

AG Strategies

Agriculture Business Strategies

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Co-ordinating Ag Tourism Familiarization Tours

The purpose of this factsheet series is to help producers and processors understand the key elements needed to manage a business. The factsheets also discuss some of the essential components used to develop a business plan and assess the profitability of a business venture.

A familiarization (FAM) tour is used to show an invited group of participants what a group of ag tourism operators in a particular area has to offer. It is offered free of charge or at a reduced rate.

FAM tour participants are people with the potential to influence others to support or visit the operations on the tour. Participants may include:

- **other tourism operators** – Often other agricultural (and non-agricultural) tourism operators in an area have not had the chance to visit each other's sites. A FAM tour can be held to familiarize operators with what's in the area, and to develop a basis for cluster-based marketing and promotion activities.
- **community representatives** – This can include chamber of commerce members, tourism/recreation officials, economic development officers and municipal representatives such as public service staff or local politicians.
- **members of community businesses such as hotels and tourism attractions** – This category includes event and conference organizers, as well as support service staff, such as those from gas stations, restaurants, gift shops and transportation-related businesses.
- **regional tourism industry representatives** – Examples include staff from Travel Alberta, destination marketing organizations, tourism destination regions and tour company operators.

- **the media** – These are people from print, radio and television.
- **travel trade members** – This category covers tour wholesalers, tour operators and travel agents.

If this is the first FAM tour for the majority of site operators, the group may choose to select a local audience to participate in the tour. These individuals will be more forgiving of any errors or oversights than will members of the media or travel trade members.

Planning a FAM

What are the objectives of a FAM tour?

A FAM tour is a tool to build awareness about tourism product in an area. It is a chance to showcase individual site operators, attractions and destinations. FAM tours can also be used to gain support from the community or tourism industry, or to build rapport among operators in a region. The tour host and on-site operators need to decide together on the specific objectives of the FAM tour. The tour should focus on a particular "theme" (i.e. guest ranch accommodations, farm day trips, etc.) and tour participants should be invited based on their fit with the theme and tour objectives.

How is a tour host selected?

A group may wish to choose a tour host/committee to co-ordinate the FAM tour. The tour host/committee members need:

- good organization and communication skills
- a flair for detail
- a working knowledge of the sites and products to be toured
- an understanding of the potential package linkages

Which potential on-site operations should be approached for the FAM tour and how many can the tour accommodate?

It is important to invite site operators that fit with the specific tour objectives and potential tour participants. Be prepared to provide individual attention to these operators in preparation for the tour (see section on “On-site Operator Hosting”). If the group is too large, split it up with individual guides. Remember to address any site access issues. Think about parking availability and road conditions. Are there any structures or bridges that large vehicles should be aware of? Will a bus be able to turn around at each stop?

What information will the tour participants be looking for?

If possible, talk with the participants prior to the FAM tour to determine their specific interests. It is not necessary to show them everything. Highlight the uniqueness of the operators. FAM tour participants are usually only at each location for a maximum of 20 minutes.

What is the “experience” you are trying to showcase?

Why are these operations special, unique, valuable or interesting? What products or services do the site operators have available for sale, and for how much? Why would a visitor come to these locations rather than competing attractions?

When is the best time to showcase?

When are the operations open? What is the impact of seasonality or weather conditions?

Carefully select the time of year, time of the week and time of the day for the tour. Consider the availability of the tour participants.

Why should the tour participants support or promote these operations?

The tour host should give each participant an outline of the tour. Each stop should provide a brochure and a profile sheet to reinforce two or three highlights about the operation and list the contact information, website address, event schedule, pricing structure, key images and capacity details. If available, include testimonials from visitors. Remember, participants need to leave with a memorable experience and all the information they need to influence others.

Implementation details

Tour host/committee

The tour host/committee takes the lead for scheduling the tour, sequencing of tour locations and keeping all operators and participants fully aware of the plan. The tour host/committee should:

- **determine how many locations there will be** – Be sure to think about the travel time between each location. Remember to include time for each individual to unload from the transportation, visit the washroom, tour the operation, ask questions and reload.
- **establish the touring route of the selected operations** – Pick the start and end points carefully in order to create a lasting impression. Both of these should be determined ahead of time, taking into account that tour participants may have limited time available.
- **think about including a guide with a map as an overview for the tour** – This piece will be valuable for the participants to take home with them. Include information on each stop, an overview of the area and its history and show the route of the tour on the map.
- **decide if a meal, samplings or refreshments will be included** – If the sites that are being showcased are unable to host a meal, consider working with a local restaurant. Remember, a FAM tour should be considered a marketing tool and marketing often comes with costs. However, if the costs associated with hosting a meal are too high, the group may wish to charge a nominal fee to cover these costs.

- **ensure washrooms are accessible** – If possible, clean washrooms should be available throughout the tour. Identify sites that do not have visitor washrooms facilities prior to beginning the tour. Consider bringing in portable washrooms.
- **determine emergency arrangements for the tour** – Be sure to have a cell phone and detailed directions to each of the stops along the route. Consider having staff with CPR and basic first aid knowledge on the tour.
- **establish a contingency plan** – Determine timelines and procedures for cancellation. Think about the impact that the weather may have. Have a plan in place if one of the stops is unable to participate at the last minute.
- **ensure that insurance issues are in order** – Each operator should check with their insurance agent to be sure that the activities conducted during the tour are covered under the current policy. If not, the operation may need an additional rider for the tour. The group may also want to consider insurance for the tour as a whole.
- **do a dry run** – This will help to determine the route and the length of the tour. It will also give everyone involved a chance to address any concerns prior to the event. Do a dry run at each site and offer feedback to the operators.
- **keep the tour on schedule** – On the day of a tour, a cell phone is recommended to alert the next operator of itinerary timing and possible changes.
- **identify safety concerns** – Do a site assessment of the operation to identify any safety concerns. Secure any hazards away from the tour participants. Point out all hazards at the beginning of the tour.
- **consider in detail the sequence of the presentation (what, when, where, why)** – Focus on those products, activities and attractions that differentiate the operation from its competition. The following is a list of issues to consider.
 - Begin the tour with a brief outline of what will be experienced. Provide a brief history of the operation and highlight any important or unique features.
 - Point out any hazards on the site and any necessary safety precautions.
 - Establish any etiquette rules that the tour participants should adhere to.
 - Make a good first impression and ensure that the tour is memorable. Create an experience involving the five senses.
 - When ending the tour, reinforce what is unique about the operation and ask the participants if they have any questions.
 - Be sure that the participants have received the information that they came for.
 - Summarize how you see your product fitting within the overall scheme of other ag tourism operations, both within the FAM tour and a broader regional context.

On-site operator hosting

When the tour arrives at a site the tour host should introduce the on-site operator. This introduction should include a brief background sketch of how this particular property fits within the overall tour theme.

The on-site operators should:

- **decide what to showcase** – This involves identifying the operation's best features and areas.
- **think about how best to greet the tour participants** – Determine how can a lasting impression best be created.
- **identify a spokesperson for the operation** – Choose the person who can relate the to the tour participants. If the primary operator is not available to represent the operation, ensure someone appropriate is available to fill in. This individual should be enthusiastic, friendly and confident. They must be able to speak clearly in front of a group and be knowledgeable about the operation.

Ideas for creating a memorable experience:

- use clues to unravel a mystery
- wear a costume
- bring food or beverages to taste
- allow the participants to pick fresh berries
- greet the tour on horseback
- role-play
- tantalize the smell receptors
- use props to create a focal point
- weave a story
- create a quick craft to take home

Additional on-site tour tips:

- Confirm the length of time the tour participants will have at the operation.
- Start on time, stay on time and finish on time. The on-site operator and the tour host should worry about the time so the tour participants do not have to.

- Ensure that all participants can hear. Speak clearly.
- Show enthusiasm. Have fun and interact with each participant. Blend a mixture of business and pleasure within the tour.
- Allow time for questions. Ensure that all questions have been answered. If unable to answer questions, offer to find the answer and let them know as soon as possible.
- Consider giving participants a small gift of something memorable to take home.

FAM tour follow-up

Tour host/committee and on-site operator hosts should:

- gather contact information for all the tour participants in order to follow-up and stay in touch with them
- send any additional information that has been requested
- send thank you notes to each tour participant, include a picture or small token to trigger their memory
- critique the tour to decide what worked well and what could be improved upon

For additional information

For more information on ag tourism development go to: www.agtourism.ca or contact a new venture specialist at the Ag-Info Centre at 1-866-882-7677.