

2009 Farm Survey Results

By Jane Eckert

We can learn from other farm marketers, and I want to share with you this month some of the recent responses to an online survey that I conducted.

School Tours

You can *make money* at school tours, and this is a very popular activity offered on farms today. In the past, many farms looked at conducting school tours as a give-back to the community. However, today we are looking at schools tours as a profit center. In fact, 69% of my respondees charge from \$5.00 - \$8.00 for school children to come to the farm (most often, the children take home a product, and sometimes educational materials provided by the farm.)

If you are one of those farms offering tours for less than \$5.00, I encourage you to review your program, the length of stay by the class, and what you offer. We truly provide an educational benefit to the school children who visit our farm, and you deserve to make a return for all of your time and efforts.

Host Special Events

It's clear to me that farms today understand the benefits of hosting groups on their farm. Whether you create a seasonal festival, host non-profit groups for special activities, or conduct classes and workshops, people enjoy coming to the farm. Many of these events include admission and/or special fees for participating. As I mentioned last month, the time is right to offer cooking classes, as more people in today's economy are eating at home and relearning to make tasty meals.

Advertising Expenditure

I am often asked, "How much should I be spending on advertising?" While there is no one right answer, I will tell you that you do need to allocate funds to market and promote your business. You really can't just rely on your location and word of mouth to grow your business. I wish you could.

Farm markets today are spending between 1 – 16% of their gross revenues on advertising. Ranked in order, here are the strategies they utilized for marketing: web site, local newspaper, printed pieces, online advertising, tourism publications, radio, family publications, local television, billboard and cable television.

Farm web site's were by far the highest ranked marketing strategy as being your "most effective" advertising method. Yet, I continue to go to farm shows and meet farmers that don't have a web site or have one that is just not competitive in design and layout. Today's web site needs to be planned out, using keywords to score higher in the searches, an easy to use navigation system, and a sophisticated "backend" that lets you analyze what pages are of most interest to your customers.

Online Advertising

By far the biggest surprise to me was that to learn that 51% of the farms were utilizing online advertising (Pay Per Click and Placed Advertising) such as Google Sponsored Links and Yahoo. This is truly progress. Among those farms spending money on online advertising, 72% said that this form of advertising is "significant to critical" to their success.

If you don't recall the details about sponsored links, you may want to go to my website, www.eckertagrimarketing.com, and look at the resource articles. You'll find a series of articles that appeared in this publication last year regarding sponsored links, and buying internet advertising.

Customer Research

I was pleased to learn that 37% of the farms today appreciate the value of getting customer feedback in order to improve their businesses. If you don't ask the customer what you are doing right or what you can improve, you often will not know.

The most common methods used for research are the standard comment cards, one-on-one farm interviews, and online surveys. Some of the best customer suggestions received were: provide a faster checkout system, need more children's activities, increase the frequency of our e-blasts, add more picnic seating, ideas from teachers to improve our curriculum, etc.

If you don't ask you are missing out on the best method to improve your business. Of course, you might need a thick skin to handle the comments, but truly all customer responses need to be evaluated and shared with your staff to improve your operation.

Tourism Participation

Over 75% of the farms responding to the survey said they participate with tourism marketing programs. The most frequent forms of participation include listings in tourism brochures, listings and links on tourism web sites, appear on maps, attend trade shows, and, best of all, many are on the board of directors of their local CVB. The only way for "agri-tourism" to flourish is for you to make the connection with your local and state tourism entities, and I applaud these folks that have stepped up to the plate.

Credit & Debit Card Acceptance

Farms today are recognizing that they must accept credit and debit cards for the young family demographics. People today just don't carry cash or even their check book. They are relying on plastic to buy everything.

Over 70% of farms surveyed accept plastic, and most all of them agree that is "very important" for their sales. In fact, a fourth of these farms say that over 25% of their gross sales are paid by credit or debit cards. If you have been contemplating calling your bank and setting up an account, I encourage you to do so. If you don't, I can guarantee you that you are losing sales because you don't accept credit cards.

Next month, we look at the remainder of the responses from our fall farm survey. For those who participated, the results were emailed to you—so if you've not received those, please let me know. I think the results of these surveys certainly provides us all with some valuable information to help make our farm business's grow.

Jane Eckert, a national speaker, author and agritourism expert, is principal of Eckert AgriMarketing (www.eckertagrimarketing.com), a firm that helps farmers sell products directly to consumers and develop their operations into tourist destinations. Jane can be reached by phone 314-862-6288 or at jane@eckertagrimarketing.com