

Marketing Savvy Helps Corn Maze Grow

When there's a lot of competition, a business needs to stand out. The Willard family, owners of the Wild West Maze have a knack for excelling in marketing that incorporates Facebook, Twitter and short, snappy YouTube videos with a corn-cob-microphone-wielding hostess. Plus they continuously add new events, such as "Mutton Bustin" for kids this year.

A couple of years ago, the family in Hudson, Colo., operated what is believed to be the world's largest corn maze (about 50 acres). Last year they cut back the size to focus on refining their agritourism business to make it entertaining enough to become their guests' annual tradition. Visitors could jump on a giant jumping pillow, or crawl inside a hamster ball. Or if they were daring enough, go through the maze at night with people in gorilla suits ready to surprise them.

The 2012 season (September through October) featured 6 miles of maze on 25 acres with a "Cowboys & Aliens" theme. The Willards also set aside days for people to bring horses and dogs through the maze. Kevin and Heather Willard decided to

create the maze in 2010 to diversify their farm operation, W-Spur Hay Company. Kevin has a huge barn to store small square bales of alfalfa hay that he sells mostly to hobby farmers as well as large equine facilities, so the Willards were used to having customers come to the farm.

But it wasn't anything like the first year with the maze, recalls daughter Kylee Willard, the YouTube host who reports "from the corn-cob". People poured in to go through the maze and enjoy the many other activities on the farm.

The Willards and their three children appreciated the community support that helped them through their first year; the business employed 60 seasonal workers.

The family hires Maze Play to cut the maze, using the Willards design ideas. After the maze is cut, the Willards mow the paths and work on other activities.

While they have the system down, each family member adds new ideas to keep the operation appealing to visitors. Willard's brother, Seth, was in charge of Mutton Bustin this year, for example.

The general admission fee (\$12-adults)



The Willard family, owners of the Wild West Maze, continuously add new events such as "Mutton Bustin" for kids (above left) and a giant jumping pillow (left). People can bring horses and dogs through the maze.

includes several free activities: petting zoo, hayrack rides, an obstacle course and Farm Scene Investigation (FSI). FSI asks farm-related questions, as part of the Willards' goal to provide education about agriculture in an entertaining way. The farm's location is within a half hour of Denver and Greeley, close enough to attract city folks.

For additional fees or an unlimited pass (\$18 to \$22 for adults), visitors can ride a

barrel train, shoot ear corn from a cannon or take pony rides. There's also a pumpkin patch and special Halloween activities as the season runs from Sept. 30 to Oct. 31.

Kids, 4 and under, are admitted free of charge.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Wild West Maze, 6876 Weld County Road 47, Hudson, Colo. 80642 (ph 303 536-9200; www.wildwestmaze.com).

Paintball Bus Latest Maze Attraction

Glen and Pam Fritzier really know how to keep crowds coming back to the Fritzier Corn Maze, which draws thousands yearly from a 200-mile radius. For each of the past 13 years, the family has offered a new feature each year to pump up publicity in the local press. This year they added a Zombie Paintball Adventure.

The Fritziers didn't just set up a paintball course. They turned three old school buses into mobile arcades with semi-stationary targets. Each bus is equipped with 36 paintball guns mounted at shooting stations.

"We have 40 stationary targets to shoot at during the day as the buses travel through the field," says Fritzier. "We add 20 employees dressed in zombie costumes or escaped prisoner costumes to after dark trips. They dart in and out of the cornfield as the buses go by. Most of the paintballs get fired at them."

The Paintball Adventure joins other

attractions added over the years. They include the giant maze, pedal go-carts, giant jumping pillows, corn and pumpkin cannons, campfires, the Verti-scope and a slide mountain. Even helicopter rides are offered. Simpler attractions include the shelled corn play box and a hay pile. The annual additions have turned one-time trips into family traditions.

"We have built a really loyal base of people who come here year after year," says Fritzier.

They also have created a seasonal industry in the community. The Fritziers employ around 200 people, including adults, college students and local youth.

Glow-in-the-dark paintballs are used at night. Fritzier ordered special paintballs that will dissolve quickly. Going into the season, he expects to go through approximately four million of them.

"Perhaps 50 percent buy more ammunition during the ride," says Fritzier.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Fritzier



School bus is fitted with 36 paintball guns mounted at shooting stations. Riders shoot at targets as buses travel through field. At night, employees dressed as zombies dart in and out of cornfields and shooters use glow-in-the-dark paintballs.

Corn Maze, 20909 CR 33, La Salle, Colo. 80645 (ph 970 737-2129; www.fritziermaze.com) or The Maize Inc., P.O. Box 367, Spanish Fork, Utah 84660 (ph 801 798-0596 or toll free 888 798-0596; www.themaize.com).



Ag Tours Pay Off For Iowa Farmer

John Maxwell gave his first farm tour to his daughter and her preschool classmates. Soon, that daughter, Amy, will be part of a robotic dairy tour on the family's Donahue, Iowa, farm. Located near the Quad Cities and Deere headquarters, Maxwell's scenic and diversified Cinnamon Ridge Farm is ideally suited for farm tours.

So is Maxwell, who is very social and enjoys hosting people from the U.S. – and nearly 50 other countries so far. In 2011, he hosted 70 tours for 2,500 people from international tour groups, rural cooperatives and for corporations such as Deere, Pioneer and Monsanto.

Maxwell cites hard work, dumb luck and timing for getting him into the tour business. After being named one of the four winners of the National Outstanding Young Farmer Award in 1997, Deere asked if he would provide tours – mostly for foreign guests. It was a hectic time, he says, scheduling tours between running his 4,000-acre corn/soybean operation and milking his registered Jersey dairy herd,

(currently the seventh largest producing Jersey herd in the U.S.).

When he upgrades any of his farm operations, he keeps the tours in mind. He added hogs, for example, for the manure to spread on his land. He built buildings to lease to a hog farmer, and the wean-to-finish barn is enclosed by glass on all four sides so visitors can see the operation yet maintain bio-security.

Beef cows, Nubian goats and 400 chickens add to the farm's ambience. Maxwell's home with a great room seats 75 comfortably, and a certified kitchen allows him to add catered meal options to tours.

Besides food, Maxwell offers music as an option and hires local bluegrass, folk, country and sing-along groups.

"The music is universal and makes it very homey," he says. "I don't ever want to lose that personal touch. I want to be the spot everyone talks about."

That must be the case, as he has never advertised. All business has come from word-of-mouth.



Last year John Maxwell (center) hosted 70 different tours for people from international tour groups, rural cooperatives and corporations such as Deere, Pioneer and Monsanto.

For those who want to offer farm tours he suggests, "Dream big but don't start out too big." Start with small groups and educate yourself to know everything about your farm. Add new things to satisfy repeat visitors and tailor tours to your visitors.

Maxwell charges \$10 per person for tours (meals and music are extra) with a \$150 minimum. He plans to add the robotic dairy managed by his daughter as a tour option, and

he hopes to offer public tours on Saturdays in the near future. He also has an on-farm store selling chicken, eggs, beef, pork and other foods and products.

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