

Pick your Own (PYO): What you need to know to get 5* rated (part 2)



Much like Black Friday and Cyber Monday there are many trends which cross the Atlantic and become engrained in the British calendar. Halloween being one, which has now eclipsed Valentine's Day to become the third-biggest event after Christmas and Easter, and with it comes the 'Pumpkin Patch' trend which is starting to make waves. But what do Growers' who run PYO farms need to know? This is the second in our series of industry insights. In this edition we look at how an effective online marketing strategy can work wonders, the importance of maintaining your crops and maximising your presence with online reviews.

What did we learn in the last edition?

In part one of this factsheet, we looked at the changing market of pick your own enterprise, and explored the reasons driving customer demand. From the rise of social media, consumer awareness of sustainability, demand for supply chain transparency and the moving trend towards more spending on 'experiences' rather than products.

As recently quoted in an article for the BBC, Claudia Lenza from Llanvihangel Crucorney said:

"Pick-your-owns can do really well. It's a different customer now. Before it was people wanting to fill their freezers. Now its families with young children looking for a fun day out"



This was echoed by Gary Rees from Brooksgrove Farm who said, “It used to be people stocking up with wheelbarrows or ladies making jam. Now its families looking for an experience”.

Here are the key learning points from part one:

- If you are considering, or in the process of setting up a PYO attraction, make sure you do your research and listen to advice. And if you already have a PYO attraction, keep learning and keep improving your offer.
- Keep the customer experience at the forefront of your mind. Think about the journey you want to take your customer on, what you want them to do, and what do you want them to purchase? Make use of signage, pathways and displays to guide the customer flow.
- Think about the added extra’s...what else can you offer? Perhaps a café with local food and drink available? Is it additional purchases such as jam making kits? Take time to think about what your customers might want and make it easy for them to buy.

As also highlighted in part one, pick your own enterprises need to see themselves as an experience not just a product – ***you are competing with the likes of Alton Towers rather than the supermarket.***

Therefore, marketing and engaging with customers play a vital role in the success of a pick your own enterprise. The first half of this factsheet focuses on ‘making online marketing and social media work for your PYO’.

But, getting people through the door is only half the challenge. With the rise of online review sites such as Google and TripAdvisor its now easier than ever for dissatisfied customers to air their concerns with fellow customers.

90% say that they check online reviews before deciding to visit a business, and 88% of consumer say they trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. Therefore, you could have an all singing and all dancing marketing campaign, but if in reality the customer experience doesn’t live up to expectations, your customers won’t be afraid to say so, and publicly, undermining your hard work. The second half of this factsheet provides some top technical tips to ensure that you get 5* rated.



Part 1: Making online marketing & social media work for your PYO

Online marketing is an essential tool for a pick your own (PYO) business: it allows customers to find you quickly and easily and allows you to communicate directly with them to provide a wealth of information about your business. Online marketing is particularly important for “attraction” style PYO, but there are a number of core messages that apply to any PYO message that we cover below.

As well as providing information for new customers, social media can provide an excellent platform for sharing information about upcoming events, and this can be particularly important for pumpkin growers that are hosting events around Halloween.

For growing-focused PYO businesses, social media can allow you to provide up-to-date status information on what crops are available, encouraging your customers to visit your site when produce is available. Developing your online presence will take time and energy, but it can have a huge impact on your business!

Your Website

A website is the foundation of your online presence – it is likely to be first thing that customers will encounter when searching online and will be their first port of call when looking for information to help them plan a visit to your business. If you don't have the skills to develop one yourself, an independent developer will be able to produce a platform-based website (e.g. WordPress) that you will easily be able to update and modify on a regular basis.

A developer will also be able to help you with your branding, and this can be worked into the website to produce a smooth, bright and easy to navigate website to showcase the best of your business and this is certainly worth considering investing in if you are seeking to develop your PYO business. Your website should have all the information a new customer will look for when planning a visit organized under easy-to-find menu tabs and should have plenty of photographs to showcase the best of your PYO business. Some common topics to cover are:



Tab	Content
Home Page	This should include a brief introduction to your PYO, giving your unique selling points and attracting visitors to your site. Up-to-date news and current opening times can provide a touchstone for visitors to begin planning their trip.
Crop Calendar	This is essential information for customers timing their visit, especially if you are growing a range of PYO crops that will be reaching maturity at different points in the season.
About Us	Give some information about your PYO business and its history. Provide plenty of photos (both old and new) to show your site and help shape your visitor's expectations. A list of facilities can also help visitors to plan ahead.
How It Works	Briefly summarize how your PYO business works. If you have a minimum spend/ticketed entry give it here. This can also be a useful place to give any suggestions (e.g. footwear) or rules for visitors to your site (e.g. if you allow picnics or dogs).
Where to Find Us	An address, email and telephone number with directions for people travelling from key motorway junctions, town/cities etc. A Google Map applet can be installed with the PYO location plotted.

Other features could include a calendar of future events (e.g. summer BBQ, fruit festivals, Halloween), a newsletter sign up or information about your crops, recipes or a photo gallery alongside links to your social media accounts. You can easily control the information on your website (unlike social media) so this should be the core of your information with all you social media posts linking back to the website “for more information”.

However, you need to make sure that you keep the information on your website up to date and provide new content when you can. If you are getting similar questions from customers by telephone or email it suggests that that topic is either missing from your website or is too hard to find, so update it accordingly. It is also an excellent platform for helping tailor customer expectations of what they will be able to experience during their visit.



Social Media

Social media can be a powerful tool to reach out to new and existing customers, and can allow you to provide updates of maturing fruit, new events or just promotional material about your business. Social media is particularly important for “attraction” style enterprises where it enables you to showcase the added value aspects of your business.

While each social media channel is slightly different, there are two golden rules: firstly, always scaffold the post around some media (photos or videos) to draw attention and encourage them to share your post. Secondly, always provide a link back to your website and avoid giving specific information or details – this way you can control the information and always insure it’s up to date and accurate. Posts with additional interest are always a good idea (e.g. new activities, special recipes in the cafe, animals on the farm or customers having a good time).

Some platforms like Facebook will give you feedback about your followers demographics, and by looking at this alongside how your posts are received and shared you can shape your social media approach to be more in tune with you customers’ needs.

<p>Twitter</p> 	<p>Twitter allows you to connect with a large number of people, and to broadcast your message over a very wide area, although it can be very easy for your message to get diluted and lost on the feeds of your followers. It is best to post every few days, but as these are short and sweet it won't be very time consuming. It can also be used to link with other feeds such as local groups, events or products that you sell in the farm shop.</p>
<p>Instagram</p> 	<p>On Instagram is can be harder to share stories and links about your business, but it can be an easy way of building up a portfolio of pictures that show the best of your business – as well as helping to shape customer expectations before they visit. Try to encourage users to share images by running themed contests with posts tagged with your business.</p>
<p>Facebook</p> 	<p>Facebook is likely to be one of your main marketing channels and is particularly useful for communication with parents with young families that are interested in days out. Similar to Twitter, it is a good idea to post every 2/3 days with a new story with a photo from your site.</p> <p>Likewise, it is very easy for your message to get diluted and you should plan your posts to have a high impact within the first hour or so of posting – early evening posts, Sunday to Tuesday, are often good for hitting peak interest, catching people at home but early in the week without a plan for the next weekend. You can expect to reach only about 25% or less of your followers with a given post, but you can pay a small fee to have posts reach greater proportions of your followers.</p> <p>Ensure that you have set up a business and not a private page on Facebook. Complete all the relevant information, such as opening times, directions etc. Also ensure that you monitor messages requesting information and respond in a timely manner. Facebook will generate a publicly available average response time on your page, so the quicker you respond the better.</p>



Communicating with Followers

Social media can act as a two-way channel, and this can allow you to achieve greater exposure as customers comments are spread out across their own followers. Customers may be looking for photo opportunities on your site (especially with pumpkins) which they will upload on social media and engaging with them such as retweeting their post will allow you to gain some free exposure. Sadly, there is always the risk of negative feedback (especially on review websites like Trip Advisor), but it is worth handling this carefully. If it is a simple gripe it can be best to ignore it as any conversation will act to promote a post, giving it more exposure, but if it is a larger issue that you feel you need to deal with reaching out to the customer can have a positive effective.

Newletters

A newsletter can be a slightly different form of communicating. This will be for people that have signed up (either in person or through your website) so the chance of your message getting through is a lot higher than social media. You should aim to email out a lot less frequently (once or twice a month at most). This may be the best way of advertising specific events where you wish by directly targeting a core group of existing customers, particularly at short notice – for example, fruit festivals with special discounts on produce can be organized if you have a glut of fruit coming through. You could encourage people to sign up with competitions or discounts for customers on your mailing list.

Part 2: Top tips for maintaining your PYO attraction

Once your marketing strategy has done its job in getting customers through the door, you now need to ensure that their expectations are met and exceeded. Online reviews can make or break your marketing strategy. Whilst good reviews will encourage new visitors. Negative reviews will undermine your marketing efforts.

Whilst your customer experience will ultimately involve numerous factors, such as facilities, signage, cleanliness, staff etc, its vital that your crops are in the best shape possible. ADAS have kindly provided some technical top tips for maintaining your crops:

- Check plants regular for rotten or diseased fruit and remove any you find – not only does this look unpleasant for PYO customers, but this will encourage further disease development and sites for spotted wing drosophila to lay eggs.
- A little plant husbandry can help plants develop, especially recently established young plants. Removing the very first flowers on very small plants can encourage vegetative growth. Runners should be removed as you find them throughout the season to encourage the plant to put energy into flowering and fruiting.
- Check electrical conductivity daily (or 3 times a week at a minimum), and make sure this is in the optimal range of 1.6 – 2.2 EC. Spikes in EC can happen during hot weather, so watch out for this and reduce the feed input in needed. Remember to increase it again when it cools down!
- Check for western flower thrips in your crop – tap flowers over a white sheet of paper and look for small brown insects with a dark stripe around 1mm long. You should aim to establish populations of the predatory mite *Amblyseius cucumeris* (<https://www.biolineagrosciences.com/products/amblyline/>) to keep these under control.
- Put traps for spotted wing drosophila in and around your crop traps such as the Droso Trap (<https://www.biobestgroup.com/en/biobest/products/monitoring-and-scouting-4464/pheromone-traps-4494/droso-trap-4708/>) can be useful for monitoring and control, but will require daily checking to identify whether the pest has been caught. Make sure that the liquid is kept topped up, otherwise this can act as an egg laying site. The AHDB has information on this pest and its control here: <https://horticulture.ahdb.org.uk/swd>
- Hot weather following rain is likely to lead to high humidity, and can create perfect conditions for fungal disease development (e.g. powdery mildew and botrytis) so keep your tunnels open and well ventilated to promote air movement.



- Vine weevil adults are starting to emerge from the soil and growing media and may be seen in increased numbers – a tell-tale sign is seeing notching on leaves as evidence of their activity. The vine weevil larvae that attack the plant roots can be controlled effectively through nematode control (for example Nemasys H - <https://www.agricentre.basf.co.uk/en/Products/Overview/Nemasys%C2%AE-H.html>) applied through the drippers or as a root drench.
- For advice on pest and disease control, and general crop production, seek specialist consultant advice (which can be obtained fully funded through the Tyfu Cymru).

Its worth noting that online reviews is not something to be feared. Positive reviews are priceless. Encourage visitors to leave feedback on google, TripAdvisor and Facebook. You can do this by displaying signs on site, adding instructions on leaflets or by posting on social media. Remember to check feedback regularly, and respond to feedback, both negative and positive.

Research* has shown that responses from management can influence how a potential customer views your business (*whilst this research specifically focused on hotel bookings, we can also learn from this for experience-based establishments). 87% of users say that an appropriate management response to a bad review improves their impression, 70% say that an aggressive/defensive management response to a bad review makes them less likely to book and 62% say that seeing management responses to reviews generally makes them more likely to book, when compared to one that didn't respond.

When responding to feedback, always be polite and professional, acknowledge their feelings and feedback and address any specific issues without becoming defensive. Ensure that you take steps to act upon constructive feedback to make improvements to your business.

Thank users for positive feedback and promote within your marketing, feature on your website and use in social media posts to gain additional exposure.



What have we learnt?

- Ensure that you use your online presence to manage customer expectations of what they will be able to experience during their visit. Utilise the tools available to provide quick and easy information i.e directions, pricing, availability of crops.
- An effective marketing strategy is key for a pick your own (PYO) business: it allows customers to find you quickly and easily and allows you to communicate directly with them to provide a wealth of information about your business.
- Make social media a priority in your planning...How can you utilise social media to promote your attraction and offer? How can you encourage your customers to post to social media? How will your attraction be branded to ensure maximise exposure?
- Maintaining your crops will influence how the customer views your business. Spend time learning and nurturing your crops. Take pest and disease control seriously and remember to contact Tyfu Cymru for support on managing pests and diseases or for general crop production advice.
- Make the most out of the online review culture, ask for feedback, learn from constructive feedback and promote positive feedback within your marketing channels.

Tyfu Cymru recently announced the launch of three new networks (Pumpkin, Soft Fruit and Top Fruit) to support Welsh commercial growers by providing study tours, workshops, expert advice, training and networking opportunities. If you are interested in joining these networks, please contact tyfucymru@lantra.co.uk or call 01982 552646