

Pick-Your-Own (U-Pick) Marketing

INTRODUCTION

Pick-Your-Own (PYO), also referred to as U-Pick, is defined as what occurs when farmers “invite the public onto the farm to harvest their own food.”¹ Producers searching for new crops, combined with a growing Kentucky population, have contributed to renewed interest in PYO. During annual surveys of growers from 2002 to 2007, 15% to 20% of Kentucky produce growers said that they would be 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, 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: **L**ocation, **L**iability, and **L**abor. More detailed information can be obtained from the references listed at the end of this profile or from other Extension sources.

LOCATION

It has become a well-worn cliché that the three most important



criteria for marketing from a retail store are “location, location, and location.” This is usually true for a PYO business, as well.

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. A number of other factors are also important. The crops to be picked must be easily accessible for visitors. There must be adequate parking and amenities, such as access to restrooms and drinking water. In addition, 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.

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If your farm is not located near a major byway, it does not mean that you should not consider PYO as a marketing option. 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 cannot find anywhere else, exceptional service, and more purchase options than just a single crop. These farms turn 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 a 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, no matter where it’s located, 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*.

Finally, potential PYO customers often turn to the Internet to locate possible farms to visit. There are a variety of Web sites, both state and national in scope, that can help steer customers to your farm. Social media Internet sites, especially those turned to by consumers interested in locally grown food, can also present effective electronic

“billboards” to direct customers to your farm. Many savvy farm marketers also maintain their own well-designed and frequently updated Web sites that create a presence for their farm and its products online.

LIABILITY

Liability concerns, like production costs and returns, will vary greatly from farm to farm. This section is not intended to provide formal legal or insurance advice. You should always consult with a legal expert and/or insurance professional before making any decisions relating to the law and liability issues on your farm. The principles presented here are mainly related to reviewing insurance needs. Those interested in general legal information about on-farm marketing may access pertinent publications concerning agritourism through The National Agricultural Law Center Web site.

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/or 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 are 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 the initial consultation, schedule an on-farm visit with your agent so he/she can see where you plan on 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

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



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 activities 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 questions.

LABOR

Reducing the amount of time needed for harvest labor is the primary reason many growers 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 necessity that someone be available to supervise customers and provide a “face” to the farm. Duties can include weighing or counting the produce that has been picked, collecting payment, answering farm-related questions, and providing directions to the bathroom facilities. This person also needs to be able to resolve common customer differences. Strong public relations skills and the ability to communicate effectively are critical.

Deciding How to Use Your Labor

For some operators, labor time required for PYO 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 sales 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.

SELECTED RESOURCES

- Agritourism (University of Kentucky, 2011) <http://www.uky.edu/Ag/cdbrec/introsheets/agritourism.pdf>
- Liability for Visitors to Farm Property (University of Kentucky, 2004) http://ces.ca.uky.edu/cesrc-files/west/Liability_for_Visitors_to_Farm_Property.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 (ATTRA, 2007)
<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=263>
- Direct Marketing Guide for Producers of Fruits, Vegetables, and Other Specialty Products (University of Tennessee, 2002)
<https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1711.pdf>

- National Agricultural Law Center (University of Arkansas)
<http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/research/>
- Pick-Your-Own Operations and Farm Stands — Options for Your Business (University of Wisconsin, 2006)
<http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/A3811-14.pdf>

¹ Neil D. Hamilton. *The Legal Guide for Direct Farm Marketing* (Drake University Law School, 1999) p. 26.

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<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agecon/index.php> (Issued 2005, Revised 2010)

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