

Visit NJ Farms: An Online Resource to Support Statewide Marketing of Agritourism

Abstract

The popularity of agritourism is growing nationally. Central to the success of any agritourism operation is effective marketing. Visit NJ Farms is an interactive website designed as a centralized marketing platform for New Jersey agritourism operators. The website was developed to provide farmers with an easy-to-use tool to enter farm information, agritourism activities, and special events in a searchable database of statewide agritourism activities. Individuals interested in visiting a farm are able to search for specific agritourism activities or browse special on-farm events. Website visitors can select farms of interest to visit and develop customized travel itineraries with driving directions.

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Engagement in agritourism, the business of making farms travel destinations for entertainment or educational purposes, is growing nationally. It is a particularly popular economic development and diversification strategy among farmers in the urbanized northeastern states (Schilling, Sullivan, & Komar, 2012) and small farms unable to effectively compete in increasingly global market channels (Dougherty & Green, 2011).

Schilling et al. (2012) find that one out of five New Jersey farms offer agritourism. Statewide agritourism revenue was estimated at \$57.5 million in 2006. In addition, agritourism contributes to the retention of multifunctional benefits provided by farms (e.g., open space, wildlife habitat, scenic views) that are highly valued by residents. A decade ago, Barry and Hellerstein (2004) estimated that 62 million people visited a U.S. farm. More recent analysis of American consumer demand for agritourism suggests opportunity for continued growth in this sector (Carpio, Wohlgenant, & Boonsaeng, 2008).

The success of an agritourism enterprise is predicated heavily on proper marketing (Schilling et al., 2011). Today, the vast majority of consumers use online resources to identify and research products and services, and agritourists are no different. Ryan, Debord, and McClellan (2006) find that 6 out of 10 visitors to Pennsylvania farms researched farm destinations on the Internet. This points to the

essentiality of farmers having professional and informative websites to aid in the marketing of their farms to potential guests (Bamka, 2000). At the same time, this reality suggests the value of comprehensive and centralized online directories of agritourism venues—in essence, a form of collaborative marketing (see Bagdonis, Thomson & Altemose, 2008)—that aid the public by reducing consumer search time and increasing awareness of the range of available agritourism activities. However, the quality and availability of such directories are variable across states, as is the incorporation of agritourism into state-sponsored travel and tourism promotional campaigns. In New Jersey, for example, farm-based tourism has largely been overshadowed in state tourism promotions by the arts, historic and cultural attractions, and shore destinations, including the entertainment and legalized gambling activities of Atlantic City.

Visit NJ Farms (www.visitnjfarms.org) is an interactive website developed as a centralized marketing platform for New Jersey agritourism farms. Designed by Rutgers Cooperative Extension faculty in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Agriculture and New Jersey Farm Bureau, the website was initially launched in October 2006. It was redesigned with minor functionality changes and enhanced website security in November 2010 and currently hosts 189 registered agritourism farms.

Website Features

The functionality of Visit NJ Farms was developed around the needs of agritourism farm operators and potential farm visitors. For farmers, website registration is free upon certifying that the farm is a "commercial farm" as defined under the New Jersey Right to Farm Act. This requires that a farm be at least 5 acres in size and produce \$2,500 in farm product sales. For farms smaller than 5 acres, the agricultural revenue requirement is \$50,000. Registered farms are allowed to enter a customized farm description and populate fields that reflect their agritourism offerings and other amenities or services, including:

- Farm description and contact information, hours of operation, and a link to the farm website (if available);
- A listing of agritourism activities, including various on-farm recreational activities, farm tours, products available for pick-your-own, types of products available for retail sale, private "by arrangement" activities, and special events. To avoid accumulation of outdated information, an auto-expiration feature was incorporated to remove special, non-recurring events once the event date passes; and,
- A description of farm facilities and services, including availability of food and refreshments, restroom, accommodations for persons with special needs, acceptance of credit cards, and participation in Women, Infants and Children (WIC) or the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP).

The website's public interface allows visitors to enter specific activities of interest (e.g., a hayride, winery tour, corn maze, pick-your-own, etc.) and query among all registered farms within a defined geographic area (i.e., county or specified linear distance from a user-entered street address). Farms

meeting the user-defined criteria are displayed in a search results window, with a link to a printable farm summary (Figure 1). The website user may add a farm or multiple farms to a travel itinerary and generate driving directions from a defined starting address to each farm destination (Figure 2).

Figure 1.

Screen Capture of a Visit NJ Farms Farm Summary



Figure 2.

Screen Capture of the Visit NJ Farms Travel Itinerary Builder



A Look Ahead

Day-to-day management of Visit NJ Farms was recently transferred to a statewide association of farm direct marketers. The association will assume responsibility for farm recruitment and screening of farms applying to the website, as well as website promotion. Rutgers Cooperative Extension faculty continue to support the website, facilitating visual changes to refresh the website's appearance and incorporating expanded functionality. Features to be added include the addition of social media tools and a local food systems tab.

Expansion of Social Media Links

While farmers acknowledge the importance of conventional word-of-mouth advertising, the reality is that social media represents a new and contemporary form of word of mouth. Increasingly, customer experiences are shared instantaneously through social networking tools. Farm pages on Visit NJ Farms are being modified to incorporate popular social media links, including Facebook and Twitter.

Addition of a Local Food Systems Tab

USDA economists note that varied factors are contributing to heightened consumer interest in local food systems, driving many farmers to develop direct marketing outlets (Martinez et al., 2010). Each registered Visit NJ Farms farm will be able to identify local outlets through which their farm products are available (e.g., an on-farm retail stand, restaurants, supermarkets, community farmers' markets, etc.).

Summary

The primary motivation behind the development of Visit NJ Farms was the establishment of a central, statewide directory of agritourism destinations in New Jersey. The website was designed as an easy-

to-use tool for farmers to market their agritourism enterprises and as a convenient "one stop" searchable database for potential farm visitors to identify and research agritourism destinations. A short-term goal is to integrate the refined Visit NJ Farms website into state travel and tourism promotions.

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