

Mesilla Valley Maize Maze & Pumpkin Patch On-Site Evaluation

Overview of Business

Anna & Steve Lyles have a farming operation one mile north of Las Cruces. They farm approximately 1,000 acres with 20 acres devoted to the entertainment area. The entertainment area currently includes a large corn maze, wagon rides to the pumpkin patch, concession trailer, wooden cutouts, trike track and other small children's activities.

This is the fourth year for the maze and the first year operating without a partner. The Lyles are now able to have full control regarding decisions for improvements and expenditures.

Gross Revenue by Year

2001	\$33,000
2000	\$28,000
1999	\$25,000

The maze is open to the public six weekends from September 21 through October 31. The hours of operation are from 11 AM to dark. Other groups can be accommodated by reservation. The admission charge is \$6.00 for adults and \$4.00 for children.

School tours are offered during the week. The price for school tours is \$4.00 and that includes a small pumpkin, visit to the maze, a wagon ride, and access to the playground and to the picnic tables for lunch.

Every year the maze is designed to provide an educational component, which enhances the experience for school children. Because of the learning stations, school groups can spend over an hour in the maze, which limits the number of children that can be accommodated on a daily basis.

Location

The maze is located on a four-lane road and is easy to find. The front parking lot has easy access from the main road. A large billboard sign on the corner of the Lyle property creates good identification. The maze is located within easy driving distance of the population of Las Cruces (125,000) and less than one hour from El Paso, Texas (700,000).

Target Customer Base

A maze and pumpkin patch is a major draw for families with children and their grandparents. The complexity of the maze also offers a fun attraction for teens, youth groups and young adults. It is also an appealing destination for companies wanting to

host a family picnic event. The group least likely to be attracted to the maze is seniors who are not accompanying children.

Objectives to Grow Business

- **Increase the average customer sale**
- **Improve the quality of customer experience**
- **Attract more weekend customers**
- **Increase the School Tour business**
- **Establish and build a group business**

FOOD SERVICE

For admission farms, a key goal (and a benchmark for how they are faring) is to increase the average sale per customer annually. The longer a customer stays on the farm during his visit, the more money they will spend.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Offer more food and beverage options. Either invest in the equipment, buying the product and staffing the booth; or hire an outside concessionaire. When you are starting, it is best to hire concessionaires to minimize your stress and also to be able to evaluate what food sells. Standard food concession commissions are 15 – 20%. Beware of those that want to just pay a flat fee... you will rarely come out as well as taking a commission.
- As you expand the area of your activities, the more food and drink choices you should offer. Make sure to locate food concessions strategically throughout the activity areas: multiple food outlets will sell more product than one large stand.
- Food choices should be easy to eat with the hands and not require utensils.
Examples: Hot dogs, bratwurst, hamburgers, turkey legs, popcorn, sweet corn, funnel cakes, kettle corn, sno cones or any candies or foods sold in bags and packages. Offer a good selection of sodas and bottled water.

Foods such as BBQ, baked beans, slaw, etc. require utensils and, more importantly, require plenty of picnic tables so people can sit and eat.

PRODUCTS

There are a variety of ways to increase revenue by product sales.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Display and sell a full selection of fall decorations. Show off the colors and textures of the fall season. These decorations sell best when sold from large displays.
Examples: Bundled corn stalks, straw bales, gourds, squash, Indian corn bundled, Indian corn with bows and potted mums
- When you create a good visual impression with your displays the customers will buy more. Be sure to enhance **ALL** of your grounds, including fence posts, entrance, wagon loading area, photo-display areas, wooden-cutout area, etc.
- Offer other seasonal products: New Mexico apples, New Mexico food products, ristras, Halloween pre-wrapped candies, popcorn balls, etc.
- Add value to your pumpkins by offering painted pumpkins for sale. (This also adds another activity to the roster.) Find the “craft painters” by advertising in the newspaper. These people will gladly work on a per-piece basis and pick-up the product then returning it painted.

- Increase the pricing of your pumpkins. You are selling them too cheaply. The best way to maximize the value is to charge by the pound, which requires a scale by every register that rings pumpkins.

ACTIVITIES

Adding activities makes the farm experience more interesting and fun. It also increases the length of the stay, ultimately leading to increased sales per person. Additional activities can be offered for a fee per activity, or offered as part of an overall admission price that can be increased to cover your expenses. (**NOTE:** There is an admission threshold: the point at which the admission price becomes too high and negatively effects overall gate attendance. Farm admission pricing varies by area, so do a little research and observe customer reactions to reach price sensitivity.)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider activities for which you could charge fees:
Examples: inflatables, arcade games, train or barrel rides, etc
- Consider adding activities that would not warrant a separate charge, but could add value to the admission cost.
Examples: Live music, miniature golf, expanded playground activities, large sand box or corn box, smaller maze for young children, strolling characters, magicians, balloon sculptors, etc.
- Farm animals are a big attraction at a farm destination. It needed by a big undertaking, goats and sheep can be enough.
- The other reason to add farm animals is to be able to sell the animal feed. Sales of animal feed can become a good source of revenue and far outweigh the expense of feeding them for six weeks. (See resource sheet for “gumball” supplier.) Goat walks provide a great source of feed income, and have become particularly popular.
- Other optional activities for fees could include:
 - Face Painting
 - Pony Rides (use a concessionaire)
 - Make-Your-Own Scarecrow (see enclosed sample and directions)
 - Paint-Your-Own Pumpkin (parents pay so that children can choose and paint a pumpkin *and* leave the mess at the farm!)

QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE

The quality of experience plays a big part in whether customers return and spread positive comments to their friends. A big part of the “experience” has to do with how the grounds and display look, which requires simple annual improvements. These updates rarely equate to increased entry fees, but the overall guest satisfaction level will be higher and lead to return visits.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- As described before in this report, use fall decorations and pumpkins to enhance **ALL** of your grounds, including fence posts, entrance, wagon loading area, photo-display areas, wooden-cutout area, etc.
- Continue to add quality wooden cutouts. (See Resource Sheet for supplier and ideas.)
- Add simple themed decorations: cornstalk teepees, simple maze for the small children.

Employee appearance and behavior with the public can either positively or negatively impact the guest’s experience. As you increase your entry fee (which is your goal), you also increase the guests’ expectations on how they will be treated.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Each year, conduct an employee-training program in advance of opening. (Include family members.) This would cover topics such as:
 - Basic elements of how to treat a guest
 - How to speak with guests
 - How to handle a problem or disgruntled guest
 - How to answer frequently asked questions
 - How to assist someone who has been injured
 - How to work cash register and make change
- Employees should be easy to recognize and have consistent visual identity by wearing company-issued shirts, hats, name badges, etc. with the farm logo.

MARKETING PROMOTIONS FOR WEEKEND VISITORS

There are many effective ways to grow your business through marketing and promotions that require more creativity and advance efforts than big budgets.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Invite school groups, ball teams and other not-for-profits to presell tickets to your maze as a fundraiser. They receive a small commission on sales. You could stipulate that the tickets are good for admission anytime OR good only for the first two weekends when typically the farm traffic is slower.
- Contact the promotions director at various radio stations to provide them with admission tickets as a give-away for radio contests. In exchange you receive mentions and promotional plugs about Mesilla Valley Corn Maze.
- Use tickets as give-aways to companies that sponsor contests, sign-ups for new business, etc. In return, they would promote the farm through publicity, display of your brochures etc.
- A great way to get publicity is to set up a challenge for competing DJ'S or TV hosts to run through your maze. Winners would win money for their favorite charities. In return, you would get free media exposure as they announce the big contest on air and invite the public to come and watch, as well as with post-event on-air discussion.
- See if your newspapers, TV stations, radio stations would list your events on their websites or provide a link the sites' calendar listings.
- Tap into the potential customer base at the University in Las Cruces. College kids have money and transportation, and they enjoy coming to the farm for the maze, wagon rides, pumpkin sales, etc.
 - Set up a STUDENT ONLY Friday night event
 - Contact the sororities and fraternities and have a GREEK EVENT.
 - Post bright orange flyers around the campus about the maze and/or special student events
 - Research the costs of advertising in the campus newspaper.

BUILDING A GROUP PARTY BUSINESS

The pre-booked private party business can be a very profitable enterprise for you when it is priced correctly. Once you begin this effort you will find that is just as easy to host 300 people as 50 people.

There are a number of businesses and groups that would be interested in booking a fun day at Mesilla Valley Maize for private parties and company picnics. In order to do this you will need to plan the marketing effort, food handling, private space requirements, tables, chairs, tents and costs to come up with a complete package price.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Market your facility to local corporations by purchasing a mailing list of companies with 100 or more employees within 100 miles of your farm. I spoke with a list broker who explained there are 520 companies in your area meeting this criteria, which they would provide for 40 cents a name or \$208.
- Marketing to these companies occurs during the winter. Often they need a long lead-time for planning such events, which are typically held during the day.
- Call each name to pre-qualify good candidates by finding out if they ever host company picnics for their employees and families. (See sample script for suggested initial phone contact.)
- Once you have an interested prospect, mail a letter, brochure and pricing sheet with menu choices. Invite them to the farm for an on-site visit. Continue phone contact until they book an event or say they are not interested.
- Target other groups such as service clubs, college groups, pharmaceutical companies and not-for-profit organizations for solicitation of private parties.
- You must be able to offer a complete turnkey package so the company has no responsibility. That means you provide the food, book all rentals, book the entertainers they want, etc. (See Eckert picnic brochure for scope of party planning effort.)
- The menu choices should be limited. If you are uncomfortable handling the food for large groups, make contact with a local caterer to build the program. The caterer should give you a wholesale price that you can mark up substantially to include the rentals, your additional labor and charge for the entertainment portion of the party.

Because of your good weather, you may want to offer the private parties for a period beyond the fall season.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- November in your area might still be a prime time for weekend group events. You don't need the pumpkin patch to make it work, but continue to offer private wagon rides for the group.
- Consider offering private parties in September *before* you open to the public.

FARM LAYOUT

Anticipate substantial attendance growth in the future and start planning now to handle larger crowds.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Your parking lot will need to be expanded as crowds grow. Plan ahead as to where you will place additional parking.
- As crowds grow and you add entertainment, plan for additional picnic tables, a stage area, placement of food concessions, areas for private group parties, etc. Begin now to consider where to put walking paths and permanent structures when larger crowds spread out over the grounds.

SCHOOL TOURS

School tours provide an excellent source of weekday income for the maze. And the children who come to the tour often return with mom and dad for Fall visits. Expanding the school tour enterprise will impact revenue growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Expand your school tours by hiring staff to handle more children. The increased revenue from the tours will more than offset the increased labor costs.
- Target elementary schools in the Las Cruces and El Paso areas by mailing each one a brochure your school tour program. Typically schools are willing to have their children ride the bus up to an hour or so for an educational experience. (See some brochure samples.)
- Seek to find ways that you can accommodate more children during the tour. The maze experience takes too long. Have some of the educational components occur outside of the maze. Or create a smaller version of the maze for school children.

- Make sure every child leaves your farm with a certificate, brochure, map, or other printed piece that list your farm name, phone number, hours and website address. Consider distributing a flyer with an attached discount coupon that entices the child's family to return together to the farm and go through the maze during a weekend.
- You are giving a very good value for \$4.00. I would consider going to \$5.00 per child. In order to feel comfortable with a price increase, I would suggest you call the science museum, zoo or any other places that offer school tours and see what they are charging and what they are providing for the price.

Your program is currently designed for elementary school children. However pre-schoolers have become a big audience for pumpkin farms.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Design a different experience for pre-school children. A short interactive talk about the growing of pumpkins, wagon ride and pumpkin is enough to provide for children this age.
- Have a separate area to handle the pre-schoolers.

BUSINESS EXPANSION

As the business grows you may also want to consider refining your bookkeeping to better track each enterprise so you can track profitability and make better decisions about each source of income. This will be become very helpful to better manage and review your business.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Start posting your revenue by department or source. Examples:
 - Admissions
 - Pumpkins
 - Food concessions
 - Outside activity concessions
 - Private Parties
 - Decorations

ADVERTISING & MARKETING

Typically farms are spending between 4 – 10% of their gross revenues on paid advertising.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Based on your revenue at this time, I would recommend looking into newspaper advertising in Las Cruces and El Paso for your three big weekends.
- Because you reach such an expanded geographic area, I don't think that a billboard program would be cost effective.
- Distribution of flyers and posters at schools, soccer parks, libraries etc. might also be effective if you are permitted to display them.
- Paid advertising in school programs, athletic events, etc. would not be advised.
- See if your area has a publication geared towards families. Sometimes the large daily newspaper offer special sections at the start of school. Sometimes they offer Halloween special sections. It would be worthwhile to advertise in these publications.

Free publicity is a critical part of the marketing efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Continue to send press releases at the beginning of the season. Add at least two other press releases during the six weeks.
- Your database should include all newspapers, radios and television stations in the Las Cruces and El Paso area. (Paper is cheap. Build a big list.)

SPECIAL EVENTS TO ATTRACT CUSTOMERS

Special events are a wonderful way to attract more customers. You also get additional press coverage about special events by sending a press release for each one.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Think about a partnership with a not-for-profit organization to co-host a special event at the farm. Develop the event as a fund raiser (the group gets a portion of sales) or as a way to build awareness for an important cause (organ donation, for example). The event will attract new guests and the participating groups get good publicity for their causes.

- Produce your own special event with different activities that are unique to the weekend. This will appeal to new guests, as well as cause existing customers to make a second visit during the season.

Mesilla Valley Maize Resource Sheet

Animal feed/gumball machines

www.123vending.com

1-888-525-6115

The machines start at \$49.95 and pay for themselves and the feeding and upkeep of the animals very quickly.

Wooden farm cutouts

Signs of the the Season

Suzanne Gilmore

216W. Clark St.

Rensselaer, IN 47978

219-866-4507

www.signsoftheseasons.com

ggilmore@signsoftheseasons.com

Popcorn Balls

The Humphry Company

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New Mexico

Brochure Distribution service

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