

Gaining and Retaining Customers from On-Farm Special Events

Will hosting a special event at my farm help me to attract and keep customers? By Marie Anselm



What is an on-farm special event?

An on-farm special event is any event hosted on-site at a farm that is outside the farm's typical operations. Any kind of farm can host an on-farm special event. A farm that is usually closed to the public but decides to host a farm tour or a CSA that decides to host a local food dinner in their barn are examples of on-farm special events. A corn maze being open during the fall would be part of their regular operations and would not be considered a special event.

Many farms have considered hosting a special event on-site at their farm as a marketing strategy to attract new and existing customers. Hosting any kind of on-farm event open to the general public, such as a harvest dinner, open house, or farm demonstration, has the potential to draw large numbers of people to your farm, but also requires a significant time investment. Before hosting a special event at your farm it is useful to understand how successful they are at gaining and retaining customers.

Research. To determine how, if at all, on-farm special events help farms to gain and retain customers Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) Madison County conducted a study of Open Farm Day visitors. Open Farm Day is an annual event hosted since 2008 where farms across Madison County, NY open the same day to welcome the public to visit their farms. Usually around 30 farms of all kinds and sizes offering different activities participate. Farm guests are able to visit as many farms as they like.

In 2015 and 2016 CCE Madison County worked with Open Farm Day farms to sign-in visitors to each farm and collect email addresses from guests willing to take a survey about their Open Farm Day experience. The same survey was sent in 2015 and 2016 to visitors who left their emails; an online survey link was also made public. CCE Madison aggregated responses from this 2015 and 2016 survey. Additionally, CCE Madison County sent a second survey in 2016 only to respondents of the 2015 survey to ask about their experience with Open Farm Day farms in the year following the event. CCE Madison therefore analyzed two datasets to gauge customer response to on-farm special events: one dataset from guests in 2015 and 2016 and a second dataset from visitors in 2015 one year later. Survey results were analyzed using standard means difference tests to determine if differences across attendees were statistically significant, meaning that differences were not due to chance.

Survey Details

In 2015 and 2016 a total of 366 people answered the same survey, which was sent to 1,125 Open Farm Day visitors in October and November. The estimated response rate of this survey, as it was open to the public, is 32.5 percent. Respondents included their name and email address to track second year responses and eliminate the possibility of duplicate responses. Of the 188 people sent the follow-up survey in November 2016, 65 responded for a response rate of 34.6 percent.

To isolate how attending Open Farm Day influenced visitors, survey respondents were categorized as a “first-time attendee” if they reported it was their first Open Farm Day and a “repeat attendee” if they had previously attended Open Farm Day. For the aggregated survey, 49.7 percent of respondents were first-time attendees and 50.3 percent were repeat attendees. Both first-time and repeat attendees showed strong support for local foods with 86.3 percent and 88.6 percent reporting that they currently purchase local food, respectively; this difference was not statistically significant. There was also not a significant difference in the number of farms that first-time and repeat attendees purchased product from. On average, first-time attendees purchased product from 2.6 farms at Open Farm Day compared to 2.8 for repeat attendees. There was a significant difference between the number of farms first-time and repeat attendees visited; first-time attendees visited an average of 4.4 and repeat attendees 5.1.

Results. Table 1 below shows results from the first survey of aggregated results from 2015 and 2016. There were statistically significant differences between first-time and repeat attendees across responses. Overall 71.3 percent of visitors were already familiar with farms they visited with repeat attendees more so than first-time attendees. Repeat attendees were also much more likely to report intent to attend Open Farm Day in the future than first-time attendees.

In terms of purchases, Open Farm Day generated a large amount of sales the day of the event with 90.4 percent of all respondents buying product. Of those who purchased product, 40.1 percent did so for the first time, making this group truly new customers. Not shown in Table 1 is a breakdown of these new customers: 54.2 percent had familiarity with the farms they visited and 66.4 percent attended Open Farm Day for the first time. Table 1 shows that even repeat attendees bought product for the first time at Open Farm Day.

Table 1. Habits of All, First-time, and Repeat Open Farm Day Attendees 2015 & 2016

	Response	All Attendees (n=366)	First-time Attendee (n=182)	Repeat Attendee (n=184)
Were you familiar with any of the farms you visited prior to Open Farm Day?	Yes	71.3%	58.8%	83.7% ***
	No	27.6%	40.7%	14.7% ***
	Unsure	1.1%	.5%	1.6%
Did you purchase product from any of the farms you visited?	Yes	90.4%	87.4%	93.5% **
	No	9.6%	12.6%	6.5% **
Had you purchased product from these farms before? †	Yes	59.6%	43.9%	74.1%***
	No	40.1%	55.4%	25.8%***
	Unsure	.3%	.6%	0%
Do you plan on attending Open Farm Day next year? ‡	Yes	91.0%	86.3%	95.6%***
	No	.3%	.5%	0%
	Unsure	8.8%	13.2%	4.4%***

† First time attendees n= 157, Repeat attendees n=170

‡ Repeat attendees n=183

***Difference between first-time and repeat attendees significant at $p < .01$, ** significant at $p < .05$

Table 2. Experience of All, First-time, and Repeat Open Farm Day Attendees 2015 & 2016

	All Attendees (n=365)	First-time Attendees (n=182)	Repeat Attendees (n=183)
I had an enjoyable experience at Open Farm Day	4.75	4.76	4.74
I learned about new farms at Open Farm Day	4.61	4.68	4.54 *
The farms I visited were well-maintained and appealing to visitors	4.62	4.66	4.57
I plan to visit the farms I went to on Open Farm Day in the future	4.3	4.33	4.27
I learned about new farm products from Open Farm Day	4.33	4.42	4.23 **
Open Farm Day provided me with an authentic farm experience	4.34	4.38	4.3
I will purchase product from farms I visited at Open Farm Day in the future	4.46	4.42	4.5

Responses are based on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being “strongly disagree” and “5” being “strongly agree”.

** Difference between first-time and repeat attendees significant at $p < .05$, * significant at $p < .1$

Table 2 above shows the results of respondents being asked to rate their experience with Open Farm Day with on a scale of 1-5 .Responses to these questions were overwhelmingly positive with little significant different between first-time and repeat attendees. Visitors agreed most strongly with having an enjoyable experience at Open Farm Day.

Table 3 below displays responses from the follow-up survey sent to guests who responded to the initial survey in 2015 a year later. No statistical significance calculations were done for this survey due to the size and composition of survey responses. However, this information still offers a snapshot of a select group of 2015 Open Farm Day attendees. In total, 41.5 percent of respondents reported revisiting farms in the year following Open Farm Day and 78.5 percent said they purchased product from farms they visited after the event. Both respondents who attended Open Farm Day for the first time in 2015 and repeat attendees repurchased product at a similarly high rate. Also, though only 64.6% of respondents attended the event in 2015 and 2016, of those that did attend Open Farm Day again in 2016, 97.6 percent overall said that they still learned about new farms and products.

Table 3. Habits of 2015 Open Farm Day Attendees One Year After Event

	Response	All Attendees	First-time Attendees in 2015 (n=23)	Repeat Attendees in 2015 (n=42)
Since Open Farm Day 2015 have you revisited farms since 2015? (n=65)	Yes	58.5%	65.2%	54.8%
	No	29.2%	30.4%	28.6%
	Unsure	12.3%	4.3%	16.7%
Have you purchased product from any farms you visited at Open Farm Day 2015 since the event? (n=65)	Yes	78.5%	78.3%	78.6%
	No	15.4%	17.4%	14.3%
	Unsure	6.2%	4.3%	7.1%
Did you attend Open Farm Day 2016? (n=65)	Yes	64.6%	56.5%	69.0%
	No	35.4%	43.5%	31.0%
Did you learn about new farms and farm products at OFD 2016? (n=42)	Yes	97.6%	100%	96.6%
	No	0%	0%	0%
	Unsure	2.4%	0%	3.4%



Recommendations

If you decide to host a special event on your farm consider the following to make it a marketing success:

- Collect email addresses from attendees so you can continue to market to them after the event
- Offer event visitors exclusive coupons to use in the future to encourage repeat sales
- Make your farm and farm products easy to access year-round so you stay visible to visitors
- Offer discounts to loyal customers who bring guests to attend your event

Conclusions. On-farm special events such as Open Farm Day show great potential for farms to gain and retain customers. Results from the follow-up survey show that many Open Farm Day guests continue to make purchases from farms they visit throughout the year. Encouragingly, almost all respondents who attended Open Farm Day two years in a row still learned about new products, highlighting that these events are a great way to increase your farm's visibility and introduce new products to the public.

Repeat attendees seemed to respond to Open Farm Day more positively than first-time attendees as they visited more farms, were more familiar with farms, purchased more, and were more likely to say they intend to visit Open Farm Day again.

First-time attendees enjoyed Open Farm Day and learned more about new farms and farm products than repeat guests, making these events great opportunities gain visibility with new customers. They were also more likely to make buy product from farms they visited for the first time.

However, it is important to note that first-time attendees are not necessarily first-time customers, nor are repeat attendees always repeat customers. On-farm special events can get existing customers to your farm for the first time to generate lasting customer loyalty. They can also convert people who enjoy attending farm events into future customers.

Expect on-farm special events to be particularly successful at retaining customers. Gaining customers is often more expensive than retaining customers. Use special events to foster relationships with existing customers and to turn them into better customers that will make more purchases more frequently from you. Make sure to give first-time attendees a reason to come back. If you hope to use a special event primarily to gain customers, develop a plan to market to visitors into the future and not just the day of the event.

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