinerary and expectations with the group organizers ahead of time so that teachers can prepare students and have adequate volunteers. Field trips such as these can be a large expense for schools so it is important to follow through with what has been promised and give consistent, well-planned educational experiences. For more information and resources on farm school tours, please visit the [Oregon Farm to School](#) program.

Budgeting for tours

Consider how tours fit into your business plan. You may choose to provide short tours at no cost that draw customers to your farm to purchase your farm products or design in-depth educational tours that share about farm production and then charge for those tours to generate additional income. Either way, tours require additional staffing. To determine a tour cost, take into account expenses versus potential income. Income includes registration cost of the tour plus farm stand purchases, as offering tours can lead to more product purchases. Expenses may include staff time coordinating and hosting the tours, value of products sampled, advertising, signage, self-guided tour brochures and keeping facilities tidy and welcoming. Use a break-even analysis to determine the minimum number of guests per tour to make these activities profitable. Charging for tours may be less risky than offering free or low-cost tour and hoping customers buy product. However, you can encourage sales of farm products by ending at a farm store or place to purchase your farm products. Each operation is unique, and one budget does not work for all.

How do guests register for your farm tour

Develop a way to keep track of your tour schedule so that you are prepared and ready to welcome guests. You can think of this as a 4-step process:

1. Guests or groups inquire about your tours in person, or via phone or email.
2. Identify the day/time for the tour with your guests.
3. Get them on your calendar. This can be in a hand-written diary or calendar, an organized computer spread sheet or using a more advanced scheduling program such as Bookeo.
4. Register your guests (and take payment where applicable). Before booking, you should know the minimum and maximum guests per tour. Also, consider whether a deposit is required or implementing a late or no-show policy is right for you. Selling advanced tickets using online platforms such as Eventbrite, Brown Paper Tickets or through your farm website is another option.



Importance of customer service

A farm tour is a great place to show excellent customer service and hospitality. Staff who lead farm tours are the face of the farm so they should be energetic, good communicators, and have skills working with the public. The tour guide should always introduce themselves and what their position is on the farm. The guide is setting the tone of the tour so let the group know at the beginning if they can ask questions during the tour, where the restrooms are and how long the tour will take, etc. If the tour is longer than an hour, consider providing a rest stop where guests can sit, get out of the weather, and possibly have a refreshment. Explain the farm products in an easy and sequential way and use sensory elements when possible. Seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting may engrain that farm experience deeper and make it more relatable to the guest. If visitor attention is diverted, stop and talk about what caught their interest and make it a teachable moment. Photo opportunities with farm signage are fun for guests and provides another source of advertising as guests often share photos on social media. At the end of the tour be sure to say thank you and explain what else there is to do on their farm visit. Can guests walk around the buildings? Are there places to picnic or stay after the tour? Lastly asking guests for a post-tour review, whether on paper or electronically, may help with feedback to improve the tour.



Photo: Wings and A Prayer Alpacas

Resources

[How to Develop a Farm Tour](#)

[Oregon Farm to School program](#)

[Oregon Agritourism Partnership Regulation Limited Liability signs](#)

[ORS 30.671 to 30.677](#)

Safety and risk management

When creating a successful farm tour, look for ways to minimize your risk exposure and keep your guests safe. Be sure that your liability insurance policy is up-to-date and covers the tour activities you provide. In Oregon, limited liability signage is available to inform guests that they are entering a working farm and there are inherent risks with doing so. To be protected by this regulation, the signs must be placed at the entrance of the farm and at key points where agritourism activities are taking place. You may make your own regulation sign, as long as the lettering is one inch in size and it says the language as listed in the law or purchase one from [Oregon Agritourism Partnership](#). [More information about ORS 30.671 to 30.677](#) can be found online. It is your responsibility to minimize hazards as much as possible. This may include walking surfaces, structures, walking paths away from cars, and farm equipment. Animals that are unsafe or unhealthy should be removed from public view. Make sure the correct warning signs are displayed and visible. Examples of warning signs are: electric fences, no climbing on hay bales or farm equipment, wet and slippery surfaces, guard dogs on duty, and moving machinery.

Promote the tour

There are many ways to promote your farm tours: your farm website, social media, advertising, [list all the major ones] Partnering with other businesses to cross promote can also be beneficial For instance if a berry farm sells its products to a bakery for pies, the bakery may advertise for the farm tours. Connecting with lodging establishments may also help bring new visitors to the farm and give the lodging operators confident recommendation to their guests who are looking for local activities. Lastly, always keep websites and social media up to date with photographs and videos to give potential guests a sneak peek of the operation and what to expect when they visit.

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