

AGRI-TOURISM AT HONEYSUCKLE HILL FARM

Jeff Alsup opens his farm twice a year for agri-tourism in a "big way" just outside of Springfield, Tennessee and... he makes a good living at it.

Although, most of us will not want to manage a tourism enterprise as large as Honeysuckle Hill, you might find his story interesting, and ... it might give you some ideas that you can use on your own farm.

Jeff Alsup is the owner of Honeysuckle Hill Farm, an agri-tourism business just outside of Springfield, Tennessee. Jeff's farm is open only 4 months out of the year (April/May and September/October) but, this farm had over 40,000 visitors in 2009. During the time it is open, on any given weekday, there will be 600 - 800 school children with their teachers, spending their field trip at Jeff's farm. The farm is located 30 minutes from downtown Nashville, Tennessee.

In 2003, Jeff left his successful accounting job, where he had worked for 15 years, to start farming on 12 acres. He was a city kid who remembered visiting his grandfather's farm when he was growing up and longed to own a farm of his own.

A few years after purchasing his small "farm", the accounting firm he worked for told him he had to make a choice; either he was an accountant or a farmer. He chose farming. Jeff quickly realized that he could not support a family of four by growing crops on 12 acres. He needed a way to subsidize his "farm habit" and justify his "farming addiction".

His first question was how can I farm on 12 acres and make a living from it. He started visiting agri-tourism businesses across the U.S., seeing what they did that worked. He found the most successful were farms that included pumpkin patches and corn mazes along with learning stations to draw school groups. 12 acres proved to be too small for all of his ideas and Jeff has since added 83 more acres to his farm.

Jeff set up four learning stations (the Learning Barn, a Petting Zoo, a Hayride and a Corn Maze). The four learning stations target pre-K through second graders, though, older visitors often attend them. Visitors spend 15 minutes at each station and then move on to the next. Guides escort the visitors from one station to the next to keep things moving on schedule.

After visitors have been to all four learning stations they may leave or they can play on the many playground activities. These activities include a huge sandbox with toys, a tricycle track, custom built slides, a fort, jumping pillow, hay mow tunnels, corn box, train ride, cow train ride, feed the fish at the pond, participate in rubber duck races or watch the pig race/comedy show that is held daily at Noon. These fun spots are located throughout the 35-acre entertainment area.

There are two pavilions located on the farm for those who would like to bring a picnic lunch. The pavilions are rented out for reunions, birthdays, weddings, church groups, office picnics and corporate events during the off months.

In one of the newer barns, they have a certified short order restaurant and gift shop. Next to it is a Farmers Market building with a variety of produce and items for sale. There is a Corn Trail through a corn field for young children and a 5-acre professional Corn Maze for more adventurous visitors.

Jeff has 5 acres dedicated to parking with a pumpkin patch next to it. All school tour visitors are encouraged to visit the pumpkin patch before they leave and pick a FREE pumpkin. These are small 4"-5" pumpkins that cost about \$0.15 each to produce. These pumpkins are given to school tour visitors only. Pumpkins are available for other visitors to purchase in the Farmers Market barn.

Honeysuckle Hill Farm has up to 40 employees during the 4 months that it is open. Jeff has found his church to be a wonderful source for hiring workers. Most of his employees are either students or retirees, since this is seasonal work. Jeff stresses professionalism. All employees must be neat and clean. One of the most important things he tells his employees, is that they need to smile and be happy that the visitors are there. Jeff pays particular attention to details around the farm and tries to make visits to his farm unique. Jeff said, "You

need to look at it through your customer's eyes. Make them feel welcome when they arrive and be sure to ask them if, they had a good time when they leave."

Signage throughout the farm is very important and should be professionally made. Digital picture frames with no more than 15 pictures, make great mini billboards. Even trash cans can be FUN. Trash cans around the farm are painted with a Holstein cow pattern (black spots on white) on them. Jeff highly recommends a Public Address system. A PA system can softly play music in the background, announce when special events are about to start, help find lost children or evacuate visitors if, needed.

Prices for visiting Honeysuckle Hill Farm in 2010 were - \$ 6 each for visitors on weekdays (teachers who accompany their classes are always FREE, as are school bus drivers), \$ 9 per person on weekends, children under 2 are FREE.

There is a \$1.00 each discount for larger groups of 10 or more. When it comes to setting admission fees, Jeff says, "If you don't hear any complaints, you are not charging enough!"

And, finally, Jeff recommends networking with like-minded people and visiting successful operations. You can visit Honeysuckle Hill Farm's website for more information at www.honeysucklehillfarm.com .

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