

Marketing to Enhance Farm Viability



Workshops and Classes as a Marketing Strategy

Turning your farm into a place where people come to learn through classes and workshops is one option for farm diversification and sustainability. Holding classes and workshops at your farm gets people used to coming to your farm or business and acquainted with the products that you have to offer. For other ideas on increasing farm viability, see *Creating Successful Agritourism Activities for Your Farm* by Mark Lattanzi (May, 2005). You can order a copy from www.buylocalfood.com.

STEP 1 DETERMINE IF THERE IS A MARKET FOR WHAT YOU WANT TO OFFER

Is there a need for the information you are going to present?

What do you do that no one else can do as well?

Local Hero Farmer Lilian Jackman realized that there was a need for her to offer classes in her gardens because she was always stopped on the street and asked the questions that became the foundations of her Beyond Organic I and II workshops, classes for folks who want to learn some serious gardening techniques and Lilian's gardening secrets in a hands-on workshop.



"Everywhere I go, I'm asked for gardening advice, says Lilian, owner of Wilder Hill Gardens in Conway, Massachusetts (www.wilderhillgardens.com). "I love talking with people about their gardens, and I found it challenging to try to give good information in response to people's questions while in line at the grocery store. Now, I give out my brochure and invite people to participate in one of the workshops I offer. The workshops give me an opportunity to answer questions more fully and to show people what I do."

When you first sit down to design the workshop, think through your personal goals for offering the workshop. Are you trying to earn more income? Get more people to visit your business? Develop your own skills as a teacher? Write down your goals and review them after the class is completed.

If you decide that the need exists for the class or workshop you plan to offer, go ahead and plan and offer the class. You might be wrong about your decision that a need exists for this class or workshop, but be willing to experiment and test the waters anyway!

STEP 2 HONE YOUR TEACHING SKILLS (Or hire someone else to teach the class!)

Do you have what it takes to teach a class?

What skills do you need to learn or brush-up on?

Teaching skills include being able to organize your thoughts and communicate them effectively to a wide variety of people. "There's no excuse for boring anyone," says Lilian. "Work on your presentation skills if necessary. Attend other classes to get ideas about how to organize the class time. Read about and research the subject you will be teaching."

Lilian designs her workshops with the idea that people who come to her workshops don't want to learn lots of theory. They want to watch her doing something that they want to learn how to do, too. They want to come, observe, and ask questions.

If you decide that you are not the best teacher and don't want to learn how to teach better, you can hire teachers to come to your farm or agribusiness.

Michelle Elston of Annie's Garden and Gift Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, offers workshops many Saturday mornings at 10 o'clock at her store. She hires others to teach some of the workshops because of the variety of topics taught and the number of workshops offered each year—25 or more. Nevertheless, Michelle does teach a number of the workshops herself because she believes it "offers proof that you know what you're doing" and gives you "an increased level of credibility with your customers."





There are other benefits to teaching the class yourself. Michelle's business, Annie's, is a busy gift and garden center with many customers. When Michelle teaches a class, she makes a connection with her customers that she is not able to make in other ways. "Teaching a workshop connects you with your customers," says Michelle. "You get to know them and hear about their garden. When they come into the store, they will say, 'I took your class three months ago,' and instantly we have a connection. Participating in classes at the store makes our customers feel more connected, too."

tip If you're working on improving your teaching skills, teach the class with someone who is more experienced, even if they don't know the subject matter as well as you. This is a great way to learn.

STEP 3 DESIGN THE WORKSHOP

Organize!

Develop an outline of how you will use the workshop time. Write down what you plan to say and follow your notes during the workshop. No one can listen to someone talk for four hours—break up the class with hands-on projects, videos, and time for questions and coffee breaks. A good workshop will include a combination of the following: lecture, reference materials, a hands-on project, and/or a video.



"My experience is that people really like to work on a project and then bring it home with them," says Lilian. "It really increases participants' satisfaction with the day and helps reinforce what I am teaching during the workshop."

If you have a website, incorporate it as a teaching resource. "If your website is well designed, it will answer

tip Give participants a Resource Guide for further study to take home with them, including information on books to read, websites to visit, and product purchase information.

some questions raised during the workshop," says Lilian. For example, if your website provides links to other sites, workshop participants explore these to learn more.

Make sure you give enough information during the workshop so that participants can complete the task you are teaching, but don't overwhelm them with information.

tip If you want to use written materials to teach, do not hand out them during class. Participants will read the handouts instead of listening to you. Hand them out at the end of class. Don't forget to put your name and advertisement on the handouts.

STEP 4 MARKET THE CLASS

Are you going to rely on word-of-mouth or are you going to purchase advertising?

Do you have a brochure, web site, and signs directing people to your farm?

How will you distribute brochures or promote your website?

Will you use any other marketing methods (print, radio, television)?

Lilian holds her workshops in May and June, after her big Spring Dig sale. This sale brings hundreds of people to her garden who then hear about the upcoming workshops. Lilian recommends teaching in-season. It's a busy time for you, but you must



take advantage of the excitement about the season. “No one wants to come to a class on gardening in July and August!”

tip

If the registration for an upcoming class is smaller than you would like, but you still want to hold the class, invite a few friends—for free—and fill it up! Don’t forget that some people will decide to come to the class at the last minute—leave a few spaces for them.

STEP 5 PREPARE FOR THE DAY OF CLASS

Are you prepared to handle all of the participants’ needs—parking, washrooms, drinking water, coffee, snacks, lunch?

Do you have adequate insurance to protect you against the liability of inviting the public onto your property?

Are you in compliance with all permits, licenses, inspections, and regulations from the federal, state, and local level?

Making sure workshop participants are comfortable will increase their ability to focus on the learning experience you are providing. At minimum, you should be prepared to provide clean toilets, fresh drinking water, and clear and easy to navigate parking. Nametags are a nice way to help participants get to know each other. Make sure that if you are not providing coffee, snacks, or a meal (depending on the length of the workshop) that participants know that ahead of time so that they can plan accordingly.

It is important to research the requirements of specific regulations and to be aware of the time required for approval. Make sure, too, that you have adequate insurance coverage to cover the liability of inviting guests onto your property. Have a conversation with your insurance agent well before offering the first class or workshop on the farm.

Now you’re ready to market your class and hold the first one! Remember to relax and enjoy the day. You will be a much more effective host and instructor if you are enjoying yourself. After holding the workshop, there is still one more step to complete.

STEP 6 EVALUATE YOUR EFFORTS

Review the goals you set for yourself in the planning stage.

Use a simple survey to determine what participants liked and didn’t like about the workshop and what other topics they would like to learn about. Or simply ask folks these questions at the end of the day.

Evaluating the workshop is an important step in determining your success. Further evaluation includes your reflections on the workshop and participants’ evaluations. Did you achieve your goals? Which ones? Is it worth teaching the class again? What changes would you make? During the workshop, watch body language for clues of interest levels, tiredness, boredom or confusion.

It’s best to write down your thoughts and impressions about the workshop immediately, but then wait a day or two to evaluate the experience. Don’t wait too long, or you’ll forget some of your thoughts and impressions about the day!





A four-question survey with room to write comments works fine. Here are some sample questions:

- ❖ What did you like about the workshop?
- ❖ How could we improve the workshop?
- ❖ What other topics would you like to see offered?
- ❖ Is there anything else that you would like to tell us?
- ❖ Please share the names and email addresses of friends who may be interested in upcoming workshops.
- ❖ What did the participants have to say about the workshop? You can either ask them verbally or in writing at the end of the class.

tip

Ask participants to share the names and addresses of two friends who might be interested in attending a workshop on your farm. Add these names to your mailing list.

You will be a much more effective host and instructor if you are enjoying yourself.

You may decide to offer the workshop another time before making a final decision on your success. You might add another workshop to your offerings. Or you may drop this workshop idea and try another. Remember, don't be afraid to experiment with offering new workshops. It may take up to two years for you to determine if this diversification strategy works for you.

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