Mc Call's Pumpkin Patch
On-Site Report

Overview of Business

The McCall Pumpkin Patch has achieved a very good growth trend in the four short years it's been in operation. Most pumpkin farm operations start by serving the retail customers and subsequently add school tours. However you started your business with school tours and have built a solid base of business with school children.

Gross Annual Attendance

YEAR	TOTAL	SCHOOL TOURS	RETAIL BUSINESS
2001	26,000	16,000	10,000
2000	15,000		
1999	9,000		

Currently your school tours provide a major source of income to your business, however, the real growth is in promoting the Pumpkin Patch for retail sales. I would make a conservative estimate that your retail attendance can be at least four times your school tours or 64,000 retail guests. Your close proximity to Albuquerque and the expanded population base within 100 miles of your farm allow you to become the premier pumpkin farm for your area.

The future potential for McCall's Pumpkin Patch can even greatly exceed this estimated number with the proper expansion of family entertainment options, increased advertising, promotions and special events. I predict a very bright future for the McCall pumpkin patch business enterprise.

In addition, you can expand your private party enterprise and take advantage of a strong business opportunity.

Location

You have an ideal location to have a pumpkin farm. The farm is a thirty-minute drive from Albuquerque and within an hour's drive of Santa Fe. The easy highway accessibility to your farm provides a tremendous advantage to build your sales. The highway visibility of your farm entrance and retail pavilion further enhances your ability to attract and advertise to the daily drive-by traffic of 40,000 cars.

Immediate Goals for Increasing Revenue:

- **Attract more customers in October**
- **Expand the school tour business**
- **Expand the sales revenue during pumpkin season**
- **Provide additional uses for the facilities**

TARGET CUSTOMERS

The ideal customers for pumpkin farms are families with children.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- All future advertising, location of billboards, seeking of sponsorships and community promotions should always take your target audience into consideration.
- The target-customer base can be greatly expanded if you choose to build a large corn maze and offer activities for teens and young adults. (This will be addressed later in the report.)

HOURS

The 2002 hours of operation are:

Weekdays	8:30 AM – 3:00 PM
Weekends	10:00 AM – 5:00 PM

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- As you become more of a retail farm you will want to consider extending your closing hours until 6:00 PM.
- A later closing time will allow families to come to the farm after school.
- The Columbus Day Monday holiday has become a very popular family day to visit a pumpkin farm and the sales can often equal a weekend day, so stay open until 6 PM.

APPROACH TO FARM

Your frontage and visibility to a major highway is a significant asset to building your business.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Take advantage of the very high daily traffic count and advertise the opening of your pumpkin farm in the frontage adjacent to the highway. Use a road sign, large pumpkin mountain, straw bale art, big glowing pumpkin, etc. (See enclosed tape and photo.)

- Better yet, keep a good visual pumpkin image up year-round in the frontage adjacent to the highway. This will allow you to develop McCall's Pumpkin Farm as a "brand" so that everyone recognizes your name. As I mentioned, there is a Chicago pumpkin farm that keeps a large fiber glass pumpkin on the top of its silo year round. (See resource sheet.)

- Create an attractive and welcoming entrance to your farm. Your sign states "McCall Cattle Farm," which is not associated with pumpkins. So the entrance sign should be decorated with corn stalks, pumpkins, straw bales, etc. to create the connection, as well as to make a positive first impression as you enter the farm.

- Create these entrance displays in September (or even earlier) in order to advance your opening date.

PARKING & FLOW

The best layout for retail farms is to keep customer parking in front of the retail buildings for optimum traffic flow.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Do not board your wagons in front of the entrance to your pavilion. Move wagon loading either to the side or to the back area as we discussed.

- It is preferable that incoming and exiting traffic does not cross the main walking paths of customers as they enter your pavilion.

- Keep a well-marked pedestrian lane for families walking with children. Customer safety should always be on your mind when developing the traffic flow.

- Parking lanes and spaces should be clearly identified. This often eliminates the need for labor to park the cars.

- Create signs to identify the entrance area to your pavilion.

FOOD CONCESSIONS

Offering many food options for your customers will keep them on the farm longer and increase the average sale. Food concessions can typically average between $2 - $4 per customer.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- If you are not ready to take on the task of expanding the food choices yourself, find outside concessionaires who already have the equipment and expertise to come on site and do this for you. Typical commission that you can request is 20% of sales. This is often the best way to get started and it allows you to see what food sells.

- The most popular food at outdoor farm events is hand-held, that doesn't require utensils. (Once you provide utensils then you have to provide plentiful and convenient seating.) Sample foods: hotdogs, hamburgers, turkey legs, roasted sweet corn, funnel cakes, sno cones, popcorn, etc., plus a full selection of soda and bottled water.

ADDITIONAL RETAIL GROWTH

Future sales increases can come by offering more products for sale, which are attractively displayed and merchandised.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The sale of fall decorations is an important category and product display is key to selling more.

  Examples: straw bales, corn stalk bundles, Indian corn bundles, gourds, painted pumpkins, mums or other fall flowers appropriate for your area.

- Utilize the ovens at the Tastee Freeze to bake pumpkin pies, pumpkin shaped sugar cookies etc. Chef Pierre offers one of the most popular frozen pie bake-off product assortments. These sales would require a display case, boxes and sanitary surroundings.

- A general selection of Halloween merchandise also creates sales at pumpkin farms.

  Examples: pumpkin knives and carving kits, pumpkin buckets, general decorative Halloween merchandise for the home and yard, etc.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

The more activities you provide, the more people you will be attract to your farm, and for longer periods of time. Which leads to their spending more on food and purchases.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Activities can be provided as 1) pay-for-what-you-want option or 2) included as part of a general admission fee. (Often times even on admission farms there will be additional charges for some activities such as pony rides and the large corn mazes.)

- Activities should be developed to appeal to a wide age range of children. Some of these activities lend themselves to night activities and you need to decide if you want to go after that business. Here are some examples:

  Up to age 3: Sand box, strawpile, small animals, playhouses, face painting, petting farm

  Age 4 – 6: All the above plus: pedal tractors, small mazes, inflatables, pony rides, arcade games, miniature golf, larger play structures (forts, slides etc.)

  Age 7 – 12: See above plus: larger maze, spook house, hayride & bonfire, pumpkin chunkin'

  Teens & Young Adults: See above plus: haunted hayrides, haunted houses

- Other fee based activities: train rides, scarecrow making

- Live music, strolling entertainers, balloon artists, storytellers all provide increased perceived value to the family experience.

- Goat walks and animal pens with feed machines not only pay for themselves but also provide a true farm attraction. (See resource sheet.)

CURRENT RETAIL SPACE & FUTURE NEEDS

The 36,000-square-foot covered cattle pavilion currently provides a very workable space to service your current school tour and retail business, but not as crowds grow.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Eliminate the fencing to accommodate the variety of retail enterprises, merchandise, farm attractions and concessions that you will want to be selling,

- A new farm building or modification to your cattle pavilion should be part of a five-year plan.

The front-entrance parking lot makes it easy to site an admission booth when you convert to charging an entrance fee.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The farm entry/admission booth should be built and placed to control entry to your farm.

- Your goal should be that everyone entering your farm pays an admission to enter.

  No sales or activities will be offered without paying the entrance fee.
  It is important to have an accurate count on admissions in order to begin tallying average sale per customer. (Average sale per customer to include: admission, all food concessions sold, extra activity charges etc. divided by the gross individual sale.) The average sale per customer will become a key number to benchmark for your annual sales goals.

ADVERTISING

On average, farms are spending between 4 to 6% of their gross sales on advertising. Many of the start-up farm operations are spending up to 10% of gross sales.

Your current billboard advertising is based on a 4" X 11" "pony board" which does not allow much space to convey a message. It can quickly become cluttered and not readable. (FYI: Somebody at the State Fair commented that he had seen your boards but can't read them because of too much copy. In the case of billboards, less copy is better.)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider larger billboards with less clutter.

You are not presently doing television advertising, but Albuquerque television stations cover a wide geographic area that feeds into your sales.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Talk with the television station sales people to learn more about this option for next year. In smaller markets such as yours, television stations will sometimes include the cost of commercial production into the price of commercial time.

You will be expanding your operation to attract more families.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Research if you have any local publications and newspaper offering supplements geared to the family market. Typically these are produced at the beginning of the school year and are quite timely for pumpkin season.

Yellow Pages are an important source of family customers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- You mentioned that you are in the yellow pages but you didn't say where you are listed. If you want to be known as "The Pumpkin Farm," get listed under "Pumpkins" in the yellow pages. (If such a listing doesn't exist, ask the sales rep if they would create the listing or where Halloween events belong.)

- While your operating company is McCall Cattle Company, I would want you to promote yourselves as McCall's Pumpkin Farm to reinforce the brand, including in telephone listings and yellow page listings.

MARKETING & COMMUNITY PROMOTIONS

These following approaches to promote your farm are not as costly as paid advertising. They take advance planning and creativity to explore and develop. It is well worth the effort, since the results are often extraordinary, and sometimes much stronger than traditional advertising.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Seek out opportunities where you can get the word out about McCall's Pumpkin Patch as a trade, barter or for little money.

  Examples:

  1. Partner with a non-profit group to pre-sell tickets to your fall season, giving the group a commission.

  2. During the first weekend when sales are slower, tie-in with a charity from Albuquerque. The charity will usually provide a lot of promotion, it can provide some of the entertainment and perhaps work out a percentage of sales as a donation.

  3. Arrange to have a display at the State Fair in the NMDA building or provide them with discount admission coupons to place in everyone's bag.

  4. *Absolutely* take advantage of the large crowds in town during the Balloon Festival. Create a promotion on the farm during that weekend, and work with the Balloon Festival organization to see how you can have a booth, give away discount tickets, etc.

- Provide product donations to local communities to maintain goodwill and promote the farm. Get requests for donations in writing on the organization's letterhead. Determine a dollar value annual equivalent of product that you will donate (e.g. $500 worth of pumpkins.) Choose organizations you feel are most worthwhile, or with whom your family has direct contact. If others call, say (*in a very kind way)* that you have already donated your allotment for the season. Always keep the door open with these other groups because you may want to partner together in the future.

FESTIVAL & SPECIAL EVENTS

Special themed events and activities are an excellent method to kick off the season, to draw more customers to your farm and to attract FREE publicity.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Create special event titles that are fun and inviting, such as:

  Pumpkin Prowl
  Halloween Hoopla
  Costume Parade
  Pumpkin Fiesta

- Create special activities to coordinate with these weekends, such as:
  Contests: pumpkin pie eating, games, look a like, best/longest beard. pumpkin seed spitting
  Activities: pumpkin bowling, pumpkin throwing
  Costume parade: children and pets
  Grand opening of the corn maze with special design
  Balloon lift off from the farm
  Pumpkin chunkin'

- Work hard to get publicity about these festivals. Be sure to contact the "calendar listing" editors at newspapers, t.v. & radio stations so that each farm event is included. Write a press release and send to all the media that serves your area. You have the best chance of getting desirable television coverage if you create activities that are interesting visuals for the news (e.g. pie-eating contests.)

SCHOOL TOURS

You have already created impressive numbers for your school tour program but greater opportunity may still exist.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Next year charge $5 per child. There is no reason to charge less during the week than you do on the weekend.

- Presently your tours do not have an educational component. This will become increasingly important so that teachers can justify the trip to their administrators.

- Contact Jennifer Hopper at the New Mexico Farm Bureau to learn about the "Ag in the Classroom" program. (See resource sheet.) There are state "benchmarks" for each grade level that cover curriculum requirements. If would be good if your educational component would meet one of these requirements.

- Another educational approach is to provide the teacher a professional resource packet on pumpkins for use in the classroom. (See enclosed sample.)

- To meet the needs of the teachers, and best determine if you are doing a good job, ask the teachers to complete an evaluation form. (See enclosed school program evaluation form.)

- Make sure that every child goes home with literature about your farm. (See example from Sonny Acres.)

CORN MAZE

The large corn mazes – cut into unique designs -- offer increased revenue potential by extending your season and expanding the demographic base of your customers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Next year consider having a GPS-designed corn maze with a minimum of 8 acres. Many mazes are up to 12 acres and more. (See resource sheet.)

- A well-publicized corn maze can be a stand-alone attraction that kicks off early in September, long before pumpkin season. Corn mazes have great appeal to the media.

- A free-standing corn maze can be an additional admission activity. Many farms are charging from $5 - $10 per person.

- Large corn mazes also offer educational components that can attract older children for school tours, teens and young adults.

- Corn mazes are best to be cut when the corn is approximately one foot tall, allowing the cut portion to die-off completely. Cutting corn mazes just before the season increases the insurance liability (from people stumbling on the corn stubble and hurting themselves.) It is also much harder for young children and older adults to walk through a maze on big roots of corn.

PERSONNEL & MANAGEMENT

The more you charge for admission, and the larger the crowds you attract, the greater the public's expectations. This means paying close attention to grounds-keeping, customer service, attractions and facilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Keep in mind that you will **not** be able to do it by yourself. Find and develop key people so you will improve your chances for success (and allow you to sleep at night!)

- Facilities and attractions will need to be added and improved each year. Examples: Picnic tables, trash receptacles, restrooms, sanitary and professional-looking food preparation areas, retail facilities and attractions.

- Train employees to be courteous and well-informed. It is very important to leave a favorable impression with the customer.

- Enforce a uniform dress code with employees by providing shirts, hats, sweatshirts, etc. This way you'll have a consistent and professional appearance that leave a positive, lasting impression.

Urban families want to experience the country and appreciate the contact with the farmer.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Spend some of your time talking with the customers and walking the grounds.

- Wear a name tag so guests can make the connection that you're the owner.

See what is working at other pumpkin farms and use the best ideas regarding layouts, school tours and family entertainment options.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Participate in the annual bus tour of farms with the North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association to observe other operations and to get acquainted with other farm direct marketers. They will become a valuable future resource for ideas and future growth.

- If you want to visit pumpkin farms this October, I would be happy to provide you a list of several in the Chicago area.

Financial management will be critical to your success as your business grows. Develop a financial reporting system that evaluates which areas are making you money and where you should expand.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- In order to effectively manage your business you will want to have cash register sales and sales reports kept by department/enterprise to monitor the sales trends by year and measure profitability.

  For example:

  Admissions
  School Tours
  Food Concessions
  Decorations
  Other Retail
  Maze Admission
  Concessionaires – Food, Pony Rides, Carnival

Craft Booths
Face Painting

PRIVATE PARTIES/COMPANY PICNICS

Hosting private groups either during your off hours or in-season is a financially lucrative business when serviced and marketed correctly.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Private parties are booked in advance, and you are paid for guaranteed counts no matter how many show up. This makes planning the food and scheduling the labor much easier than your retail business.

- Marketing for private party/company picnics is done in the winter when you have few distractions. However, the actual sale and booking can take months to close and with larger groups can be a couple of years.

- This sales effort can be either by phone or face-to-face, but must be handled by someone comfortable with making sales calls.

- You can establish your picnic program based on a specified minimum food purchase, thereby ensuring all of the set-up etc. is worth your while.

- While the private-party business can be lucrative, right now it will prove a distraction to limited family resources. Best to put all your energy into the pumpkin business, which has a larger potential.

RESOURCE SHEET

McCall's PUMPKIN FARM

Jennifer Hopper
Ag in the Classroom
New Mexico Farm Bureau
PO Box 2004
Las Cruces, NM 88004-9004
505-532-4704

FiberGlass pumpkin
Jim Shoff
www.fastkorp.com
608-269-7110
Sparta, WI

Gumball/Animal Feed Machines
www.123vending.com
1-888-525-6115
The machines start at $49.95.

Wooden farm cutouts:
Signs of the Season
Suzanne Gilmore
26W. Clark St.
Rensselaer, IN 47978
219-866-4507
www.signsoftheseason.com
ggilmore@signsoftheseason.com

Maze Designers

Great Adventure Corn Mazes
462 E 1000 N
Firth, ID 83236
208-357-7837

Maize Quest
251 E Maple Lawn Rd.
New Park, PA 17532
717-382-4878