

WORKING WITH FARMERS:

A guide to growing solid relationships with farm clients

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) has developed this guide as a resource for farm and agri-business service providers who want to develop strong and meaningful relationships with their farm clients by engaging in effective and relevant conversations.

In 2020, more than 700 OFA members responded to a survey asking what is important to farmers when they're building business relationships with service providers.

Although each farm business has unique goals, marketing preferences and communication styles, OFA used the information gathered through the survey to develop this short reference guide to offer some general practical advice for service providers.

The farm business dynamic

Ontario is home to close to 50,000 farm businesses that grow, produce and raise over 200 different commodities. Just like our range of agricultural products, Ontario's farm business structures are very diverse. A farm business can be operated by a sole proprietor, a partnership or a family farm corporation. That's why the dynamics of each farm varies substantially, and although farming is a business, it is also considered a lifestyle.



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Building a solid business relationship

According to the survey, farmers prefer quality, long-term relationships with people engaged in the agriculture community, regardless of age, gender, marital status and level of education. In fact, most farmers get frustrated if their advisors change rapidly.

75% of farmers have relationships of **over 10 years** with service providers



88% of farmers are more likely to do business with organizations who are active in the farmer's local community.

Confidentiality is key

Trust is essential and keeping sensitive information confidential builds trust. Farmers can be very open and supportive as community members, but may require confidentiality in business matters, especially between direct competitors. For example, farmers may openly discuss cropping and weather information, or new research, but will not share financial data, commodity trading deals, or even the precise size of their herd or farm.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Remember that you may be building and navigating relationships with more than one person, and of any age or gender.

A farm is a 24/7, year-round operation that doesn't necessarily follow traditional business hours, so be prepared for your clients to need you on evenings, weekends, or holidays too.

Be mindful of the busy seasons on the farming calendar like spring planting or fall harvest when you're planning visits and respect the farm's hours of operation.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Invest in relationships with staff, family members and spouses so you become familiar with everyone involved in the farm business.

Avoid making assumptions about who makes the business decisions – it could be anyone involved in the farm, regardless of position, age or gender.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

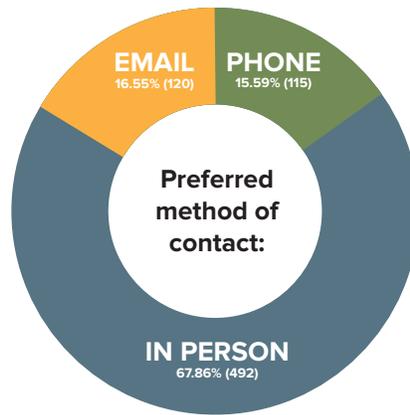
Many connections between farmers come through family ties, the type of farm they have, shared education programs or affiliations through various agricultural organizations.

In order to maintain integrity and avoid speaking out of turn, keep your conversations professional.

Ways to communicate

The majority of farmers still prefer meeting with their advisors face-to-face as much as possible.

Phone calls, emails, video chats and text conversations are important when time is of the essence, such as during planting, calving, or harvesting seasons, or when in-person meetings are not possible.



Other relationship-building tips

The agricultural community is a small world. If you recruit community champions who believe in your work, they will spread the word amongst their peers, and these referrals are important when working with your agricultural community.

To better understand your agricultural clients, learn more about their lives and businesses wherever possible – at field days, round-table gatherings, local meetings, coffee shops, or rural events like fall fairs and harvest banquets.

Our survey showed, for example, that most farmers wish their advisors would ask them about names of family members or staff, and their interests, goals and values.

Common interests build trust and this will show your clients you are committed and interested in them beyond simply a transaction.



Visiting the farm

There is no ideal time to schedule meetings with farmers. Farms can be seasonal or operate year-round.

Livestock farmers, for example, are busy all year long, but depending on the type of animals they're raising, they may also grow crops.

Farmers growing field crops busiest during the planting and harvesting cycles of a growing season, and that growing season differs based on what part of the province they are in.

Don't forget that a lot of farmers also have off-farm jobs, so they may not be able to meet with you during regular business hours.

Most farms today have biosecurity protocols in place – rules about who can visit the farm, what buildings or areas of the farm they may enter and whether coveralls, boot covers or other farm-specific clothing or

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Use a farmer's preferred method of communication to get in touch.

What you say is even more important than how you say it. The quality of the conversation and being honest are critical.

Many farmers are savvy users of technology and social media and share and compare experiences with other farmers. Word travels fast in the farm community and positive past experiences can lead to very long-term relationships.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Take the time to get involved with local committees and agricultural organizations, and get to know your clients on a more personal level.

Leverage your existing networks through referrals and word of mouth.

Understand local issues and potential controversial topics or areas of conflict.

Ask questions if you're not sure about something. Farmers will respect you more if you ask about something you don't know, or something that interests you, as opposed to assuming that you understand.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Coordinate a visit ahead of time. Most farmers do not appreciate unexpected guests.

Ask about biosecurity protocols ahead of time and follow those rules during your visit. Clarify where you should park when you arrive, where the meeting will take place (e.g. barn or house) and what protocols are in place.

Dress appropriately. Your meetings might be in a barn or shed, so business casual may not be the dress code.

footwear must be worn. This is to keep plant and animal pests and diseases from coming onto the farm.

Ask Questions

Over 88% of farmers expected their business partners to have a medium to high understanding of farming and the agricultural industry. However, **95%** said that they were willing to help a person learn.



Biosecurity protocols may include: clean boots/shoes, plastic booties, foot baths, anti-bacterial hand-wash, fresh clothing, and more. In poultry and hog barns, biosecurity can mean taking a full shower and putting on new clothes when going inside, and taking another shower when leaving.

What do farmers wish they were asked about?



Safety on the farm

Depending on the type of farm you are visiting, it is important to be aware of possible dangers that might be around like guard dogs, livestock, machinery and equipment.

It's also important to remember that you might pose a safety risk to the farm too. You may transmit diseases on your clothes, boots, or tires - germs and bacteria that you inadvertently bring with you could jeopardize a farm's entire livelihood by risking the health of livestock or crops.

The best option is not to venture anywhere without a guide or permission.

Conclusion

Farmers want to be heard and respected. They have pride in their farm businesses and will share the history and future plans for their farm once enough trust has been earned.

Even though no two Ontario farm businesses are the same, OFA's survey results clearly show that what matters most to farmers in a service provider is someone they can respect and trust, who has strong communication skills and can complete tasks quickly and correctly.

In agriculture, making an investment in relationships can help cultivate long-term business.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Plan ahead for washroom breaks as farms may not have washroom facilities available to visitors.

Know where you're going. Data coverage can be limited in rural areas and mapping software doesn't always recognize rural addresses correctly so clarify the complete address and keep a map book in your vehicle.

Start and end your meeting on time. The person you're meeting with may be working around deliveries, chore times, training staff and family obligations.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Do not enter barns or other buildings unless you have permission. If you are visiting more than one farm in a day, understand what protocols that second farm requires. In some cases, clothing, vehicles, tires and more may have to be disinfected.

Assume fences are electric and do not touch them without permission. Be cautious around farm animals and if you have to open a door or gate, ensure that you close it afterwards

Do not block laneways with your vehicle and leave enough space for large equipment to go by. If that is not an option, consider leaving your keys in the ignition so someone else can move your vehicle if necessary.

Keep a few dog treats in your vehicle, as well as a biosecurity kit that includes disposable gloves, foot-coverings and sanitizing wipes.

For more information, contact the Ontario Federation of Agriculture:

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