

HOW TO RUN A FARM TOUR

IF A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS, A FARM TOUR IS WORTH A MILLION

Organizing and hosting a farm tour is an excellent way to reach an audience that is no longer familiar with farming. It provides an opportunity for non-farmers (or farmers from another commodity) to see and learn first hand how and why things are done. It also provides a solid base of good will and increased public confidence in farming practices. Whether you bring the public to your farm or the farm to the public (i.e. farm displays), a successful event requires careful planning.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING A FARM TOUR:

Set Your Limits

Generally, tours on the farm should be aimed at carefully targeted, well-screened audiences. Your farm operation may be appropriate for certain sized groups or certain age levels but not others. You may only have time for tours at certain times of the year, or may want to limit the number of tours you give in any one year.

Choose Your Audience

Schools (kindergarten through university) and youth groups (church, 4-H, or scouting organizations) usually find farm tours wonderful field trips. Often the teacher or leader can tie the farm visit to what they are teaching in their classroom or meetings. Senior citizen or service clubs (which often include local business and community leaders) may appreciate an opportunity to see the workings of a present day farm business. And remember, if farming interests are seen as crucial to community interests, local citizens will support them.

Farm tours also offer colourful photo and feature story opportunities for journalists and help to better prepare them for future agricultural and food related news stories. If you invite journalists, plan the story you want the media to tell and do your homework. Follow the guidelines in Farm & Food Care Ontario's "How to Deal with the Media" fact sheet. While it is advisable to have a "no photos" policy for farm visitors, exceptions should be considered for bona fide media under tightly controlled situations. A picture speaks volumes – but keep in mind those words can be positive or negative.



Elected officials and government bureaucrats can benefit from the insight gained from a farm tour when making decisions that affect the farming community. Consider timing your tour to coincide with a larger agriculture awareness event or organize a multi-farm tour and invite elected officials to talk with local constituents and the media.

Consider Your Costs

Costs will depend on the extensiveness of the tour. However, just preparing for and conducting a tour requires time and labour that take you away from other things. Advertising and promotion, special equipment (like barriers to block off restricted areas, portable toilets, signage), additional liability insurance, hand out materials, and product samples will all add to your costs. Check with your local agriculture awareness/Agriculture in the Classroom (AIRC) committees, provincial commodity groups or local agri-businesses to see if funds or materials are available. Consider charging a nominal fee per person to help offset your expenses.

Farm Safety Comes First

Take a critical look at your operation and identify all potential safety hazards. Equipment and storage areas, access to animals, ponds and lagoons are all potential safety hazards to those unfamiliar with farm surroundings. Identify all off-limit areas and use signage, locks and barriers to restrict access. Check with your insurance agent regarding liability insurance. Ensure that tour groups (especially children) are adequately chaperoned. Never allow people to wander on their own. Begin all tours by explaining the ground rules.

Contact the **Canadian Agricultural Safety Association** (www.casa-acsa.ca) for tips and advice. If providing food samples, be sure you meet local public health regulations.

Promote a Positive Image

Be proud of your role as a farmer. Be positive, not defensive. After all, you help feed the world and you do it with care.

Clean working conditions and a sense of pride in one's farm are a psychological benefit to any farmer. A neat attractive farm also creates a positive image with visitors and neighbours.

- Keep physical facilities in good repair.
- Keep weeds and grass mowed.
- Provide good drainage.
- Practice good fly, rodent and waste control programs.
- Do a little extra for tours: make sure facilities are bright, clean, tidy and free of hazards.
- Plan your farm chores around tours and avoid unsightly chores like spreading manure the same day of a tour.



- Take an imaginary tour of your operation through an outsider's eyes or invite a non farming friend to do it for you.

Proper care of farm animals is essential if farmers are to maintain the respect of the public. It takes people to manage animals properly, not just good equipment.

- Follow your Recommended Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals.
- Stay up to date on changing standards for housing and handling requirements.
- Take advantage of livestock specialists, crop specialists, veterinarians and nutritionists to ensure your animals receive the latest and best that research and experience can offer.
- Follow good animal husbandry practices in handling, transporting and holding livestock.

Be an agricultural ambassador. The most effective public relations activities are those that reinforce widely held beliefs:

- Farmers are hard working, honest, friendly people.
- Farmers provide abundant, wholesome and affordable food.
- Farmers do so responsibly and professionally.
- The family farm remains the backbone of Canadian agriculture.

To the public a farmer is a farmer, so remember that in their eyes you are representing all farmers. Do not be a source of misinformation:

- Speak on what you know and limit your comments to your farm.
- Refer questions you are not sure about.
- Do not build yourself (or your sector) up by deflecting criticism somewhere else.

Make it Relevant and Make it Understandable

Speak the layman's language – many urban people aren't used to agricultural jargon.

- Talk in terms that your visitors will understand: cartons of milk rather than kilograms of milk, birthing pens rather than farrowing units, neutering rather than castration.
- Make comparisons that are relevant to your audiences' experiences. By comparing disease outbreaks in livestock to chicken pox in people, for example, you can illustrate that even undertaking the best precautions some diseases cannot be prevented or controlled.



Don't assume that the facts speak for themselves and don't expect people to see the obvious.

- Develop a set program and verbal presentation for every tour.
- Tailor your presentation to your audience: children for example want to know about the animals and their life cycles, businessmen want to know about the business side of farming etc.
- Pick a theme or key messages such as sustainable agriculture, food quality or animal care.
- Explain how and why things are done on your farm and point out the obvious.
- Point out the shade, water and feed available to animals.
- Highlight animal housing that protects them from predators, provides climate control and easy access to fresh feed and water.
- Explain restraining devices or point out the lack of them.
- Point out practices that make birth less stressful and protect the young (i.e. birthing pens).
- Discuss medical care given to livestock – vaccines to protect against disease and medication to cure illness.
- Describe animal handling practices necessary to the health and welfare of the animal – beak trimming, tail docking, needle teeth trimming, dehorning, neutering, ear marking, tattooing and ear tagging.
- Discuss feeding procedures and basics of animal nutrition.
- Always allow plenty of time for questions and to address common misconceptions in your prepared presentation.

Make it Memorable

For many visitors this may be the first (and only) opportunity to see and experience a farm. Think about how to involve the public and how to make factual learning fun with hands-on activities or visual aids or hand-outs. Milking or shearing demonstrations, egg grading or butter making, or a ride on the hay wagon all add to a memorable and positive farm tour experience.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN SETTING UP A FARM DISPLAY:

Taking the farm to the public rather than inviting the public to the farm offers many advantages, including reaching large numbers of people in a short period of time. While the recommendations for farm tours apply, farm displays also raise some special considerations.

Take Advantage of Established Events

Coordinating a farm display with an established event such as an annual fair or agriculture awareness event can help increase their visibility and appeal. Many Agriculture in the Classroom and agriculture awareness committees hold annual "school days" where commodity stations are set-up for students to visit. Some of the major fairs now include a farm display, which may or may not include school tours.



The animals and crops brought for exhibition automatically promote strong interest and serve as visual aids for teaching the public about agriculture and food production.

Present an Accurate Picture

A farm animal exhibit should reflect today's farms and farming practices. Petting zoos or "Old McDonald's Farms", while appealing to the public, do little to foster understanding and appreciation of present day agriculture.

- Exhibit mature animals (with their young if appropriate) in accurate settings: sows and litters in birthing pens; dairy cattle in stalls; layers in cages.
- The Recommended Codes of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals should be followed in designing such displays. Signage should indicate this.
- Agribusinesses or commodity groups may be willing to help by providing the equipment, supplies and animals needed to set up such a display.
- Inviting the local humane society and/or agriculture inspector to inspect and comment on the display is encouraged.

Animal Wellbeing Comes First

- It is crucial to ensure that the needs of animals are met. This includes adequate bedding, ventilation, lighting and temperatures. Provision of feed and water as well as routine chores should be scheduled to meet the animals' needs and not accommodate the visitors' schedule.
- Ensure that only qualified caretakers are put in charge.
- Due to the foreign atmosphere such surroundings present it is advisable to deliver animals ahead of the event's opening to all them time to acclimatize.
- With larger animals in particular, it may be advisable to use show animals who are used to crowds and frequent handling.
- Any animals that show signs of illness or distress should be removed immediately and return home for care.
- When handling animals maintain an even temperament. The compassion and ease shown in handling livestock is the best possible testimony to animal welfare.



Communication is Key

An unmanned animal exhibit is a recipe for disaster, both from a potential public and animal safety point of view and for fostering misunderstanding or misconceptions. It is important that knowledgeable trained people be assigned to talk about the animals and farming practices. There is no one better than the men and women who raise such animals. Not only does the public get to see and learn about the animals but they get to meet a farmer too. Communication training is important and can be provided through your commodity group or Farm & Food Care Ontario.

- Informative, fact based signage and written materials are also important to further explain farming practices and your particular commodity. Make sure that any written information is both accurate and understandable.
- Colourful and attractive displays and materials along with games, draws or handouts all help attract and stop traffic.
- Supplementing an animal exhibit with an information booth on nutrition or the environment or a byproduct display is a good way to provide the whole picture and tell a complete story about agriculture and food production.

HELP IS AVAILABLE:

- Talk to others who have held farm tours or farm displays for their advice and suggestions.
- Work with your local agriculture awareness or AITC committees.
- Contact your provincial commodity group for resources, contacts, materials and training or advice.
- Work with local agribusinesses and/or area farmers.
- Contact Farm & Food Care Ontario for materials and training or advice.

If you would like more information on holding farm tours, please contact us

