

Pick-Your-Own (U-Pick) Marketing

Pick-Your-Own (PYO) is defined as what occurs when farmers “invite the public onto the farm to harvest their own food.”¹ Farmers searching for new crops, combined with a growing Kentucky population, have contributed to renewed interest in PYO. Each year, 15% to 20% of Kentucky produce growers say that they are interested in using PYO to market their produce in the future.

Crops that are especially suited for PYO marketing in Kentucky are those that require little expertise to harvest, but demand considerable harvest labor per acre. These include: tree fruits, berries, tomatoes, day lilies, beans and pumpkins. Some growers have also found success marketing cut flowers using a “U-Cut” method, which eliminates the considerable harvest labor requirement. U-Cut Christmas trees have long been identified as a possibility for on-farm marketing.

This publication will summarize the “Three L’s” of Pick-Your-Own marketing: Location, Liability, and Labor. More detailed information can be obtained from the references listed at the end of this fact sheet, or from other Extension sources.

Location

It has become a well-worn cliché that the three most important things for marketing from a retail store are location, location, and location. This is definitely true for a PYO business. Location is the most common factor cited



by customers who decide to visit an on-farm market.

PYO operations that are easily accessible to well-traveled roads have an obvious advantage. However, a great location does not guarantee a PYO operation’s success. The crops to pick must be easily accessible for visitors. There must be adequate parking and amenities, such as access to restrooms and drinking water. Customers may want places to “cool off” after they are done picking. PYO is not just about finding a way to harvest a high-value crop without hiring labor; it is also marketing the experience of harvest to your consumers.

If your farm is not located near a major byway, it does not mean that PYO is not an option for you. There are successful PYO marketers who have turned their remote location into an asset by emphasizing the retreat that customers get when coming to pick their own produce. Successful remote PYO



operations usually offer products that consumers can't find anywhere else, exceptional service, and more purchase options than just a single crop. These farms have turned themselves into "destinations" for consumers that may not normally go out of their way to purchase food.

Agritourism has become a popular concept, bringing many visitors out to "experience" the farm. A number of PYO operations have networked with other on-farm retailers to cooperatively promote a network of these markets. Conversations with PYO operators have revealed that some of their customers are drawn from great distance. Innovative promotions can help offset the limits of more remote locations.

Certain marketing strategies apply to any setting. The way to your farm should be well-marked from all directions with adequate signage. For a summary of colors and kinds of signs that work best, refer to University of Kentucky Extension publication ID-106, *Promotion and Advertising for Kentucky's Direct Markets*.

Liability

Liability concerns, like production costs and returns, will vary greatly from farm to farm. This section is not intended as formal legal or insurance advice. You should always consult with legal and/or insurance professionals before making any decisions relating to liability and related issues on your farm.

There are several steps that potential PYO marketers can take toward identifying and limiting liability. Most of these are accomplished through a simple phone call and visit with your insurance agent. Conducting an "insurance audit" with your agent should be an annual event, updating and evaluating your coverage based on changes in your farm business plan.

KNOW YOUR CURRENT LIABILITY COVERAGE

Every farm should have some form of liability coverage. If you're not sure what your current insurance policy covers, you can

easily check by contacting your insurance agent. If PYO or other agritourism activities are not a main source of income on your farm, you may be able to cover your additional liability for a few hundred dollars per year.

VISIT WITH YOUR INSURANCE AGENT

The single most knowledgeable person about how PYO marketing will affect your current insurance policy is your insurance agent. After you have initially consulted with your insurance agent about how PYO will affect your current insurance coverage, schedule a visit with your insurance agent where you plan to be conducting your PYO operation. Your insurance agent should be able to help you identify potential "danger zones" on your farm operation.

IDENTIFY PLACES THAT MAY BE DANGEROUS OR UNFAMILIAR FOR VISITORS TO YOUR FARM

Most farms contain many places that can present hazards or questions for visitors. Machinery and equipment, ponds, animals, and work projects in process can all present potential hazards for on-farm guests. It is important that visitors are precluded from certain areas by fences, etc., or are informed of the risks that they can incur.

There may also be things on your farm that you accept as normal but would appear unusual to people with non-farm backgrounds. Taking opportunities to explain the happenings of your farm through signage, literature, or other educational materials can go a long way toward answering questions. Finally, remember: nothing helps customer relations more than friendly, personal answers to people's questions.

Labor

Reducing the amount of time needed for harvest labor is the primary reason many producers consider PYO marketing. There are two concerns related to labor that should be addressed by the producer: overseeing PYO customers and using PYO to maximize profitability from the owner/operator's labor.

PYO LABOR

PYO will not fit into some farm marketing plans because of the requirement for someone to watch PYO customers, collect payment, and other related management duties.

It is recommended that someone be present at the PYO farm to supervise customers. This person can weigh or count the produce picked by customers, direct them to bathroom facilities, and provide a “face” to the farm. The person who is managing the PYO operation should have good people skills, be able to resolve common customer differences, and possess good communication skills.

DECIDING HOW TO USE YOUR LABOR

For some operators, labor time is better spent on managing other aspects of their farm or crop. Some producers report that PYO marketing does not return enough profits to justify it; their time is better spent harvesting the crop and retailing it elsewhere.

Preparing a partial production budget where you compare profitability from produce you harvest yourself to PYO produce will aid this management decision. While many growers find that the most profitable marketing plan for their farm uses several different market channels, you will also want to remember your personal strengths and weaknesses as they relate to PYO marketing.

More Information

- Agritourism (University of Kentucky, 2004)
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/introsheets/agritourism.pdf>
- Promotion and Advertising for Kentucky’s Direct Markets, ID-106 (University of Kentucky, 1991)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id106/id106.htm>
- Direct Marketing Guide for Producers of Fruits, Vegetables, and Other Specialty Products (University of Tennessee, 2002)
<http://www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/pbfiles/PB1711.pdf>
- Small Farm Connection: U-Pick Sales (Washington State University) - *links to several resources*
<http://smallfarms.wsu.edu/marketing/uPick.html>

¹Neil D. Hamilton, *The Legal Guide for Direct Farm Marketing*, Drake University/SARE, 1999, p. 26.

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