

Tyfu Cymru: Technical Advice Sheet

Online Booking Systems for Pick Your Own

Booking Ahead

Managing customer footfall on your site can be a key challenge when running a pick your own PYO business, but with planning this can be easy to overcome. As well as making sure you can maintain social distancing a booking system will offer a number of additional benefits to make sure your customers are satisfied and that you get the best returns on your produce. For example, managing footfall can be essential in ensuring a good customer experience by making sure your facilities are not overwhelmed (such as car parks) and to avoid disappointment caused by having to turn people away at the gate. This can also help to match supply with demand by matching footfall with the availability of ripe fruit or pumpkins in the field on a given day.

While online prebooking has become commonplace, you will need to have clear messages about the booking processes, especially if you are only allowing online bookings to be taken. It is also highly recommended that customers are charged to prebook to reduce the risk of no-show bookings and to help you recover the costs of the booking system. However, many growers offer an exchange system whereby customers are given vouchers for the price of the ticket which can be redeemed against the same value of fruit at the tills. Clear communication of the booking process will help to make sure that your customers have an easy and enjoyable visit to your site.

Starting a Booking System

While there are a number of booking systems that can easily be set up, you'll need to think carefully about how you integrate them into your business to get the maximum benefit. You can choose whether to only allow online booking, or to allow a combination of both online and farm gate entrance, although the first approach will give you the best control over footfall. Booking ahead can also speed up entrance at sites that charge a flat fee for visitors. The general public has widely accommodated prebooking for events as a result of the covid regulations, but this may also be appealing for customers planning day trips at busy times of the year – this will be especially relevant to pumpkin and Christmas trees where the marketing window is short but busy. Booking management will also help to ensure customers have a good experience whilst on site by avoiding overcrowding and making sure that sufficient produce is available to match likely demand: more customers can be admitted when a flush of fruit is ripening, or controlled to a steady stream to provide time to restock pumpkins in the field.

Booking System Basics

A general approach is to structure a day into a series of timeslots, each of which is an event that a customer can book into. Each slot will be given a specific number of tickets, giving a maximum cap on footfall at a given time. Customers will then arrive on site at their allotted time, pick and pay for their produce then depart within the event window. After booking the customer will receive an email confirmation which can be shown on admission. Many services provide a quick QR code that can be scanned in with a smart phone to enable quick entry.

Once checked in you may wish to provide any vouchers or coupons included in the ticket price – this will also speed up payments at the till as they can be quickly exchanged for the fruit. Many systems will also link up to a mobile app which allows processing of ticket sales at the farm gate if you want to ticket both advance and walk-in bookings.

Not only does this control how many people enter the site, but also how many are likely to be on site at any given time. This will allow you to know how many people to expect (and when) helping you plan staffing and produce availability in advance. Booking systems will also provide you with a range of added functions such as automatic event creation to allow you to quick and easily set up replicate events across multiple dates for ease of use, set dates when booking is opened up and generate data on booking made.

While many online booking systems are available, they all run along similar lines – customers are presented with a calendar showing available slots, they can then select and pay for slot and receive an electronic ticket by email. This can then be used to check them in on site when they arrive to provide a quick, smooth process to entering the site. The data collected during the booking in process may also provide any necessary track-and-trace details, further speeding up entrance to your site.

Choosing a Booking System

There are two key methods implementing a ticketing system: the use of third-party ticketing websites, or the use of an app-based platform which is integrated onto your website – both are explained below. While these differ in terms of set up and costs, they generally operate in the same format. Both approaches use ready-made systems for ease of access, and can be easily integrated into your existing marketing approaches, including through your own website or social media presence. The systems handle all aspects of booking from slot selection to payment processing in a single package making it easy for the customer to book in. You may also want to consider when you receive payments for online sales – some services pay with each transaction, whilst others hold payment until after the event has taken place. If you are offering free tickets some services won't charge for this, enabling you to have a cost-free booking system in place.

Website-based Booking Systems

If you are already running a website for your business, a range of plugins are available that can be included on your website. Once set up these systems will be cheaper to run as you will not need to pay small monthly website fees and card transaction costs rather than a percentage of ticket sales that you will see on the standalone platforms covered above. This can also seamlessly integrate bookings into your wider promotion and customer communications, such as visiting information.






The **WooCommerce Box Office** app (www.woocommerce.com) is a plugin designed to slot into a WordPress website which offers complete customer ticket sales, including a calendar view to allow customers to browse a range of time slots to make their choice. The plugin is \$129 per year (roughly £8/month). This also offers a range of ticket types for different activities (e.g. just pick-a-pumpkin, or a longer timeslot for picking and carving on site) or for you to vary prices between points in the season.

BookThatApp (www.bookthatapp.com) is a similar plugin designed to work with the Shopify platform which can handle higher volumes of customers (which may be more suitable for high volume seasonal sites) although is slightly more expensive starting at £14/month. These services will also have their own payment processing options, or allow linkage with other services like PayPal or Square.

Third Party Ticketing Services

A simpler approach can be to utilise a third-party booking system, with a number of platforms offering easy ticket sales for small business. This is likely to be a slightly more expensive option, and these may charge a flat rate per ticket or offer a flat price (although this can be passed onto the customer in some instances). Some services are pay-monthly, which could be a lower price option for limited use in the season, although the majority of services will levy a charge on a per ticket or per transaction basis.

Whilst these services are more expensive than an integrated booking option such as the apps discussed above, these are quick and easy to use without any technical startup. These are also the best option if you are not running a website, and they can be linked directly with a social media page like Facebook.

	<p>Merlin Tickets - www.merlintickets.co.uk Provides a simple to use online platform for calendar-based ticket sales, including a mobile interface. Quick to set up, with low costs. Payments are made as soon as a booking is made. <i>Charges of 2.5% of ticket sales are made monthly in arrears.</i></p>
	<p>TicketSource - www.ticketsource.co.uk Complete online ticketing package, including calendar booking, multiple ticket types and mobile/print at home tickets, and can be linked with at-gate ticket sales. Payments are made in the week following each event. <i>Charges 7.5% + VAT per ticket, with a minimum charge of 25p + VAT per ticket.</i></p>
	<p>Eventbrite - www.eventbrite.co.uk Offers a comprehensive ticketing service with a range of packages to suit requirements. This included digital and printed tickets, single listings for recurring events and at-gate ticket sales. More advanced packages include multiple ticket types. <i>Charges vary by package: "Essentials" tickets are 49p + 3.5% + VAT, "Professional" tickets are 49p + 6.5% + VAT. Tickets for free events are not charged.</i></p>
	<p>Digitickets - www.digitickets.co.uk A standalone ticketing package that offers wide range of functions including a calendar-based service with date-variable pricing, providing mobile and print at home tickets. <i>Charges include a £1.5k standalone set up fee, with an additional 50p charge per ticket, £1.50 per transaction or 5% total for the basic package.</i></p>
	<p>BookWhen - www.bookwhen.com A pay monthly ticketing service that offers calendar-based booking for multiple ticket types with a recurring ticketing schedule. <i>Packages offer 300 (£9+VAT), 800 (£19+VAT) or 1800 (£39+VAT) tickets per month.</i></p>

Planning Booking Slots

Each time slot should be long enough for your customers to have a good opportunity to enjoy your site, but not so generous that time is going wasted. You can match this up with how long you'd expect a customer to be on site – for example, you might specify 60 minutes for soft fruit picking or 30 minutes pumpkins (although you can state if this is for the whole site, or just the picking areas if you have facilities like a café where you might like customers to linger). You can then structure a day as a series of separate 30 or 60 minute events to which customers can purchase a ticket. You may also wish to think about when you open ticket sales up. For crops like pumpkins and Christmas trees with a clear marketing window you could open booking weeks (if not months) in advance, but for soft fruit you might want to only release these a few days in advance. This means that you can match bookings with the availability of fruit, and allows customers to match their visit with the weather forecast.

Advertising & Customer Awareness

If you are releasing bookings only a few days in advance you should advertise this clearly on your promotional material to make sure customers can book in when they want to visit. Advertising on social media when slots are opened up, particularly for weekends that are likely to see good weather or when new products are available for picking, can be a good way of engaging customers. As part of the booking process you should include explanation of how customers will receive their tickets (avoid printed tickets, although mobile ticking options are common place), and how they will be used to access your site. You may also wish to include the ability to book online on any flyers or banners used for roadside advertising, especially if you are only allowing advance booking.

You should also have clear terms and conditions when people are booking. This can cover any requirements for covid prevention measures and restrictions on party sizes (if not linked to ticket price). You might also wish to state arrival times on site (e.g. no more than 10 minutes in advance), your policy on late arrivals and cancellations, and clear limits on how much time they can expect to spend on site. This is also a good opportunity to make customers aware of how the PYO process works, such as picking and paying by weight with advertised prices for fresh fruit. Some booking systems will also offer the ability to store customer details (with the necessary GDPR compliance) for email marketing so this can be a handy way to build up an email list for customer outreach.

Pricing

It is recommended that a small charge is attached to an online booking to reserve a place. This could be as small as a £2 booking fee to help you recover the cost of the running the booking service, or a larger sum such as £5 or £10 per group. Higher ticket prices will reduce the risk of no-shows, but you might want consider linking this with a particular product or service when they visit your site. For example, the ticket cost could be returned as a money off voucher at the till (so customers are not left out of pocket) or are associated with booking an event or activity such as a slot at a pumpkin carving bench or reserving a picnic table. This will also ensure a minimum spend per party to ensure good returns. Many services offer a range of ticket prices, and this can be particularly helpful for sites with a range of activities besides PYO produce such as pumpkin carving or a Santa's Grotto at Christmas Tree sites. You may wish to specify that a ticket is required per party (e.g. one ticket for a group up to six people) or per person. If you charge per person, you could consider offering reduced or free tickets for children, or include a child with each adult ticket.

Summary

It can be quick and easy to set up a ticketing system, and while this may need a small amount of planning on a week-by-week basis this can quickly become a routine part of your business, and fits nicely with any existing website or social media communications you have with potential customers. While this approach will provide a good solution to the current social distancing requirements you are likely to find the wider benefits of a book ahead system more than sufficient to keep the system running in the long term.

Disclaimer

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of information and recommendations given in these notes, with information provided correct at the time of writing. The material given above is provided for information only and is not an endorsement or promotion of the services described. Growers are recommended to full research and price out ticketing options before implementation. Website and businesses development mentoring is available free of charge for eligible growers through the Tyfu Cymru program, please contact us to arrange an appointment – email/telephone advice is also available.