



# GROWING AGRITOURISM

A Toolkit for Planning and Developing  
Your Agritourism Business in Simcoe County





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# Who is this Toolkit for?

If you are considering the addition of an agritourism component to your farm, the expansion of your existing operations, or just want to explore what it takes to get into the agritourism industry, then this Toolkit is for you!

Throughout this document, we will use the terms operation or business to refer to your agritourism operation. Remember, although you want to enjoy your work, you also want to ensure your agritourism operation is profitable. So, it is helpful to keep a business-oriented mindset throughout the preparing, planning, launching, and operation stages.

This Toolkit also includes useful information for tourism businesses that are related to agritourism (but not necessarily on a farm) such as:

- farmers' markets,
- culinary tourism destinations, and
- other rural tourism operations.

# What you will Learn

This Toolkit contains all the information you will need to help you decide whether agritourism is right for you. The Toolkit also outlines the steps you will need to take to add an agritourism component to your existing farm business or to help grow your existing agritourism business. The Toolkit is divided into four components based on a standard business development planning approach.

## **PREPARE**

This section will help you determine if agritourism is right for you, your family, and your farm. This section will also direct you to resources to consider if you are unsure whether you want to venture down this path.

## **PLAN**

If agritourism is for you, this section will walk you through key considerations for your farm before you welcome guests. This stage requires a considerable amount of time and effort, and this section of the Toolkit will help steer you towards resources that will make this process more streamlined.

## **LAUNCH**

This section will provide you with resources to support your agritourism business once you open your doors to the public.

## **EVALUATE**

Once your business is fully operational, you can evaluate how your business is performing in order to plan how to strengthen your business. This section will also assess ways you can troubleshoot the unforeseen challenges of operating an agritourism business.



## Why Agritourism May Be an Opportunity for You

Simcoe County welcomes approximately 9 million visitors every year, generating approximately \$1 billion in economic activity<sup>1</sup>. In fact, food and beverage specifically makes up 39% of all tourism spending across the County. The number one activity that visitors to the region engage in is 'any outdoor activity'. The combination of interest in 'food and beverage' with 'outdoor activity', gives Simcoe County a strong natural advantage for the development of agritourism activity.

In 2018, the County of Simcoe surveyed the agri-food value chain to identify opportunities to grow the agri-food sector in Simcoe County. The top opportunity to grow the local food economy was identified as expanding tourism across Simcoe County. In short, more visitors = more opportunity to expand the agri-food economy and related businesses. Hence, agritourism.

Clearly, opportunity exists for Simcoe County to grow its agritourism sector. Consumers are increasingly seeking information about food and farming. This trend heightened because of the COVID-19 pandemic; more consumers were drawn to locally produced food. In April 2020, for example, a CBC article highlighted the booming interest in direct farm sales<sup>2</sup>. In the wake of the pandemic, people will also be eager to travel again, but will do so cautiously, being wary of large events, indoor spaces, and close contact.

Agritourism offers the ideal opportunity for families and small groups to get involved in healthy outdoor activities, as well as learn about their connection to the land, food production and access to nutritious foods. Moreover, Simcoe County is the easily-accessible 'backyard' for the entire Greater Toronto Area, the largest market opportunity in Canada. So, think seriously about it – agritourism may be just the thing for you.



<sup>1</sup>Experience Simcoe County. (2019). Domestic tourism snapshot.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/covid-19-farm-gate-sales-booming-customers-looking-for-freshlocal-safe-1.5535723>

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# Part 1

# PREPARE

You are interested to get into agritourism but you are not sure if it is for you. Agritourism can be very rewarding personally and for your business, but it is also not for everyone. This section will help you to determine if agritourism is right for you, your family, and your business.

## What you will learn:

- What agritourism is
- Whether agritourism is right for you, your family, and your business

## 1.1 What is Agritourism?

The Province of Ontario defines agritourism as “those farm-related tourism uses, including limited accommodation such as a bed and breakfast, that promote the enjoyment, education or activities related to the farm operation”<sup>2</sup>.

For the purposes of this Toolkit, Tourism Simcoe County uses a somewhat broader definition of agritourism to include a number of off-farm operations as well as on-farm operations.

Agritourism that happens on farm properties includes uses that promote the enjoyment, education or activities related to the farm operation. Examples include (but are not limited to) on-farm retail, farm tours, accommodations such as bed and breakfasts, or recreation such as horse riding. Agritourism may also interact more broadly with rural tourism activities that include off-farm agriculture-related businesses. Examples include farmers’ markets, speciality retail featuring local producers or food processors, or local food-related events and festivals.

While the Toolkit focuses primarily on farm-based agritourism, it will also be of benefit to individuals interesting in starting or developing off-farm agritourism operations.

The main difference between agritourism and traditional agricultural businesses is the idea of welcoming visitors to your farm. Consumers want to know more about how food is produced and where their food comes from, and agritourism can enable consumers to learn. You, as a producer, may also want to get to know some of the people you grow/raise food or agricultural products for. In a time when rural and urban spaces seem far apart, agritourism can provide an avenue for us to learn from each other, and to have some fun!

The agritourism sector is part of the larger umbrella of rural tourism which “*includes visits to rural settings or rural environments to participate in or experience activities, events or attractions not readily available in urbanized areas*” (p. 1)<sup>3</sup>. Many people who live in cities are interested in ‘getting away from it all’ and venturing out to the countryside. Although people coming from cities may be the largest market, agritourism also presents an opportunity for people who live in Simcoe County to learn about agriculture and build pride in place and community.



<sup>2</sup> Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. (2016). “Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario’s Prime Agricultural Areas: Publication 851”. Retrieved from: <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/landuse/permittedsuses.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. (n.d.) “Developing an Agri-Tourism Operation in Ontario”. Retrieved from: <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/busdev/facts/16-029.htm>.

Many farms in Simcoe County currently offer engaging agritourism activities from farm crawls, to on-farm retail, to bed and breakfasts, to horse rides. As of 2016, 329 farms across the County reported selling farm products directly on their farm<sup>4</sup>. Tourism Simcoe County lists the local rural operations on its Farm Fresh Local Food Agritourism Map.

To learn more about what agritourism activities are permitted in your local municipality, please see section 2.3 Planning Policy Considerations.

## 1.2 Is Agritourism for me?

Getting into agritourism can be exciting, and the opportunities in this industry are ripe. But running an agritourism business is not for everyone. Use the following questions to help you navigate whether agritourism is right for you, your family and your business.

A fillable worksheet with these questions can be found in Appendix A.

### Is agritourism for me?

- Do you want to broaden or diversify your income stream?
- Are you interested in promoting your particular product or brand?
- Do you like interacting with other people regularly?
- Do you like educating people about your farm and agriculture more broadly?
- Are you willing to accept the risk and liability associated with inviting people onto your farm?
- Are you willing to pay the cost of insurance that comes with inviting people onto your farm?
- Are you willing to develop a business plan and revisit it regularly to help support the success of your operation?
- Do you have access to enough capital to invest in the infrastructure, facilities and equipment in order to make this business opportunity work?
- Are you skilled with having an online presence such as a website and social media for marketing and/or sales?
- Do you have demonstrated customer service skills?
- Are you prepared to manage a team of employees?
- Are you prepared to train and educate a team of employees about your farm and agriculture more broadly?
- Are you interested in working on weekends, holidays and outside of regular work hours, in addition to your regular farm work?
- Have you or will you connect with your neighbours to learn whether they support your plan to invite the public to your farm?
- Are you willing to invest your time in the administrative aspects of agritourism, including regulatory and land-use planning paperwork/documentation?

If you answered yes to all or most of the above questions, then agritourism may be right for you! At this stage, you can start to develop a business plan for your operation, drawing on the resources we provide throughout this Toolkit.

If you answered no to a few or many of the above questions, you may be interested in learning more information before you invest time and financial resources into agritourism. This Toolkit contains a number of resources to explore. If you're interested in downloading all the resources referenced in this Toolkit, visit Tourism Simcoe County's Partner Resources webpage.

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<sup>4</sup> Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. (2017). "County Profiles – Simcoe". Retrieved from: <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/stats/county/index.html>.



## Part 2

# PLAN

You have decided that agritourism is a good fit for you and your business. Now comes the important part, planning. There is a lot to consider as you plan your agritourism business, from understanding local planning policies to marketing and social media. This section will help you to cover your bases as you begin to plan.

### What you will learn:

- Planning for your business
- Legal and liability considerations
- Land use planning policy considerations
- Planning for your visitors
- Planning for your workforce
- Marketing and social media



### Start Small

Getting into agritourism can be exciting – and you may have big ideas! However, the best approach may be to start small and expand your agritourism offerings over time. For example, you may want to begin with offering a simple u-pick strawberry field one season. Use the Part 2: Planning section of the Toolkit to gain a full understanding of the time and effort it may take to build out your agritourism business fully but, remember, it can be a good strategy to test the waters with one offering at a time.

## 2.1 Planning for your Business

Planning early in your agritourism journey will pay off in the long run. Business planning involves knowing your market, identifying your product(s) and/or experiences, and identifying your price(s).

For a more complete overview of what you need to know to plan for your agritourism business, check out these resources:

- Direct Farm Marketing Business Resources (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs)
- The National Farm Business Management Resource Centre, Starting Your Farm Business Resources (Farm Management Canada)
- FactSheet on Developing an Agri-tourism Operation in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs)
- Planning for success: How a business plan can work for you and your farm (Farm Management Canada)
- Templates and business guides (Business Development Bank of Canada)



## Developing a Business Plan for Your Agritourism Operation

The opportunities for agritourism are endless – opportunities exist to provide products and services from almost anything on your farm. Before getting started, it is helpful to set your business goals for the short, medium, and long term with regard to your agritourism operation.

To help set your business goals, reflect on your own personal goals, and your business vision, mission and values. Use these items to help make decisions in the development of your agritourism operation. Consider if you should reframe your vision and/or mission as you build this new element of your operation.

If you don't yet have these elements of a business plan, now is the perfect time to work with your family and/or team to craft a vision, mission and values for your operation. This document does not need to be a formal strategic plan, but the document should outline a shared understanding of where you want to go and why. Part of your reason for wanting to get into agritourism will likely be income and profit, and you need to be clear about your broad expectations in this area. But your desire to expand your business into agritourism may also relate to lifestyle, a desire to do something new and exciting, or an effort to provide transition opportunities for the next generation of your family. You should be clear about your hopes and expectations, and document these guiding principles. This framework will help you shape the future of your business.

### **Cash flow**

Another key element of your business plan is your projected cash flow, which includes both expenses and income.

**Expenses** include your fixed costs, such as taxes, insurance, mortgage payments, etc. These costs remain relatively consistent regardless of your sales volume. Expenses also include variable costs; as the term suggests, these expenses will vary depending on the scale of production. Variable costs include expenses for crop inputs, livestock feed, marketing materials, employee wages etc.

**Income** includes all of your revenue streams, such as product and ticket sales.

You can use a monthly cash flow breakdown to help you determine how much of an operating line (line of credit) you need to run your business. In a seasonal industry like agriculture, expenses may be higher in one part of the year, while income may be higher in a later part of the year. For example, if you operate a u-pick pumpkin operation and a corn maze, you will need to pay for your crop inputs and labour in the spring but will receive the bulk of your income in the fall through the sale of pumpkins and corn maize tickets. You will need to ensure you have a sufficient operating line to cover your expenses until the fall when your income rolls in.





You need to have a solid understanding of your expenses to ensure your operation will be profitable with your projected sales. But you also must set your prices at a point that the local market will bear; if you overprice your product, customers will not buy it, but if it's too low they may not value it. Subsection 3 on page 19 provides more information on how to monetize your product.

To learn more about cash flow planning, check out this guide from Farm Credit Canada. Your financial institution can also provide more information, as well as a template to use for creating your projected cash flow.

### **Consider your business structure**

You can select between three main structures for your business:

- Sole proprietorship
- Partnership
- Corporation

The key benefits and drawbacks of each structure are summarized below<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Sole proprietorship**

Typically, new businesses begin as sole proprietorships. In this business structure, legal and tax authorities see an operator and their business as “one and the same.”<sup>6</sup> This business structure is informal and easy to set up. However, the individual is personally liable for all legal and tax considerations for the sole proprietorship.

#### **Partnership**

In contrast to a sole proprietorship, a partnership involves two or more parties. Although a legal structure is not formally required, accountants and lawyers typically advise the creation of contractual agreements. These agreements outline partner responsibilities, the percentage of income and expenses for each partner, etc. Partners retain personal liability for legal and tax considerations.

#### **Corporations**

Incorporation is a formal legal process through which a separate legal entity (or business) is formed. The owners of the corporation are shareholders. These shareholders now may have a degree of liability protection for legal and financial considerations. Incorporation can also provide tax benefits through tax deferrals<sup>7</sup>. In a corporation, company owners are typically paid as employees. Record-keeping requirements, including audited financial statements, are much higher for corporations than for sole proprietorships or partnerships. As a result, corporations are more expensive to operate than sole proprietorships and partnerships.

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<sup>5</sup>Business Development Bank of Canada. Choose the right structure for your business. Accessed from <https://www.bdc.ca/en/articles-tools/start-buy-business/start-business/advantages-different-business-structures>

<sup>6</sup>Business Development Bank of Canada. Choose the right structure for your business. Accessed from <https://www.bdc.ca/en/articles-tools/start-buy-business/start-business/advantages-different-business-structures>

<sup>7</sup>David McLeod. Farm Corporations. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Accessed from <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/busdev/facts/16-033.htm#table1>

The Farm Corporations Fact Sheet from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs provides more insights into the basics of incorporation and how to incorporate your business.

You should speak with your accountant to decide which business structure is best for your operation. If you decide to form a partnership or to incorporate your business, you should consult a lawyer.

### Find Help with Business Planning

You shouldn't plan alone; a farm business advisor can help you. Contact a local farm business advisor by visiting the Canadian Association of Farm Advisors directory for Ontario.

Throughout Simcoe County, supports are available for planning and networking that will help you with your business planning activities. The organizations below can help with business planning and help you stay informed about potential funding opportunities as you develop your agritourism business.

**Table 1. Local business planning support organizations by location in Simcoe County.**

Location	Organization Contact for Business Planning Support
City of Barrie, Orillia and all of Simcoe County (except for Clearview, Wasaga Beach or Collingwood)	Small Business Centre of Barrie, Simcoe County and Orillia <a href="http://barriebusinesscentre.ca">barriebusinesscentre.ca</a>
West Simcoe County (Wasaga Beach, Collingwood, Township of Clearview)	Centre for Economic Development and Business <a href="http://cfsouthgeorgianbay.ca">cfsouthgeorgianbay.ca</a>
North Simcoe (Tiny Township, The Town of Penetanguishene, Tay Township, Springwater Township)	North Simcoe Community Futures Development Corporation <a href="http://nscfc.on.ca">nscfc.on.ca</a>
South Simcoe (Essa, Innisfil, New Tecumseth, Bradford West Gwillimbury, Adjala-Tosorontio)	Nottawasaga Futures <a href="http://nottawasaga.com">nottawasaga.com</a>
South Georgian Bay (The Town of Collingwood, the Town of Blue Mountains, Clearview Township, the Town of Wasaga Beach)	South Georgian Bay Small Business Enterprise Centre <a href="http://enterprisecentre.ca">enterprisecentre.ca</a>
East Simcoe County (including the City of Orillia, Oro-Medonte, Severn, Ramara and Rama)	Orillia Community Development Corporation <a href="http://orilliacdc.com">orilliacdc.com</a>
Other	Business Development Bank of Canada <a href="http://bdc.ca">bdc.ca</a>  Henry Bernick Entrepreneurship Centre, Georgian College <a href="http://georgiancollege.ca">georgiancollege.ca</a>



## Three Steps to Plan Your Agritourism Offering

You should consider three (3) main activities in planning your agritourism offering:

1. Determine your audience or market;
2. Identify your assets and product; and
3. Monetize your product

### **1. Determine your Audience/Market**

Doing market research and planning early on will help set your agritourism business up for success. Your market will include a combination of customers from your community and outside of your community. Research shows that some of the major reasons for vacationing and visiting rural destinations like Simcoe County include:

- To build and strengthen relationships
- To improve health and well-being
- To rest and relax
- To have an adventure
- To escape routines and stress
- To learn
- To reminisce

Agritourism activities can address all of these travel motivations.

**See Appendix B for a worksheet you can use to answer these questions for your own agritourism business.**

### **Steps to Determine your Audience/Market**

#### **(A) Determine Your Potential Customers (i.e. 'Who they are')**

One of the great advantages of agritourism is that many potential visitors exist in the vast market area of the Greater Toronto Area to the south, home to urbanites eager to get out of town and experience the rural countryside. Ask yourself these key questions to help determine your market and your potential customers:

- Who is your ideal customer and why?
- Where do your potential customers come from?
- If passing through the area, where are your customers going?
- What stage of life are your customers in?
- What is the age group of your target market?
- What is their income level?
- Does your market include various cultures and ethnicities?



### **Destination Canada Explorer Quotient**

An advanced tool for tourism businesses in Canada is the Destination Canada Explorer Quotient (EQ). Using the EQ Toolkit, businesses can understand the values and attitudes of different traveller types. The EQ Toolkit will walk you through how to identify who your customers are and give practical steps on how to market to them based on their EQ profiles. For more help on identifying market segments, contact your Regional Tourism Organization.

## (B) Get to Know Your Customers (i.e. 'What They Want')

Once you understand your market, you can learn about what they like. Ultimately, this information will help you build your product. Use these key questions to help you determine the interests of your market:

- Are your potential customers visiting year-round? If so, what do they expect at different times of the year?
- Will your potential customers be more interested in visiting in a particular season? Why?
- How long are your potential customers expecting to visit?
- Are your potential customers interested in products, experiences, or both?
- What types products or experiences are your potential customers interested in and why?
- Are you aware of the different reasons local and more distant visitors are likely to be interested in your operation, and can you communicate with and cater to both audiences?

Did you know? Your Regional Tourism Organization (RTO7) has lots of useful information about the kinds of visitors in Simcoe County. To learn more about this research and access these tourism insights, view the RTO7 resources page at [rto.ca/Public/Resources](https://rto.ca/Public/Resources).



### Have you talked to your neighbours?

The reality of agritourism is that inviting the public to your farm may impact your neighbours. While this is not required, it is courteous to reach out to your neighbours and discuss your plans for agritourism. Before starting this conversation, visit section 2.3 of this Toolkit to gain a better idea of the activities that are and are not permitted on your farm. Listening to their concerns and maintaining open communication can help influence your business planning activities and make for a more positive experience for you and your community.



## 2. Identify your Assets and Product or Experience

When it comes to agritourism, your products or services may not be different than what you already do as part of your business – but rather you now show visitors what you do. Identifying your assets will help you choose the parts of your farm or agritourism operation that can offer a product or experience for visitors. Identifying your assets doesn't have to be a complicated process. Start by jotting down the physical and environmental assets on your farm.

**Physical assets** are real, tangible things associated with your business. For example, these assets include different types of land, buildings, roads and trails, animals, and even wildlife.

**Environmental assets** are perceived resources that your farm can offer potential visitors. These assets include fresh air, quiet surroundings, and closeness to your rural community.

**Intangible assets** are things like your reputation, brand, goodwill or any patents, trademarks or copyrights you might have. For example, sustainable agricultural practices may be considered an intangible asset. The ability to offer a unique experience might be thought of as an intangible asset. Be aware also, that what you take for granted, may be considered a unique experience that someone is willing to value and pay for.

Once you have completed this exercise, consider asking a friend or family member who doesn't farm to visit your property and list the assets for your farm. You may be surprised by what other people perceive as assets on your farm!

**“A tourism product is what you buy,  
while a tourism experience is what you remember.”<sup>8</sup>**

Destination Canada



### Greening Your Business

Going green can have numerous benefits for your business. Consumers are increasingly aware of and drawn to sustainable practices, and there are several savings on energy, water and waste disposal that you can take advantage of. More broadly, actions associated with reducing your environmental footprint can help contribute to a better environment in your community. To help, Explore Lake Simcoe published a Green Agritourism Toolkit which includes a self-assessment as well as practical steps to green your agritourism operation.

#### Tip: Look beyond your farm property

Assets that could benefit your agritourism business can also go beyond your farm property or off-farm agritourism operation. These external assets can help shape the product or experience you may choose to offer. Do any of these assets exist near your operation?

- A highway or freeway with a nearby off-ramp
- A network of hiking or cycling trails/roads
- Overnight accommodations
- Other agritourism operations
- Restaurants, cafés or markets
- A nearby event or seasonal activity that is likely to draw large crowds to your area
- Cultural attractions
- Resorts

If these types of assets are nearby, how can they help shape your product or experience? Do opportunities exist to partner with other business owners?

<sup>8</sup> Destination Canada. (2011). Experiences: A toolkit for partners of the CTC. Retrieved from: <https://www.destinationcanada.com/sites/default/files/2016-11/Programs.SignatureExperiences.Toolkit.Experiences.2011.EN.pdf>



### **3. Monetize Your Product**

Determining the price for your product or experience can be challenging. The price should meet your customers' expectations while also bringing in a profit for your business. At this stage of planning, you should have a clear picture of your target markets, and the products or experiences you will offer.

Consider the following aspects of pricing when planning how much you will charge for your products or experiences.

#### **Unique Products and Experiences**

Understanding how your product differs from others that are available to your target market is important. The more unique your product or experience, the more money you may be able to charge.

#### **Competitor Pricing**

Understanding how your competitors price their products or experiences is important. This information will, in part, determine the upper price limit for your products or experiences. Understanding where your competitors are located, and how their offering is similar and dissimilar to yours, is crucial.

#### **Partnerships**

While understanding your competitors is important, understanding opportunities for partnerships with other businesses can be a win-win situation for you and other business owners. Visitors often are drawn to an area because of multiple attractions. So, consider exploring options to offer a joint package of products or services with other businesses. This 'product or experience development' strategy could include opportunities for selling other local products, or experiences that build off one another. For example, a cider-tasting experience at one business could be paired with an on-farm overnight stay at another nearby location. Partnerships with other like-minded businesses is also known as "co-opetition".





**Bundle Your Products or Experiences**

Bundling can be a strategic way to market your products or experiences. You will, of course, have a set price for each product and/or service you offer. But you may consider offering pre-set package deals that provide customers with a discount on the individual product/service prices. For example, you may offer a bundled price for a pick-your-own pumpkin, hot apple cider, and a family pass to your corn maze. The example below demonstrates how a family bundle may be offered:

**Table 2. Example of a bundled product or experience price.**

Example Product	Example Price
Pick-your-own pumpkin	\$7 per pumpkin
Access to the corn maze	\$5 per person
Hot apple cider	\$4 each
Family of four bundle – includes 4 pick-your-own pumpkins, full family access to the corn maze and four hot apple cider beverages.	\$55.00 (note that this represents an approximate 15% discount on the individual prices for each item, times four people)

Notice how the family bundle is offered at \$55.00. Without the bundle, four of each of the products 1-3 would cost \$64.00 in total. When setting your bundle pricing, remember your cost of production to ensure good profit margins.

**Seasonality**

You may be able to charge a higher price for your product or experience depending on the season and likely demand for that type of experience at that time of year. This seasonal pricing will vary depending on the product or experience you offer. Thanksgiving, Easter, Christmas, March Break, and long weekends in the summer are a few seasonal considerations for pricing.





## Premium Pricing

Depending on the products or experiences you plan to offer and your target audience, you may be able to charge a premium price compared to your competitors. Your product or experience may lend itself well to charging a premium price if any of the following conditions are met:

- Your product or experience caters to a very specific, otherwise known as niche, market (If this is the case, consider searching for information on how these customers spend their disposable income)
- Your product is produced in a specialized way that differs from other similar products (i.e. organic, using new or innovative technologies or processes)
- Your experience is delivered in a specialized way that differs from other similar experiences (i.e. beer tasting guided by a beer sommelier)

If you use premium pricing, you should ensure you have a strong rationale and that your staff/team are prepared to discuss the quality of your product or experience with customers.



## What is a niche market?

A niche market is a subset of a larger market. For example, yoga with farm animals is a niche market belonging to the broader agritourism market, and ice wine is a niche market within the broader market for wine. Why is this relevant? Niche markets tend to have unique and specialized needs and desires, which can command premium prices. So, think about potential specialized experiences that you can offer to niche markets – and the premium prices that you may be able to charge for them.

## Other Resources to Help you Decide on Price

Refer to pages 71-82 of **OMAFRA's Direct Farm Marketing Business Resources** for information on *how to take the guesswork out of pricing*.

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs has a series of business decision calculators available to help you make financial decisions. Their **Cash Flow Planning Worksheet** can help you understand your planned or actual cash inflow and outflow over one year.





## 2.2 Legal and Liability Considerations

Farm and agritourism operations inherently involve risks, and the extent and nature of risks increases when you invite visitors onto your property.

As a result, you need a good risk management plan for your operation. To begin the process of creating such a plan, you should do a careful walkthrough of your property. Identify all the potential risks or hazards.

While identifying and managing personal risks on your property may be second nature since you are familiar with the location, visitors do not have this background knowledge. You must try to put yourself in the shoes of your visitors when you are identifying potential risks. Perhaps a friend who does not work on your farm or agritourism operation could provide a fresh perspective<sup>9</sup>.

The **Integrating Safety into Agritourism website** provides a helpful resource for the walkthrough process.

Remember, you can never fully eliminate risk, but you can take steps to manage it. You can employ a mix of three general strategies depending on the particular risk:<sup>10</sup>

- Reduce risk
- Manage risk
- Transfer risk

The information provided in this toolkit is intended solely as a guide; it should not be treated as legal advice. Given the complexity of liability considerations involved in an agritourism operation, you should consult both your lawyer and farm insurance provider to ensure you have necessary coverage for your unique needs.

### **Reduce risk**

In reducing risk, you can make changes to your operation to improve safety and reduce hazards – for yourself, your staff, and your visitors. For example, you may limit access to certain areas of your farm or agritourism operation with fencing or locks on doors.

### **Manage risk**

In managing risk, you can prepare plans and procedures for you and your staff to follow to help prevent an accident from happening and dealing with challenges when they arise. For example, you can create daily, weekly, monthly, and seasonal checklists to help prompt you to reassess your equipment and buildings.

You should create a safety plan which details the protocol you and your staff should follow in the event of an emergency. The plan should include guidelines, contact information for your team and emergency personnel, and a map of your operation.<sup>11</sup> Train your team on the protocol and review the plan as necessary.

You should also create an incident report to document any crises or near misses. Through these reports, you record what happened, who was involved and the relevant contact information. Detail how you addressed the incident and reflect on what actions you will take to prevent this type of incident from happening again.

In consultation with your lawyer, you should consider the legal structure of your agritourism operation. Incorporating your business may help to protect yourself personally from the financial or other liabilities of the corporation.<sup>12</sup> Your lawyer will be able to help you weigh the pros and cons of each business structure as it relates to your individual situation.

<sup>9</sup> Oregon Agritourism Network. (2017.) Agritourism Handbook. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Kelly. (2006.) Managing Risk on Farms Open to the Public. Retrieved from Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs: <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/busdev/facts/15-005.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Florida Agritourism Association. (2017.) Florida Agritourism Toolkit. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Service Ontario. (2020.) Business Information Guide. Retrieved from Service Ontario: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/business-information-guide>

## Transfer risk

In transferring risk, you should ensure that your insurer is aware of your agritourism plans. You may already have general farm or business insurance, which covers such items as barns, equipment and livestock, but this insurance is insufficient for an agritourism operation. You should review both farm market commercial general insurance, as well as farm and commercial liability insurance, with your insurer. You can learn more about these types of insurance in the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs' factsheet on **Managing Risk on Farms Open to the Public**.

Remember that insurance is a vital risk management strategy to protect yourself, your family and your business. You should factor a comprehensive policy that fits the unique needs of your operation into your operational budget. Insurance premiums will vary depending on your planned activities and your desired level of coverage. Speak with your insurance provider regularly as your agritourism offerings change or grow over time.

To further protect your operation, you should consider the use of signs and waiver forms. Signs can inform visitors about the risks of the on-farm activities and indicate off-limit areas. Waivers are formal legal documents that might be well-suited to slightly riskier activities, such as horseback riding. You should consult your lawyer to ensure the correct wording for signs and waivers, a lawyer can confirm if the waiver will hold up in a court of law.



### Remember - this may be your visitors' first time on a farm

Farms are new experiences to most people – what is common sense to you on your farm, may not be common sense to your visitors. Using signs to indicate important rules can be a helpful way to reduce the risk on your farm. Examples of helpful signs include:

- Do not feed the animals
- Do not enter or restricted area
- Do not try to pet the farm animals
- Do not climb on or touch equipment\*
- No pictures please

\* If you have a playground area, make sure signs are clear that visitors can interact with all the materials in this section

## Public Health Considerations

Before you welcome guests to your agritourism operation, you must know and follow public health requirements as outlined in the **Health Protection and Promotion Act** and its associated regulations. Below, we describe the key public health considerations you must address in your operation.

### Safe Water

If visitors have open access to drinking water on your property and the water is not drawn from a municipal source, you should contact a public health inspector to determine whether you have a Small Drinking Water System (SDWS). If you have such a system, you need to follow provincial regulations. You can learn more about the on-site assessment process and requirements in Simcoe County by visiting the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit [www.simcoemuskokahealth.org](http://www.simcoemuskokahealth.org).

### Disease Prevention & Injury

If visitors can have any contact with livestock on your farm or agritourism operation, you must address additional public health considerations. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care provides Recommendations to *Prevent Disease and Injury Associated with Petting Zoos in Ontario*, including information about rabies prevention on their website: [www.health.gov.on.ca](http://www.health.gov.on.ca).

You can contact the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit for more information on public health requirements for your agritourism operation.



### ***Food Safety and Traceability***

If you serve food at your agritourism operation, you must familiarize yourself with, and follow, the requirements under the Health Protection and Promotion Act and the Food Premises Regulation. The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit will also conduct periodic inspections.

You can visit the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit website to learn more about guidelines and training for food service operators, food safety best practices and more about the efforts to support food donations and food rescues. You can also learn more about the process for starting a home-based food business in this Ministry of Health guide.

### ***Smoke-Free Ontario Act, 2017 (SFOA) Compliance***

Workplaces and public places are required to maintain smoke-free and vape-free indoor spaces (including the smoking or vaping of cannabis) at all times including inside work vehicles and public transportation. Smoke-free/vape-free signs must be posted at all entrances, exits and washrooms. These signs are available from the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit by calling Health Connection at 705-721-7520 (1-877-721-7520). Inspections can be requested for SFOA compliance through this service as well.

### ***First aid***

You should ensure that you or one of your on-site staff are trained for first aid and that a first aid kit is located on site (with a defibrillator). Even if the agritourism activities at the farm or agritourism operation are not particularly risky, accidents can happen at any time.

### **Final thoughts on legal and liability considerations**

As you develop your risk management strategy, you must find the middle ground between protecting yourself and your business from liability and ensuring you still provide opportunities for your guests to have fun safely. While you have many legal and liability factors to consider in building and operating an agritourism business, remember that being proactive will help to keep everyone – yourself, your team, and your visitors – safe. Safety is an essential step in the journey to providing fun experiences.

You can ask other stakeholders in the agritourism industry for recommendations of lawyers and insurance brokers. You can also search the Canadian Association of Farm Advisor's database for experts in these fields. The Co-operators offers a member benefits program, which includes advanced farm coverage and a program discount, to Ontario Federation of Agriculture members. The Co-operators offers liability insurance for agritourism activities.



## 2.3 Land Use Planning Policy Considerations

One of the most important calls you can make to ensure your agritourism venture is a success is to your municipal planning department. You will want to make sure that your ideas are permitted in your local municipal zoning and policy by-laws. If you do not take this important step early in your planning process, you may end up facing costly delays, or even costlier, have to change plans. You do not want to realize a month before your planned opening that you need to submit a rezoning application which may take months and may or may not be approved!

Visit your local municipal website for more information:

Township of Adjala-Tosorontio

Town of Midland

Township of Severn

Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury

Town of New Tecumseth

Township of Springwater

Township of Clearview

Township of Oro-Medonte

Township of Tay

Town of Collingwood

Town of Penetanguishene

Township of Tiny

Township of Essa

Township of Ramara

Town of Wasaga Beach

Town of Innisfil

### Simcoe County Planning Regulations 101

#### *The Province of Ontario*

Planning policy that outlines what is and is not allowed on agricultural or rural land starts with the Province. The Provincial Policy Statement outlines high level goals and policies for all of Ontario. In 2016, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) released *The Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Prime Agricultural Areas*. If your farm is designated as being located in a prime agricultural area, these guidelines will apply to you. There are also areas of Simcoe County that are located in the Provincial Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, and Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. These are specialty areas in Ontario with additional policy considerations. You will need to comply to these plans as well as your local municipal zoning bylaws.



## **The County of Simcoe**

Based on the broad goals and policies of the Province, the County of Simcoe also has a role to guide the growth and development in the County. The County of Simcoe's Planning Department produces an Official Plan, which designates different land uses and special interest areas throughout the County. For example, the Official Plan indicates which land in Simcoe County is considered 'agricultural,' and lists which uses are allowed on the land. The County acts as an approving authority for local municipal official plan amendments, which means that their approval is necessary to amend your local official plan. The County also acts as a commenting agency for local zoning by-law amendments, which means that while their approval is not necessary to amend a by-law, they have the opportunity to provide comments on potential changes.

## **Your Local Municipality**

The directions from the Province and the County of Simcoe provide guidance to your local municipality. Local municipalities each develop Official Plans which outline municipal goals and direct growth and development within the municipality. Each municipality will develop policies and permitted uses related to different uses of the land. For example, the Town of Springwater's Official Plan specifies that in lands designated as 'Agricultural', the "predominant use of land in the areas so designated shall be for agricultural purposes and farm-related uses which may also include reforestation, forestry and hunting".

Each municipality also enacts a zoning bylaw, based on the policy objectives of the official plan. The zoning bylaw separates all properties in the municipality into different 'zones', each with their own allowable uses. The zoning bylaw specifies:

- Uses permitted in each zone
- Definitions for each use
- Lot size and frontage
- Building size and height

Each municipality has zoning maps which you can use to determine the zoning (i.e. the permitted uses) for your property.

In addition to the zoning bylaw, the municipality may also have other bylaws that you may need to be aware of. Be sure to become familiar with the different bylaws and ask your municipal planning department whether your proposed agritourism venture is affected by any municipal bylaws. Bylaw topics can include:

- Events
- Signs
- Waste Management
- Traffic and Parking
- Noise
- Servicing
- Landscaping/buffering
- Development charges

Lastly, if you intend to convert an existing building or construct a new structure, you may need to apply for a building permit. Check with your local municipal building department to confirm what does and does not require a building permit (in some cases, even large piles of dirt can require a permit). The requirements for building permits are regulated by the Ontario Building Code, Ontario Building Code Act, and local municipal bylaws. They are a way for municipalities to ensure buildings are made to health and safety standards. Additionally, some municipalities may require site plan approval as part of the process of building a new structure. To figure out what approvals and permits are required for your project, you should reach out to your local planning and building department.

Even before getting a building permit, consider how you build and where you build on your property to reduce potential risks in the long term. For example, extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and severity across Simcoe County. To reduce risk, consider the following:

- Do not build in areas that are prone to flooding
- Consider whether trees or powerlines have potential to cause damage if they fall
- Ensure well water and septic systems are well maintained

If you call the planning department sooner rather than later, you can ensure you will not encounter any unexpected hurdles when you expect to begin welcoming visitors. Your local planners will be happy to help guide you through the different processes to help bring your idea to life.

Check out Appendix C for a checklist of what questions to ask your local planner.

For further reading, check out the Province of Ontario's "Citizen's guide to land use planning". You can learn about all of the rule and processes municipalities must follow to develop planning policy. Topics covered in the guide include enabling legislation, zoning bylaws, official plans, and building permits.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### *Questions to ask yourself and your local planning department:*

#### *Are agritourism activities permitted on your property in the municipal zoning bylaw?*

Provincial Policy allows for agritourism activities on prime farmland as an "On-farm Diversified Use" (OFDU). However, your local municipality may have additional requirements. For example, they may have a certain threshold to ensure that your farm is considered a bona fide farm so that you may operate an agritourism business. Check with your municipality early in the planning process to ensure your proposed activity is permitted.

#### *What types of agritourism activities are permitted in the zoning bylaw?*

Your local municipality may have restrictions or definitions for agritourism. For example, there may be limits on the size and location of buildings supporting agritourism activities on your farm. It is very important to check with your local municipality before you build.

#### *Do you need to include parking for customers?*

Your local municipality may have requirements for parking such as surface material, size, capacity, location, and access to the road.

#### *Do you intend to build a new structure?*

You may need to apply for a building permit depending on the type of structure, how large it is, and where it is located.

#### *Do you intend to convert an existing building to host people (example: converting a barn to host events)?*

You may need to apply for a building permit or submit additional applications to ensure the building is up to safety codes such as fire safety, and ensuring emergency safety exits, and adequate sanitary services.







***Do you intend to host events?***

Your local municipality may have noise restrictions, limits on event gathering numbers, or restrictions on serving food or drinks. The municipality may also have requirements for overflow parking on the street and may require you to apply for an event license. The municipality may also require permits for events.

***Do you intend to sell alcohol or allow people to consume alcohol on site?***

The Alcohol and Gambling Commission of Ontario (AGCO) is the provincial body responsible for administering the Liquor Control Act. Visit the AGCO web page on Liquor Sales Licenses and this helpful FAQ page for more information. The municipality may also have restrictions on where guests are able to purchase or consume alcohol.

***Do you intend to sell products from other farms along with your own?***

Check with your local municipality to learn which products you can sell on your farm. Some municipalities may require all or some of the available products to be produced on your farm or produced on nearby farms. Some municipalities may allow some products from elsewhere.

For example, the Township of Clearview's zoning by-law dictates that only produce that is from the farm operation may be processed on the farm, and an accessory farm produce retail operation may sell "produce, including processed produce, predominantly from the farm."

***Do you intend to offer overnight accommodations?***

Check with your local municipality to learn which types of accommodations you can offer on your farm (i.e., campsite, bed and breakfast, or RV pad), what support services you need to provide (i.e. washrooms, hookups, pump-out, etc.), and the number of guests you can host.

***When should I call the planning department?***

As soon as possible. You may be required to submit an application, whether for a building permit, special event license, rezoning, site plan approval or official plan amendment. Application times vary depending on the request and the application type. You should contact your planning department at least six months in advance of your planned opening to ensure enough time.

### *What is a zoning variance?*

In certain circumstances, you may be able to apply for a minor variance to the zoning bylaw. Minor variance applications take less time to process compared to full rezoning applications. They are for uses that follow the general intent of the zoning bylaw but do not exactly follow the specifications. For example, if you are expanding your existing retail space, and can't fit the additional parking spaces required by the parking by-law, you may seek a minor variance for relief from the requirements. The criteria to consider a minor variance are derived from the Planning Act, and some municipalities may have other criteria of what constitutes a minor variance. Contact your local planning department for the requirements of such an application.

### *Do I need a rezoning application?*

A rezoning application is a request to the municipality to change your zone, or to amend or relax some of the restrictions for the zoning on your property. The municipality may approve the rezoning application if your application is consistent with the goals and objectives listed in the Official Plan. If they are not, you may require an official plan amendment (OPA).



## **Re-Zoning and Notice of Public Meeting**

If you are planning to apply for a re-zoning of your property, or an official plan amendment, the Planning Act requires the municipality to hold a public meeting. This means that your neighbours (those within 120 meters of your property) will be notified of the changes on your property, so it is best to go and visit ahead of time to have a discussion and understand any concerns that they may have. This way, they are not surprised when they receive a notice of public meeting from the municipality.

### *What is an official plan amendment?*

An application to your local government to amend the official plan designation of your property or applicable policies to allow for a desired use that may not be permitted by policy or land use designation. Amendments to a local official plan must be consistent with the Provincial Policy Statement, conform to provincial plans and the upper tier official plan.

### *How will an agritourism operation impact my tax assessment?*

Depending on the type of agritourism, the property tax assessment on your farm may be subject to changes. It is recommended that you consult with the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) on potential changes to your tax assessment. For general inquiries, visit MPAC's webpage of FAQs for Farm Properties.

### *Is my agritourism idea considered an on-farm diversified use?*

The Province defines on-farm diversified uses as “uses that are secondary to the principal agricultural use of the property, and are limited in area. On-farm diversified uses include, but are not limited to, home occupations, home industries, agritourism uses, and uses that produce value-added agricultural products.”<sup>13</sup>

There are a few considerations on what is considered an on-farm diversified use. The first is that the use is located on a farm. Your local municipality may require proof that the property is actively farmed. The second is that the use is secondary to the principal agricultural use of the property. The secondary nature of the use is based on space and on time. Spatially, the use should be smaller than the agricultural use on the property, and in the case of time, the use should be temporary (i.e. an event) and does not interfere with your farm or surrounding farms. For a more in-depth explanation, contact your local planning department and read through OMAFRA's Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Prime Agricultural Areas.

<sup>13</sup> Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. (2014). Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario's Prime Agricultural Areas Publication 851. Retrieved from: <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/landuse/facts/permitteduseguide.pdf>.





## 2.4 Planning for Your Visitors

Now that you have determined the kind of experience or products you will offer your customers and the planning-related requirements for you to do this, it is important to plan for the whole of your visitors' experience. Consider exactly what customers will need to enjoy their visit, from the moment they enter to the moment they leave.

### Accessing the Property

Consider how your visitors will arrive at your location. Will they see a sign for your corn maze on the highway? Will visitors bike to you as part of a cycle tour? Will they walk over from a nearby bed and breakfast or hotel? However visitors arrive at your property, ensure that they are comfortable – consider the following:

- Ensure enough parking is available or plan options for overflow parking
- Include bike parking & something to lock bikes to where they will be visible
- Ensure that pedestrian walkways are clear and separate from vehicle traffic
- Use large signs to ensure that visitors know where and how to enter
- Register your business on Google Maps so people can easily search for directions to your business
- Consider which seasons your agritourism business will be open. Ensure farm and agritourism access is safe in all those seasons. For example, make sure to keep snow cleared from all parking lots and walking paths in the winter
- Consider how to ensure your agritourism operation or event is as accessible to all ages and abilities as possible

The **Rutgers Cooperative Extension Agritourism Working Group** has a list of materials and checklists available to download and use. Particularly useful materials include the Agritourism Animal Safety Assessment Checklist and the Agritourism Parking & Traffic Assessment Checklist.

The Province of Ontario aims to become accessible by the year 2025. To support this initiative, the Province has published several laws and a framework to make Ontario more accessible. Visit [www.ontario.ca/page/accessibility-in-ontario](http://www.ontario.ca/page/accessibility-in-ontario).

Ohio AgrAbility has an excellent resource titled: **"Making your events, festivals and agritourism accessible to the public"**.





## Have you considered becoming “Ontario by Bike” certified?

You can let your visitors know that they can experience your farm by arriving on bike! Check out the requirements for becoming Ontario by Bike certified and joining the network of other certified businesses by visiting their website.

### Enjoying the Farm and Agritourism Operation

Consider how you would like customers to interact with your farm or agritourism operation. As discussed in Section 2.2 Legal and Liability Considerations, put yourself in the shoes of your customers. Do you have proper signs letting visitors know where and where not to go? Do you have signs and other resources informing them what to do and not to do (e.g. “no smoking” signs, handouts, farm “orientation” from employees)? How do you think visitors will best enjoy their visit to the farm?

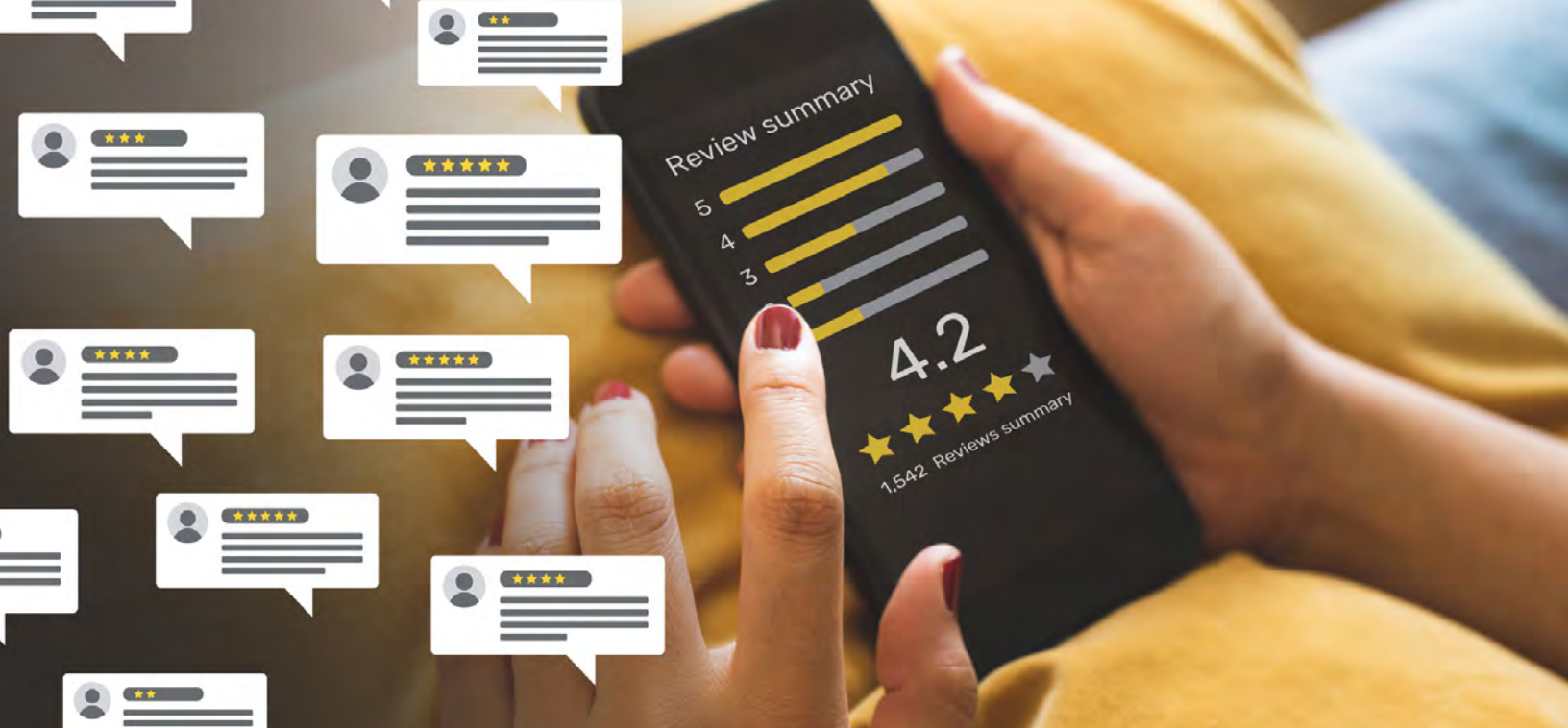
Consider the sanitary requirements for your customers. When inviting visitors to your farm, you will need to offer a clean washroom. To welcome customers with young families, you should provide a changing station in your washrooms. If you intend to have many guests at once, you may want to ensure several washrooms are available.

You may want to post online instructions for your guests so that they know how to best enjoy your farm comfortably. Let them know to bring proper footwear, if necessary. If you expect guests to be outside for long periods of time, let them know to bring sunscreen or proper sun wear, to prevent sun burns and other health risks. If guests spend time in wooded or overgrown areas they should be reminded of how to protect themselves from ticks.

If you are offering prepared food at the farm (see Section 2.2 regarding regulations for selling/serving food) you must have a handwashing or sanitizing station. You should also consider the following:

- Offer a comfortable space for your guests to sit down and eat that is comfortable at all times that you are open
- Identify locations on your property with nice views for meal/rest areas
- Locate seating near trees or shade structures to provide relief from the sun and extreme heat
- Provide a heated area for shoulder seasons

How will your customers pay for products and experiences? It may be worthwhile to purchase point-of-sale capability so that customers can pay by card or cash.



## Be clear about your operating hours

Since you are welcoming visitors to your farm, be clear about your hours of operation. To avoid visitors when you are closed, be sure to ensure your operating hours are clearly stated and easy to find on your website and social media. You may also choose to post signs on your property, but this should be done in addition to providing your operating hours online.

### Leaving the Farm or Agritourism Operation

When your customers leave the farm or agritourism operation, make sure that they know how and where to leave a review or send feedback. Tripadvisor, Yelp, Facebook, and Google are all examples of platforms where you can encourage guests to leave reviews. Consider printing out a QR Code linking to a review site so that guests can immediately leave a review using their smartphone. Good reviews are excellent ways to market your business, while bad reviews provide opportunities for reflections and improvements. You may also choose to create your own customer survey using an online service such as SurveyMonkey, or simply hand out feedback forms.



## Lessons Learned During COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted many businesses across the world and damaged many sectors of the economy. There are, however, some practices that started during the pandemic that may become commonplace in the years following. For example, many businesses started online prebooking and payment. During the pandemic, this has enabled businesses to limit the number of people on premises at one time for health and safety reasons. However, online booking has also enabled businesses to better plan for an expected amount of people.

To read more, Cornell University published a helpful webpage about [agritourism best management practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit has resources and guidance documents to help support safe business operations during the pandemic.





## 2.5 Planning for Your Workforce

To provide exceptional customer service to your visitors, you need the right staff and employees. You need enough of them to handle the workload and your team needs the correct skills and training to achieve success.

As with any aspect of business, you need a plan to meet your goals. Finding and training staff requires investing time and money. So, you will want to make the process as smooth as possible, and find and keep the best fits for your operation.

### **Steps to develop and enact your human resources plan:**

- 1) Assess the strengths and limitations of your current team
- 2) Consider your needs
- 3) Identify solutions
- 4) Write a job description
- 5) Prepare an employee handbook
- 6) Recruit staff
- 7) Interview candidates
- 8) Onboard and train your staff

### **Ontario Employment Agencies**

There are a number of Ontario Employment Agencies within Simcoe County that can assist you with developing job descriptions, recruiting talent, and interviewing. Some agencies also provide training for employers related to workplace safety and insurance, payroll taxes, and funding opportunities. A majority of services are free of charge or at cost to the employer.

Visit the [Employment Ontario](#) page on the [Immigration Simcoe website](#) for more information and contact information for the locations within the County.







### 1) Assess the strengths and limitations of your current team

Depending on the size of your operation, you may be starting with just yourself and your family. Or, you may already have employees on your payroll. Reflect on the areas where each team member – including yourself – shines. Consider each team member's limitations and where they could improve. Remember that not every person will excel with every type of task; a good manager recognizes and supports employees in areas of weakness. **The Business Development Bank of Canada has helpful resources** to assist you with assessing your team.

### 2) Consider your needs

Think about your successes and challenges over the past year. Consider if you experienced any crunch periods in which you felt you did not have enough human resources. Think about your growth plans; what is your team's capacity to handle additional responsibilities? What limitations might they face in terms of availability and what skills might they lack?

### 3) Identify solutions

Your analysis of the limitations of your current team should flow into a consideration of the types of skills and attributes you need to round out your team. Review opportunities for training current staff and/or list skills and responsibilities that might be better met through the addition of a new team member. Revisit your projected cash flow to consider your budget for hiring. Decide if you need additional support on a seasonal, casual, part-time or full-time basis.

### 4) Write a job description

To help ensure a new hire will meet your needs and can onboard to the team effectively, you both need clarity in roles and responsibilities. An effective job description is key.

Start by listing the responsibilities for the person in the role. Add descriptions of the skills, experience and qualities needed for success in the position. Contextualize how this role contributes to the overarching operational goals.<sup>14</sup> Create an easy-to-understand title that reflects the role. Consider the salary range for the role and training requirements. Explore the **5-step recruitment plan for small businesses** developed by the Business Development Bank of Canada.

You will use the job description during the hiring, onboarding and performance review processes.

You can reference the AgCareers.com website for profiles of careers in the agri-food industry. Then, you can build on these profiles to create a job description to match the unique needs of your operation.

**The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs** also provides a template for job descriptions.

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<sup>14</sup> Government of Alberta. (2015.) Tourism Business Planning Guide. 55.

### 5) Prepare an employee handbook

To help employees better understand your expectations and their responsibilities, you need a clear employee handbook. Even if you begin with just one or two employees, this handbook can start small and be updated as your agritourism business grows. The specific content included in this document will vary by the operation but this resource should include:

- A code of conduct – a list of dos and don'ts
- General policies
- A safety/emergency plan

#### Legislation to consult

You should include the relevant information on employee and employer responsibilities under the following legislation in your employee handbook:

- [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#)
- [Workplace Safety and Insurance Act](#)
- [Employment Standards Act](#)

For more information on provincial regulations, visit the [Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development website](#).

For more information on human resources, refer to the [factsheet on creating and implementing a human resource management plan](#) from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.



### Living Wage Policies

When determining your wages for your employees, you may want to consider adopting living wage policies. [The Canadian Living Wage Framework](#) says "a living wage reflects what earners in a family need to bring home, based on the actual costs of living in a specific community." A living wage is higher than minimum wage. If you are interested in learning more about this concept and how to apply it in your business, you can learn more at [livingwagecanada.ca](http://livingwagecanada.ca).

#### Health and safety considerations

You should also outline the necessary safety and skills training for employees. You should keep records of the completed training in the event an accident occurs.

For more information on safety, visit the [Canadian Agricultural Safety Association](#) and [Workplace Safety & Prevention Services](#) websites.

You should also follow the recommendations of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit regarding the health and safety of your employees. You can learn more about their workplace health recommendations on their [website](#). Public health can also provide the latest advice regarding physical distancing and distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relatedly, the Ontario Government also compiled a [list of resources](#) to help prevent COVID-19 in the workplace. [www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-workplace-health-safety](http://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-workplace-health-safety)

### 6) Recruit staff

Use the job description to create a job posting for any positions you seek to fill. The postings should also include:

- basic information about your operation
- due date and time for applications
- application requirements (e.g. resume, cover letter, references)
- method of application and contact information if necessary (e.g. email, mail/drop-off)

When creating your job posting, it may be helpful to review postings for similar positions at other companies. Consider what you like about these postings and how you could improve upon, and tailor

them for your operation.

You can advertise the posting in several ways. Be strategic in your promotion of the posting to reach a broad audience. Consider the following options:

- word of mouth
- advertisement in a local newspaper
- job boards
  - local options: Work in [Simcoe County](#), [la Clé](#), and [Agilec](#)
  - generic/national options: the [Government of Canada's Job Bank](#), [Indeed](#) and [LinkedIn](#)
  - industry-specific options: [AgCareers.com](#) and [AgriRecruiting.com](#)

Tell your team when you begin the search for a new employee; your staff will appreciate being kept in the loop and may want to share the posting with some of their contacts.



## Feeding Your Future website

Recruiting employees to rural and agri-food industry jobs can be challenging. For example, public transportation options to your operation are likely limited and some roles are seasonal. In 2020, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and its partners launched the [Feeding Your Future website](#). It promotes jobs in the Ontario agri-food industry and training opportunities. For example, new employees can complete the [Ontario Agriculture Worker Safety and Awareness Certificate](#) and watch training videos in the [Focus on Food Video Series](#). This project is supported by Canadian Agricultural Partnership funding.

### 7) Interview candidates

Once you receive the applications from the job posting, review and rank the applicants. You may find it helpful to create a checklist to help streamline this process; what skills and experience must your ideal candidate have and what skills and experience would it be helpful for them to have?

Next, make a shortlist of candidates. You may decide to pre-screen the selected candidates by phone or email. Think of this process as a mini interview with two or three questions.

Sample mini interview questions:

- What interested you in this position?
- What are the key skills you could bring to this team?
- If hired, what would be the main support you would need during the onboarding process?

You can use this additional information to narrow your list of interviewees for more formal interviews.

You should prepare interview questions in advance of the formal interviews. That way, you can ensure you will cover all the relevant information and provide interviewees with an even playing field for comparison. You can search online for common interview questions for your desired position.

Ensure your questions cover both the technical skills (e.g. equipment operating skills, financial literacy) and interpersonal skills (e.g. teamwork, customer service) that the individual will need to be successful in this role. Incorporate both behavioural and situational questions into your interview list.

Behavioural questions can help you assess an individual's interpersonal skills, like their problem-solving skills. For example, you may ask the interviewee to describe a time they had to collaborate with a colleague who had a different personality from theirs. Interpersonal skills are key to success in the agritourism industry, so reflect carefully on the types of questions you ask and the various responses you receive.

Situational questions can help you assess an individual's knowledge and work methods. For example, you may ask the interviewee how they would handle a disgruntled visitor.

You should allot one hour to each interview when planning your schedule, although some interviews will go faster, depending on the interviewee and the nature of the position.

Ideally, you will complete interviews in person or through video calls so you can read an interviewee's body language in addition to listening to their verbal responses. During the interview, you may find it helpful to take notes on the interviewee's answers to reference later.



If possible, it is helpful to have a second person conduct the interviews with you; that way, you can meet after finishing the interviews to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each applicant.

You may also include a more practical component to the interview. Consider whether a hands-on test would provide helpful insights into the individual's skills and suitability for the role. For example, if you offer trail rides and the new employee would work with your horses, ask the individual to get a mare from the pasture and tack her up for a trail ride. Seeing the candidate in action can help their skills to shine through and provide some insights on onboarding requirements.

Once you have completed your interviews and selected your top choice, it is well worth contacting the individual's references for further insights into their strengths and work habits. Consider speaking with two or three references.

At this stage, you should be ready to make a job offer. Typically, you would first make a verbal offer over the telephone. In this verbal offer, you would specify work hours, salary/wages, and desired start date.

If the candidate expressed their interest, you would follow this verbal offer with a written work agreement or employment contract. This document would cover the elements outlined in the verbal offer, as well as information on vacation, benefits, pay period, probationary period, etc. You and the employee both need to sign the document if the individual decides to accept the offer and join the team.

You can access a template for creating an employment contract at

**[www.cfib-fcei.ca/en/tools-resources](http://www.cfib-fcei.ca/en/tools-resources)**.



## 8) Onboarding and training

Once a new employee joins your team, you will need to train them on policies and procedures for your operation, health and safety, and their specific responsibilities. You can use your employee handbook to assist in this process and draw on the expertise of other team members.

You also may want to consider enrolling your staff in Service Excellence Training, which is offered by RTO7 and the Counties of Bruce, Grey and Simcoe in collaboration with Ontario Tourism Education Corporation. Visit the [RTO7.ca](https://www.rto7.ca) for more information. There may also be other specific requirements for certain job functions. For example, SmartServe training may be required for employees who are serving alcohol. If your employees say they are SmartServe or First Aid certified, ask them for a copy of their paperwork or certification card for proof.

Remember that training is an ongoing process; we can always improve our skills to strengthen our businesses. Employees will appreciate investments we make in their learning and visitors will benefit from an improved customer experience.

To assist in the training and team development process, you should consider incorporating a performance review process into your work plan. The frequency of this process can vary depending on the business's operating window and company culture. A manager of a seasonal agritourism operation, for example, may opt to conduct small monthly performance discussions, while a manager of a year-round operation might opt for more in-depth semi-annual or annual performance reviews. Remember a performance review is a two-way conversation that ultimately benefits the employee, the manager and the broader business.

A human resources plan is a living document that you should revisit periodically as your operation evolves. Earmark some time annually to review this plan and consider any updates or changes you need to make to help improve productivity or profitability. Perhaps you should update someone's job description, for example, as their responsibilities may have shifted since they joined the team. Maybe someone would be better suited to a different role in the operation, or perhaps it is time to hire an additional team member.



### Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council

The Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) offers the [AgriHR Toolkit](#) to help employers in the agricultural industry find, retain and support staff. In 2021, a one-year membership to access this toolkit costs \$99 plus HST.

## Other important considerations for your workforce planning

You must ensure you comply with the **WSIB coverage** requirements for your operation. You also have obligations through the **Canada Pension Plan** and **Employment Insurance**. Your accountant can provide some supports in the processes for enrolling in each program.

As you incorporate additional staff into your operation, you should consider training to help ensure you meet your obligations as an employer and serve as an effective manager. You can search the **Canadian Association of Farm Advisors directory** to find professionals who can help you fulfill your human resources needs and obligations. You can also consider training opportunities available through companies such as **AgCareers.com**.

Due to the seasonal nature of tourism, you may find that your employee turnover is high. So, the more you can streamline the documents and process for onboarding and training (i.e. developing and revisiting your employee handbook), the easier it will be for you and your team each time a new person starts.





## 2.6 Marketing and Social Media

This section of the Toolkit will help you begin to understand how to promote your agritourism destination to your desired market. Here, you will learn how to build and market outward-facing brands, integrate with other marketing and web-based initiatives, and social media tips to set you up for success.

### ***Understanding your market***

As discussed in section 2.1, it is crucial to understand who you are marketing to, as this will determine how you want to promote your product or experience. Your target market will influence the tools that you use for marketing. For example, if your product or experience is more geared towards retirees, marketing through local news outlets or Facebook may yield better results than using other social media such as Instagram or Twitter.

In developing an understanding of your target market it is important to note that different visitors will have different motivations and expectations with regard to your agritourism offering. For example, more distant tourists looking for a destination may be interested in exploring a unique outdoor experience, possibly with value-added elements such as ability to stay in the area and sample local cuisine. Local visitors may be more interested in getting access to fresh local products and providing educational opportunities and/or fun events for their family members. Understanding your markets will help shape your product offering and how you communicate with each group.

Remember also the critical importance of providing a positive experience for your visitors. Word of mouth is often the single most important contributor to continued market success.

### ***How to build an outward-facing brand***

Building an outward-facing brand requires an investment of both time and money. It can be helpful to hire brand designers and marketers to help design your logo, website, and brand imagery, for example. The cost of these services can vary depending on your needs. Developing a logo and brand imagery may be something better-suited for a hired professional. Developing a website, however, is something that can be learned. Website platforms such as Wix, Squarespace, and WordPress, all provide website templates

and tools for you to build your own online presence (see table 3). These providers also often provide helpful tutorials and one-on-one support. You will want to do some research on what each provider offers before paying for a membership. Some providers offer extended services such as e-commerce solutions and analytics, marketing, website and social media analytics, and integration with other marketing services such as MailChimp, for example.

**Table 3. Website building platforms and associated price range.**

Website Platform	Approximate Price Range
Wix	\$6 - \$37 per month*
SquareSpace	\$12 - \$40 per month
WordPress	\$5 - \$59 per month*
Shopify	\$37 - \$380 per month

*\*these providers also have a free membership option, with limited capabilities.*

Before you begin investing in marketing services though, you can start by simply referring to your business' mission, vision and values (see section 2.1). Use your mission statement, vision and values to develop a brand identity. What colours, symbols, or words do you feel align well with your business' mission statement, vision and values?



## E-commerce and Online Marketing

To read about examples of farm businesses that have tapped into e-commerce and online marketing, visit the [Northern Ontario Farm Innovation Alliance website](#) and the [Ontario Federation of Agriculture's Resource page](#) for more information about direct to consumer sales.

When it comes to marketing an outward-facing brand, there are some simple things you can do that can go a long way for your agritourism operation:

**Be consistent with your brand:** This applies to both who you are as a brand, but also how your brand operates. People want to be sure that they are getting the experience they expect when visiting your operation, so making sure you stick to who you are is important. This also means staying consistent with operating hours. A customer's impression is formed within the first few seconds of visiting, and it is safe to say that a negative one will form if your website says you are open when in fact you aren't. You can be sure that you will hear about this indirectly through negative reviews in Tripadvisor and/or other review sites!

**Understand your customer's life experience:** Many of your customers will have grown up and live in urban areas often without having been to a working farm. According to polling by IPSOS Reid, 94% of Canadians know little to nothing about agriculture.<sup>15</sup> Be patient and ready to answer questions you might think are obvious.

Want to learn more about communicating effectively with the public? Check out Farm and Food Care's Factsheet on [How to Communicate with the Public](#).

<sup>15</sup> Canadian Centre for Food Integrity (2019) Canadian Centre for Food Integrity 2019 Public Trust Research.





## Developing your Marketing Plan

OMAFRA has created a factsheet for “Developing your Marketing Plan”. It consists of six steps to a successful marketing plan, including:

1. Know yourself, your customer, and the marketplace
2. The Marketing strategy
3. Implementation strategy
4. My Resources
5. Establishing price
6. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate

### *Integration with wider marketing and web-based initiatives*

Understanding how your agritourism operation fits with other attractions in your region is important. Visitors are more likely to spend the day visiting multiple farms and operations in areas with complementary agritourism activities. This “rising tide lifts all boats” is also known as partnerships, where you can work with your neighbours or other tourism operations to help attract customers to the region.

Tourism Simcoe County supports several agritourism initiatives to draw visitors to the area. There are initiatives that your agritourism operation can benefit from joining. For example, these include Maple Weekend, Bees and Honey, SIP Simcoe, and Made in Simcoe County. For more information on connecting with tourism marketing initiatives, contact Tourism Simcoe County.

You can join the **Ontario Farm Fresh** Organization as a member if you grow and sell agricultural products in Ontario. Ontario Farm Fresh provides knowledge and leadership to help you grow your farm fresh experience. Ontario Farm Fresh helps its members by providing networking opportunities, representation to government, education resources, collective publicity and marketing, and merchandising materials.

Another related initiative that can benefit agritourism operations is the **Ontario Made** initiative by the Ontario Government. If you manufacture processed agri-products, you might be eligible to register those products to receive promotional materials for your operation.

The **NAFDMA International Agritourism Association** is a membership organization that enables members to keep up with worldwide industry trends, access webinars, and connect with other agritourism operators around the world.

**ToDoOntario.com** provides curated adventures for people looking to explore North of the Greater Toronto Area. ToDoOntario also provides opportunities to market and advertise on their webpage.

Local Chambers of Commerce can also help you build your operation’s brand and reach. A membership with your local chamber can allow you to take advantage of various marketing and business to business networking initiatives. Contact your local Chamber of Commerce for more information:

- Alliston & District Chamber of Commerce
- Angus Chamber of Commerce
- Barrie Chamber of Commerce
- Clearview Chamber of Commerce
- Collingwood Chamber of Commerce
- Cookstown & District Chamber of Commerce
- Orillia Chamber of Commerce
- Oro Medonte Chamber of Commerce
- Ramara Chamber of Commerce
- Southern Georgian Bay Chamber of Commerce
- Wasaga Beach Chamber of Commerce

### *Social media tips for success*

Having an active social media presence is a critical part of marketing your operation. Research shows that 61% of all tourists, and 89% of millennials, rely on social media as a primary sources of tourism information.<sup>16</sup> However, different platforms are more effective for certain types of posts than others.

A few tips for your social media success:

**Keep it simple:** Try not to overload your audience with too much information. Consider providing just enough to draw them in to your website or visit your farm.

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/286408>



**Hashtags:** Hashtags are a way to group like posts on social media platforms. By incorporating hashtags into your social media posts, you can draw in attention from users that may not have otherwise seen your post.

**Technology can do it for you:** If you're not someone who wants to generate social media content continuously throughout the week, you can use online programs to help generate content and schedule your social media posts across multiple platforms. Spend a chunk of time each week organizing your marketing, and let technology roll it out for you. [Hootsuite](#), [Monday.com](#), [Feedly](#), [Buffer](#) and [Loomly](#) are just a few popular platforms.

**Find your virtual voice:** Your business can have a voice. Consider how your social media can relay your mission, vision, values and brand. For example, is your voice calm, relaxing and warm? Or is it energetic and exciting?

**Talk to your customers:** Using social media is a great way to market, but it can also be a place to interact with your customers too. Don't be afraid to respond to comments, like, and share posts when appropriate. Just remember that everything you post can be seen by your customers, so it is important to keep your comments professional.

Luckily, there are also several resources specific to agriculture to help guide your social media engagement.

Farm and Food Care has developed a tip sheet for posting on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Across all platforms, their tips for success include:

- Posting Regularly
- Interacting with others
- Sharing other posts
- Being yourself
- Cross-promoting your platforms

Food and Farm Care Ontario offers a wide range of [Ag-Ambassadors Resources](#). Their webpage includes everything from shareable farming factsheets, to helpful resource documents like "Communication 101" and "Dealing With Difficult Situations".

**User-generated content:** As you develop your marketing and social media content, you may wish to explore options to incorporate user-generated content (UGC) into your strategy. UGC refers to the content, such as reviews and photos, that your visitors generate. This type of content is different than more formal content (e.g. Facebook and Twitter posts) you create on your operation's official social media accounts. The voice of UGC is your visitors, as opposed to your business. Your local destination marketing organizations can provide some assistance as you explore how to incorporate UGC into your marketing strategy. This Hootsuite article provides more information about the benefits of using UGC in your social media strategy.



### Did you know?

The Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick has developed a [Social Media Toolkit](#) for farmers. The Toolkit includes step by step guides to several social media platforms, a guide to building a website, and helpful tips and tricks so that you can become a social media pro.





## Part 3

# LAUNCH

Now that you have prepared, and planned for your agritourism operation, you are ready to begin welcoming visitors to your farm or agritourism operation.

After all, visitors are fundamental to the success of your operation. Customers also often bring joy. Your heart may be warmed, for example, by watching a family introduce their child to strawberry picking. You may see the excitement on someone's face when they first pet the horse that they will be paired with for a trail ride.

In addition to these pleasures, any customer-oriented business will also face some challenges, such as answering difficult questions or addressing complaints. So, dedicate the time to continue to improve your customer service skills. You will be happy you did!

### What you will learn:

- Customer relations 101
- Managing customer questions and feedback
- Site maintenance aspects to be aware of



### Contact List

This Toolkit has introduced many different contacts to keep track of. Use the Contact List Worksheet in Appendix D to keep all of the relevant contacts for your agritourism business in one place.





## 3.1 Customer Relations

When you open your agritourism operation, you are combining your passion for agriculture with a drive to engage with the public by drawing visitors to your operation. Great customer service is key to the success of your business. Visitors who had a positive experience on your farm or agritourism operation will want to return and will tell their friends.

### **Before visitor arrival on farm or at your agritourism operation**

Before visitors come to your property, they will likely have already interacted with your business through your website, social media, or by telephone. To assist potential visitors, keep your website and social media up to date with your current offerings and operating hours. Provide information on safety, rules, appropriate attire, and payment options. Train your staff on a standard phone greeting and etiquette. Ensure your team is professional, knowledgeable, and courteous across all platforms.

### **Regular site maintenance**

To help ensure an excellent experience for visitors, consider the creation of checklists for your team to complete prior to opening for the day, throughout the day, and at the end of day. Sample templates for each period of the day are listed below; you can build on these frames to suit the needs of your unique operation.

#### **Before opening**

- If you take down entrance and parking signs in the evening, put them up again
- Put up your open sign or flag
- If you have a gift shop or food service area, check your inventory and refill your displays
- Ensure you have sufficient copies of any maps or documents for visitors

#### **Throughout the day**

- If applicable, check your restrooms. Do they need to be cleaned? Do you need to restock any supplies (toilet paper, paper towel, etc.)
- Check your hand sanitizing stations. Do they need a refill?
- Sanitize high-touch surfaces



### **End of day**

- Sweep as needed
- Empty all garbage receptacles throughout your operation
- If applicable, clean and restock restrooms
- Refill hand sanitizing stations
- Sanitize high-touch surfaces
- Take down open sign/flag, entrance signs, etc. if necessary
- Check and restock any local promotional materials (brochures for other attractions, bed and breakfasts, etc.)
- If you are over the two-bag garbage limit, you will need to take excess garbage to your nearest landfill or hire someone to pick it up

### **Welcome customers**

You and your team should have a professional and friendly approach to greet visitors. This step begins with how you look. All team members should have name tags and company shirts. Consider providing hats with company logos if your team members spend a lot of time outdoors.

You should also prepare a list of the key points each team member should cover when they welcome visitors to your operation. While you don't want your greeting to appear scripted, you also want to communicate the key messages visitors will need to know. Ensure your body language is welcoming and professional too. Welcome your guests with a smile.

Elements of a professional greeting:

- Team member's name
- Name of the agritourism operation
- Highlights of the main offerings/activities available today
- Ask your visitor a question or two to show you are engaged with the conversation. These answers will provide useful insights for your marketing plan.

### **Potential questions:**

- Have you visited our operation before?
- How did you hear about us?
- Do you live nearby? If not, where did you travel from?

### **Be prepared to answer questions**

Your customers will have questions during their visit. They may have logistical, local tourism, or agriculture related questions. Consider the types of questions your visitors may ask and prepare your staff to provide professional and helpful answers.

### **Logistical questions**

Customers will want to know about your products and services, your amenities, and your guidelines for activities on your property. Ensure all your staff know the answers to such basic questions. Signs also serve as important visual cues to help provide directions and information. Consider the addition of the following types of signs to help orient your visitors:

- Arrows to washroom facilities (if available)
- Arrows to various attractions
- Dos and don'ts for individual attractions
- Advertisements for any bundling options (see Section 2.1)
- Product/experience pricing



Make sure your employees know it is ok if they do not know the answer to a customer question. It is a better strategy to teach your employees to know who or where else to go for if they need help answering a question, rather than answering incorrectly.



### **Local tourism questions**

If customers are unfamiliar with the local community, they may have questions about other nearby attractions, restaurant recommendations, or overnight accommodations. By answering these questions, you not only provide valuable information (and thus good customer service!) to your visitors; you are also helping your community to shine. All local businesses will benefit if they support one another. Consider having a display of brochures from area attractions, restaurants, hotels, and bed and breakfasts.

### **Questions about your production practices and agriculture**

Remember, many visitors may not know much about agriculture, so you are providing an opportunity for them to learn. You will want to train your staff to answer these types of questions. Sample questions include:

- What crop is growing in that field?
- Why do only bulls have horns?
- Is your operation organic? If not, why not?
- Why do you spray your crops?
- What do you feed your livestock? Why?

Many consumers may also be concerned about the environmental impacts of the agricultural industry and may have critical perceptions of the industry based on information from mainstream or social media. To help prepare your staff for such questions, teach them about your best management practices (i.e. nutrient management, use of no-till or cover crops, etc.) on your farm or agritourism operation.

Make sure you are respectful when responding and provide the key information to answer the question. If you are faced with a question you do not know how to answer, be honest with the visitor. Perhaps you can connect them to another team member more knowledgeable in the area, or you can ask the visitor for their email address so you can provide some additional information once you've had a chance to compile the key resources.

Sometimes, visitors will have views that conflict with your production practices. Perhaps, for example, you have a conventional production system and the visitor believes organic systems are best. If a visitor has a firm stance, acting appeasing may be your best course of action.<sup>17</sup> Note that you understand their point of view and briefly outline current regulations or best practices. Highlight your shared interest in food safety and/or animal welfare.

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<sup>17</sup> Monika Roth and Jim Ochterski. (2016.) Getting Started in Agritourism. Cornell University Cooperative Extension. 9.





## **Agritourism Employees Serve as Ambassadors for the Agricultural Industry**

Your team becomes the face of your operation and, in turn, representatives of the broader agricultural industry. You and your team should be informed and professional advocates for the industry. People who serve in such ways are popularly known as “agvocates.”

When training new employees, remember they may not have a background in agriculture. Even if they do, they may not be familiar with your sector. So, you must help them learn about your crop production and/or animal husbandry practices. Your team should be able to answer questions about the agricultural sectors represented in your operation and point visitors to more in-depth sources of information as necessary.

Farm & Food Care Ontario is a registered Canadian charity that focuses on building trust in food and farming. The organization provides many helpful resources for ag ambassadors.

### **Customer complaints**

In the customer service industry, complaints will arise. Visitors may complain directly to a member of your team or customers may post a negative review online or send an email. In all cases, you should respond in a professional and timely manner. Apologize for the visitor’s disappointment or frustration and consider how you can address their concerns.

Although it can be tricky to face criticism, you should reflect on these comments to consider how you can learn from the experience and improve the experience for subsequent visitors. For example, should you provide more detailed guidelines for visitors on your website and upon arrival? Can you provide additional staff training to help ensure they are equipped to deal with a broader range of visitor needs?



## Part 4

# EVALUATE

Now that you have successfully started your agritourism business and things are going well, take the time to pause, reflect and evaluate on how things are going. If you realize you have too much on your plate, you can always scale things down. Or, if you think you are ready for the business to continue growing, you can return to Part 2 of this Toolkit and plan for your expansion.

### **What you will learn:**

- Methods to evaluate your business and your mental health
- Key relationships to maintain

## 4.1 Troubleshooting issues and strategies for mitigation

When you have your agritourism business up and running, it will be important that you continue to monitor your business and troubleshoot any challenges that may arise. It is recommended that you routinely do the following steps:

### **Maintain Good Relationships**

It is important that you take time to maintain relationships and communication with a wide variety of stakeholders around you. It is recommended that you regularly communicate with:

#### **Neighbours**

Many people move to the countryside for a peaceful lifestyle, away from the crowds in the city. If not properly consulted, neighbours may feel like their peaceful country lifestyle is threatened by the crowds visiting your property. There may be issues of trespass by (un)knowing guests that wander onto your neighbour's property. Communicate often to develop a plan that everyone is comfortable with and to ensure there are no negative side effects that they are experiencing.



## **Other Agritourism Businesses**

As discussed in this Toolkit, partnerships with other agritourism businesses can stimulate more business. You can create synergies and use word of mouth marketing to send customers to other farms or agritourism operations. By keeping up with other agritourism businesses, you can take part in wider marketing strategies and events such as Maple Weekend, or a farm crawl. You can also create support systems for each other, developing and sharing new ideas and ventures.

### **Tourism Simcoe County, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and local municipal economic development staff**

Staff at your local tourism, DMO and economic development offices are trained to network and stay connected to emerging trends in tourism. They will also have access to good practices and can help create partnerships with other businesses in your area.

## **Accounting**

In the evaluation process, you should also reflect on your business plan and review your financial situation. Do your incomes and expenditures align with your projections? If not, why not? Are you turning a profit? Consider if you can decrease any expenses, if you need to revisit your pricing strategy, or if you should discontinue a product or service offering. Explore whether you should make any changes to your marketing strategy. Your accountant can assist you with this financial review process.

## **Check in With Yourself**

Farming is already a demanding job. Adding agritourism on top of it can be overwhelming. Reflect on your mental health and whether you are enjoying the agritourism portion of the business.

Like your physical health, everyone has mental health and wellbeing. Your mental health exists on a spectrum and can range from excellent and thriving to struggling or in crisis. Your mental health is influenced by many conditions of your daily life, including work, relationships with others, events in your community and even climate change. Taking care of yourself first is important. Consider your mental wellbeing before you prepared to take on the time commitment and stress that may accompany operating an agritourism business, consider reviewing OMAFRA's **business owner's guide to identifying and managing stress**.

Remember, everyone can improve their mental wellbeing. Learn more about improving your mental health with these resources:

### **Canadian Mental Health Association mental health brochures**

### **Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit community services for mental health and well being**

If you or someone you know needs help, immediate support is available via the Ontario Mental Health Line. Call ConnexOntario at 1-866-531-2600, or chat online via <https://www.connexontario.ca>. For more mental health resources, please visit the Do More Agriculture Foundation resource page.

## **SWOT Analysis**

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis is a useful exercise to contemplate what your business is doing well and what aspects can be improved. Conducting a SWOT Analysis can help you to identify next steps for your business and help you to plan for the coming year.

The OMAFRA Factsheet on **Developing an Agritourism Operation in Ontario** has a description of how to conduct a SWOT Analysis for your farm or agritourism business.

## **Risk Assessment and Risk Management**

The identified threats from your SWOT Analysis can also be considered risks. It is important that you identify, assess and prioritize the various potential risks associated with your agritourism business – everything from labour to public relations – and develop a risk management plan.

Farm Management Canada offers several resources to help farmers across Canada to manage risk on their farms. Visit [fmc-gac.com](http://fmc-gac.com) to learn more.





## Summary

Now that you have gone through all four parts of this Toolkit, you are now well on your way to planning and opening a successful agritourism business! Adding an agritourism offering to your farm or off-farm business can be a challenging yet rewarding project that can benefit you and your family, your business, and your community. Remember to continually evaluate your business and adjust as necessary. If you would like to expand your operation, you can refer back to this Toolkit to plan your expansion at any time.

And most importantly, good luck and have fun!



## Appendix A: Is Agritourism For Me Worksheet

Question	Yes	No
Do you want to broaden or diversify your income stream?		
Are you interested in promoting your particular product or brand?		
Do you like interacting with other people regularly?		
Do you like educating people about your farm and agriculture more broadly?		
Are you willing to accept the risk and liability associated with inviting people onto your farm?		
Are you willing to pay the cost of insurance associated with inviting people onto your farm?		
Are you willing to develop a business plan and revisit it regularly to help support the success of your operation?		
<i>If you answered yes to the previous question, do you have the skills to develop such a plan or are you willing to draw on the skills of business planning experts?</i>		
Do you have access to sufficient capital to invest in the infrastructure, facilities and equipment in order to make this business venture work?		
<i>If you answered no to the previous question, are you willing to explore grant and low-cost loan options?</i>		
Are you proficient with having an online presence such as a website and social media for marketing and/or sales?		
<i>If you answered no to the previous question, are you eager to learn or do you have a core team member who could fulfill this responsibility?</i>		
Do you have demonstrated customer service skills?		
<i>If you answered no to the previous question, are you eager to learn?</i>		
Are you prepared to manage a team of employees?		
Are you prepared to train and educate a team of employees about your farm and agriculture more broadly?		
Are you interested in working on weekends, holidays and outside of regular work hours, in addition to your regular farm work?		
Have you or will you connect with your neighbours to learn whether they support your plan to invite the public to your farm?		
Are you willing to invest your time in the administrative aspects of agritourism, including regulatory and land-use planning paperwork/documentation?		

## Appendix B: Determining Your Audience/Market Worksheet

### Part 1: Determine Your Potential Customers

1. Who is your ideal customer and why?
2. Where do your potential customers come from?
3. If passing through the area, where are your customers going?
4. What is the age group of your target market?
5. What stage of life are your customers in?
6. What is their income level?
7. Does your market include various cultures and ethnicities?



## Part 2: Get to Know Your Customers (i.e. 'What They Want')

1. Are your potential customers visiting year-round? If so, what do they expect at different times of the year?

2. Will your potential customers be more interested in visiting in a particular season? Why?

3. How long are your potential customers expecting to visit your farm?

4. Are your potential customers interested in products, experiences, or both?

5. What types products or experiences are your potential customers interested in and why?

6. Are you aware of the different reasons local and more distant visitors are likely to be interested in your operation, and can you communicate with and cater to both audiences?

## Appendix C: Questions to Ask Your Local Planning Department

**Note:** This is not an exhaustive list of all the planning requirements you might need to know but is intended to be a starting point for the conversation with your local planner. It is best to have an open conversation about your property and your proposed idea to fully understand what approvals are needed.

- What is the designation of my property? What uses are permitted on my property as noted in the Official Plan?
- What is the zoning of my property? What uses are permitted by the zoning by-law?
- I want to start an agritourism operation (insert specifics). Is that permitted by the Official Plan and Zoning by-law? What amendments or variances do I need?
- What other permits and approvals do I need for this type of operation?
- How long will it take to receive the amendments, approvals, and permits that I need for my operation?
- How many parking spaces are required for my proposed operation?
- How much will it cost to apply for an official plan amendment or zoning amendment?
- What is the difference between a zoning by-law amendment, and a minor variance? Does my proposed operation meet the requirement for a minor variance?
- What products am I allowed to sell on my farm? Do they need to come from the farm, or can I sell my neighbours products?
- If I build a new structure, or apply for an official plan amendment, how will my property taxes be affected?
- Is my agritourism idea considered an on-farm diversified use?



## Appendix D: Contact List Worksheet

Name:	Affiliation:
Phone:	Notes:
Email:	

Name:	Affiliation:
Phone:	Notes:
Email:	

Name:	Affiliation:
Phone:	Notes:
Email:	

Name:	Affiliation:
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Name:	Affiliation:
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