

2012 Nebraska Agri/Eco-Tourism Workshop

Networking with the Presenters . . . Trends, Marketing and more

Panel:

Kelly Bricker – Associate professor at the University of Utah in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism. With her husband Nathan, she developed an ecotourism operation called Rivers Fiji.

Deborah Kerstetter – Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management at Penn State.

Tim Reese – Supervisor of Gale Woods Farm, a educational working farm, in Minnetrista, Minn.

Amy Sandeen - Executive director of Prairie Loft Center for Outdoor and Agricultural Learning in Hastings.

Clayton Chapman - Owner and chef at The Grey Plume restaurant in Omaha.

Kevin Loth – Owner/operator of a small diversified organic farm in Lincoln.

Q: For travel and tourism to become more sustainable, are there new transportation consumption developments on the horizon?

Kelly Bricker: Well, the big elephant in the room is airlines. A Vermont group (Global Sustainable Tourism Council <http://new.gstcouncil.org/>) created a green transportation certification standard that has been vetted. I suggest taking a look at that for ideas and guidelines.

Q : Clayton, how do you get your green/local food message out to urban Omaha?

Clayton Chapman: We set aside very little money for marketing and advertising. We put the majority of money into our upfront costs, composting and farmer relationships. We felt if we built a local foods program, the media would come along. And, we have a lot of coverage locally and nationally. As a small start up business and a sustainable business, we have to decide what's the best way to spend money? On advertising or on ways we can reach consumers interested in sustainability.

Deborah Kerstetter: Social media is another way to reach out. It's inexpensive but time intensive. You want to get as much public relations as possible, invite writers and the local media to your business and get them to write about you. Get someone to shoot video, and ask them to release it to you for publicity use. Work with consumers to help develop your message and tell your story. Ask yourself, 'how can I get my consumers to help me tell my story?'

Kelly Bricker: The International Ecotourism Society, <http://www.ecotourism.org/>, lists members and properties that are sustainable and consumers are using that list. Online travel sites such as Expedia and Travelocity have green sections too. It's a strong initiative on Travelocity right now, and the green hits have increased more than main site.

Deborah Kerstetter: Also, extension agents can help you develop a marketing campaign. And look at Greener Nebraska for assistance as well.

Q: Can education facilities and small farms do what you do at Gale Woods and offer local foods?

Tim Reese: Yes, we have big events with vendor fairs and also put on lots of events that include food and we offer local foods as much as possible. We don't grow enough to meet the demand, so we look to work with other producers. Building awareness is essential.

Amy Sandeen: A big part of it is the kids coming out and learning. We need to teach the next generation to help sustain agriculture for the future.

Q : How can one get citizens involved and engaged in a business? What are some creative ideas?

Kelly Bricker: Go with a destination approach, rather than individual business approach. Create a community initiative that looks at how you want to develop tourism in your community. Include bankers, schools, everyone. Our Fiji island group includes lots of business. We formed a tourism association with growers, fisherman, properties, diving businesses, etc. Everyone got around the table and talked about issues, ideas and growing concerns for the area. In Estes, Colo., everyone has "adopted" the park so even in a gas station travelers can find out where the elk are bugling. Every business is involved.

Amy Sandeen: We're in Hastings, so we're not quite urban, not quite rural. Collaboration! I can't emphasize it enough. We established a youth activities coalition and every couple of months we sit down and touch base. We ask: What's going on? Are we overlapping? Stepping on toes? We put together a flier for several thousand households. Each entity has something unique and great to offer. The Hastings Museum had a summer pioneer program. They collaborated with Prairie Loft and held it on the Prairie Loft site, but the museum staff did all the planning and organization. We've worked with the country club and the children's museum. Piggy back and collaborate with other groups doing things in your community.

Kelly Bricker: California had a roundtable to rally around the outdoors. State heads and anyone affiliated with the outdoors met monthly to talk about what they're doing and build partnerships. Healthcare workers wanted to write prescription for patients to get out and hike. To help unplug youth, they created a list of 10 things every kid must do before they grow up. The governor endorsed it, they created bookmarks and posters, and all these groups are using it as a framework for their programming. It was an incredible way to build ideas and connect. Check out <http://www.childrenandnature.org/>.

Q: What roadblocks have you encountered in purchasing local foods of restaurants, or vice versa?

Clayton Chapman: The hurdles are availability, knowing where to look and cost. The Nebraska Food Cooperative is amazing and will help you find resources. There's a small degree of separation—growers know each other and know people who know other growers, so you can build a network of contacts. Pricing is a real issue. We could make one call a week to a big producer and get carrots at a quarter of a price. You have to be able to pay for local foods and adjust your menu price.

Kevin Loth: You have to keep your ears open about accounts that are out there, accounts I have and accounts I've lost. And, realize this is a full time commitment for the chef. One solution would be if local producers could pool their products and offer them together—that would simplify it for the chef/owners. It would remove some of the communication and organization work for the chef. I've done a little of that with other farms, but a lot more could be done. I try to make my product as consistent, affordable and easy for the restaurants as possible.

Clayton Chapman: Easing delivering would be helpful. We have to call or email. Some consistency to ease the ordering system would be greatly appreciated.

Q: Any advice on cold calling? How do I break into this? You mentioned lost accounts, why did you lose them?

Kevin Loth: Lost accounts are often due to a new chef who doesn't have the passion for this. There is lots of turnover in the restaurant industry. Or maybe a new farm comes in and gets the account. I think it's ok to help the new guy. As for contacts, pick the right time to call. Don't call over the lunch hour. Don't call at 8 a.m. Feel out their level of interest. If you know others in the market, it's o.k. to name drop because there are community networks.

Clayton Chapman: Who to contact depends on restaurant—we're chef/kitchen driven, but there may be others that aren't so chef driven, then the owner or general manager might be better. Cold calling is preferred to just showing up. It's very frustrating to have to stop if you're in the middle of something. It's much easier if you can plan for a meeting.

Q: There is conflicting information out there about insurance issues. Any advice?

Kelly Bricker: In Fiji, it is very confusing. As part of your management team, get someone who is knowledgeable. We have a lawyer that we work with that is an expert on what insurance is needed to make sure you are covered.

Amy Sandeen: We switched insurers recently because we are a different kind of entity. We are not a park or a museum. I've seen advertisements for events promoting a "petting zoo" but at the event there are signs saying 'don't pet the animals.' We went to three firms in Hastings to see what we could find. Find a carrier who understands what you're doing (combines, farmers' markets, petting, etc.) Seek help from experts and pay for that help.

Kelly Bricker: And, review your needs every few years, because things change: laws change, products change, costs change. You may need to update. And, shop around. Some agents are more in tune with this industry. Some agents are more aware of agritourism industry, so look for someone who gets the industry. Plus, some associations work together to help reduce costs and ensure there is an industry standard. Look for those affiliated associations may help address that.

Q : Do you have suggestions on where to find creative ideas to bring in additional income from your land?

Tim Reese: Steal them from other places. You can find other places similar to you and see what they are doing. Take those ideas and tweak them to fit what you do. There are lots of creative people coming up with ideas all over the place.

Amy Sandeen: Farm revenue can be beneficial. Lease the land for community gardens and ag-based activities. Check out the farm-based education website. And, corn mazes and pumpkin patches are big business if you want to do them.

Q: Do you have one urgent message that would help with tourism?

Deborah Kerstetter: People are seeking experiences. Emphasize the experience, not the brand. You're not Nike or Coke, and trying to sell the brand isn't going to work for most people. I really believe in partnerships. Look outside the box, for example the health industry. How can we build on these unusual industries to get our story out?

Kelly Bricker: Develop a strategy to help protect the environment. In Fiji, the environment is our attraction. We have to enhance and protect the environment as our base. Work with the community members and support their various businesses. That's the key to there still being a business in Fiji after 15 years and political coups. Those two things are the crux of why we exist.

Clayton Chapman: Partnerships. When you are branding, be building your business on a community level. Donate sales to charity or food pantry to really get the community behind you. We're more than restaurant. Start partnerships to start community building. Education. Get a lot of people behind you so everyone wants to see you succeed.

Kevin Loth: Experiential learning. On our farm, we had many customers from Omaha with Creighton connections. We were asked to be a host site for Creighton community service trips. Students come in and help out, so we're bringing in the next generation and educating them. We get to know the students and their parents. Be open to work parties. They plant gardens, pick peas and more. We include the community in what we do.

Tim Reese: Facebook is going public and is valued at \$100 billion, but there's no product. It's all about connections. People are hungry for connections. We're living in a disconnected time. Be aware that "product" is more than a tangible product—it's also an opportunity to connect and engage with something they think is valuable. We have volunteers who come to do work: schools, kids, families. Then they come back for activities and to buy eggs because they've been exposed to the farm. We posted photos of the rebuilding of our portable chicken coop on Facebook and asked people to name the coop. Here's a way you can connect by offering a name.

Amy Sandeen: I have four tips:

1. Wow factor. Find the wow – taste the food, see your product, visit your site. Go for that.
2. Find your best and do it better than everybody else.
3. Dream big and be realistic. Strategic planning is huge.
4. The only way to get from where you are and where you want to be is what you do, so get to work.

Q – In a town of 360 people (or in other small, rural towns) how can I get bigger batches of people to us?

Kelly Brincker: Our Fiji site isn't a destination, we reached out to everyone doing something in the region and said, together let's build a destination by collaborating and connecting adventure activities. Develop who you want to be seen as and develop it as a region. Try to get a lot of stories coming out of the communities, like farmers that became raft guides. We had very little paid advertising. Use public relations and get the word out via stories. Look creatively at your connections.

Amy Sandeen: Try to get those that are coming in to stay longer and do more. Expand the offerings. Maybe you offer a morning tour, then find something for that same group to do for three days. We're only open for scheduled activities and events; we're not open all the time, so it's more special and unique. Look at offerings you have and how to give people the biggest bang for their buck.

Q – Does anyone know how to get one of those blue signs that says your business here?

That is done through the Department of Roads and you have to follow a certain process. The Tourism 101 guide (<http://industry.visitnebraska.org/pdfs/industry/Tourism101Guide.pdf>) outlines the process.

Q – We're humble as Nebraskans, so we think 'Why would anyone pay for this?' Do you have any advice on how to price these experiences?

Clayton Chapman: The restaurant business is very different. Our profit margin is minimal, so 5 percent is doing well. So when we set out to build our business plan and set our pricing, we wanted to offer value. It was more important to us to make a little money over a long time, than to have a high mark up.

Kevin Loth: Our farm is kind of a destination place – volunteers, tours—we ask a little bit of money (\$3,), which doesn't add anything to our budget. It maybe pays us for our time, but it does a lot for the community and may come back to us in other ways.

Amy Sandeen: As a nonprofit, I can ask for sponsorships. Much of my time is spent asking people for money. That allows us to offer two free admission events each year. The competitive market is key, look at other things in the area and compare and contrast what other people are charging. Research what others are able to do.

Q – How do I find the organic farms in our area?

Steve Martin from the NE Department of Agriculture: We have a directory on our website for organic products and farmers markets. There is a process. I work with the certifiers. The ag department doesn't actually do the certifying, but it can help you.

Kevin Loth: Check out the Nebraska Food Co-op at <http://www.nebraskafood.org/> It has listings. There is also a Beginning Farmers program offered in Lincoln that can help you get started with how to plan crops, budget, plant, etc.