

Hick's Orchard – Leveraging Social Media to Help Fulfill Their Mission

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Hick's Orchard is located in Granville, NY just a few miles from the Vermont border. The slate industry may have first put this little village on the map, but Hick's Orchard is what many people think of when they hear Granville. The orchard opened their gates to U-Pick in 1905 and is recognized as the oldest U-Pick farm in New York State. In its 117 years of operation, the 350-acre farm has been owned and operated by just two families. The Wilson family currently owns Hicks Orchard and Dan Wilson is the 2nd generation of the Wilson family to work towards the farm's mission, 'Grow Food to Build Community'.

Most farm stores lean on the adage of location, location, location. In the case of Hick's Orchard, the location is important – but not for the purpose of convenience. This business necessarily welcomes community from a distance. The population of Glens Falls, NY and Rutland, VT are both more than 25 miles away, and Albany is a 50-mile drive. Travel to Granville provides a picturesque, traffic-free escape with a bucolic orchard retreat as the reward. This model has proved successful for over a century, but the business's future success may lie more in the strategy of continuous evolution.



The farm stand was initiated by Dan's parents in 1975. The first iteration occupied the old packing barn, and has since morphed into the current, vibrant year-round farm store. In the mid-90's a bakery business was attempted, but after a few years that building was converted to much needed, large public bathrooms. Slyboro Cider, the hard cider business complete with tasting room was started in 2007, and has gained a devoted audience beyond the traditional U-Pick customer.

Haunted Hayrides and haunted barns have given way to smaller events that don't rely as heavily on overstretched harvest season staff. Dan has worked to promote U-pick cherries and blueberries during the summer, and other crops are constantly being considered. When the pandemic reminded customers of the value of local food and outdoor activities, it was apparent that more could be done beyond apple season. To keep good staff fully employed and even out revenue, some changes were needed.

For example, while their mission ‘Grow Food to Build Community’ has been a practice for a very long time, the actual statement bubbled up during a planning retreat in January 2021. [Rick Andrews Improv](#) was hired to help encourage creative, ‘Yes and...’ thinking by farm employees alongside the newly hired business development manager, David Garvoille. David’s background is in education, fundraising and event management – a perfect mix of skills given the challenges of direct farm marketing.

Social media, for example is increasingly important to reach customers. A customer survey was done in January of 2021 – the initial email survey yielded single digit responses, but Facebook feedback was over 500 responses – some of which were highly detailed. A big take-away was how much a trip to Hick’s Orchard has become a part of family tradition. 50% of customers that responded to the survey have been visiting annually for 20 years, and many have been coming for more than 3 decades. The Wilsons learned that Hick’s Orchard is a brand.

How to keep that brand fresh? Small, unique events that focus on the community as much as the orchard is the current emphasis. Dave and Dan are trying to encourage year-round consumer interest, make better use of available resources and utilize current staff wisely. This requires flexibility, trust and a relatively high degree of risk tolerance. A few examples of events include a music concert series, snow-shoeing or X-country skiing followed by a winter campfire, art shows in the cidery, a Christmas craft fair for children and a year-long apple-a-day challenge. All of these and more are fueled by a social media touch that is engaging and persistent, but not overwhelming. The emphasis in outreach is as much on elevating the relationship with customers as it is promoting the products.



And what of labor recruitment in this economy? Still very difficult given the rural location, but the farm uses creative outreach to attract local talent. Each month, a ‘Good Apple Award’ complete with press coverage and a small prize is given by the farm to a teacher-nominated high school sophomore. This effort helps orchard leadership to meet high-quality students that might value being a member of the Hick’s Orchard team. Several great student

employees have been recruited from this effort and it makes wonderful fodder for social media!

Are there challenges with non-stop business promotion? Definitely! Leadership needs to find time to measure financial success of the ventures and balance it with the toll it may take on staff. Staff need to be constantly trained – according to Dave, “Nothing in the donut kitchen is like McDonalds” which is a true statement for the entire farm. Social media offers its own unique challenge of trying to promote two very different businesses – the orchard and the cidery - to the general public. Locally produced farmstead hard cider is alcohol – and cross promotion to families with young children and adults over 21 on social media platforms is both not allowed by Facebook and others and is a poor marketing strategy.

Hick’s Orchard succeeds in growing great fruit, crafting wonderful, award-winning cider and baking tasty donuts while using ‘high touch marketing’ and social media to elevate their relationship with customers and fulfill their mission – *Grow Food to Build Community*.