

Marketing Your Wildlife Enterprise

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Efficient marketing is of vital importance to a wildlife enterprise. You may have the best location for hunting or wildlife viewing in the Southeast, but it will mean nothing if hunters are unaware that your business exists. A carefully planned marketing strategy will help maximize your profits by identifying a customer base and preventing wasteful use of your financial resources.

To design a successful marketing strategy for your wildlife enterprise, first describe your business using the four Ps of marketing – product, price, place and promotion.

Product

Product is what you have for sale. It is what you specifically offer your customers in return for their money. Sometimes it is difficult to think of “recreation services” as products. But as far as marketing is concerned, an outdoor experience is as much a renewable resource as timber from your forest. Never lose sight of the fact that you expect to create an enterprise; that is, you plan to attract customers to pay for your products and be able make a profit over and above your costs.

Exactly what products do you intend to offer? A wildlife-based enterprise may include a hunting experience, recreation services such as camping, hiking, bird watching, or fishing, or a combination. Your products should fit readily-available

resources or can be developed after reasonable and feasible modification. In other words, if doves don't visit your property, don't get into the dove-hunting business. On the other hand, should you base your choice of product solely on available resources? Certainly not. The most important component of this decision is your customer.



Figure 1. Your marketing strategy will depend on the type of nature-based experience you design to attract a particular customer base. Photo courtesy of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

Product decisions are made much easier by asking one important question: What do the customers really want? In economics, this question refers to your demand. If potential customers want a rustic cabin, having a high-end duck hunting lodge complete with meals and hot showers will overprice that demand.

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Find out what wildlife-based enterprises are already available in your area. In other words, who are your competitors? Have a clear idea of the products these enterprises offer. Visit these enterprises as a paying guest. Evaluate what you liked and didn't like about your experience. Then decide if you want to offer the same products or something different than your competitors.

Generally speaking, establishing your uniqueness as a wildlife enterprise is beneficial, provided customers want what you offer. Sometimes it is easier to offer a slightly different experience than your competitors, rather than a radically different one. For example, if your competitors only offer hunting opportunities for traditional hunters, you may want to think about selling a family hunting experience.

Following are some questions to consider.

What are the products that you are offering?

- Hunting opportunities (e.g., deer, turkey, waterfowl, bobwhite, other?)
- Recreational opportunities (e.g., trap/skeet, trail riding, fishing)
- Lodging and meals
- Which of these products are currently available in your area?
- Compared to your competitors, why are your products or your enterprise unique?

Price

Price is simply what you charge for your products. However, pricing your product is not quite that simple. Some misconceptions about pricing can greatly affect the performance of a small business. For example, many think the lower the price, the better it is for a business. However, this is not always true. Effective pricing strategy is extremely important for an enterprise to be successful.

Your price depends a great deal on your product. Before determining a pricing strategy, evaluate your wildlife enterprise. What are its attributes? Does your enterprise have any unique characteristics, such as a heron rookery, elk viewing or trophy bucks that enable you to charge a premium? Understanding your product and its position in the larger marketplace is crucial for effective pricing. Besides determining your revenue, price also impacts demand for your product which, in turn, determines how much you sell. Your price is a signal to customers about your product's value. The price that

you charge positions your product among its competitors. Remember, if wildlife resources are your product, you must avoid negatively impacting wildlife through overharvest or too frequent visitations, and manage for the long term.

Consider these factors. Where do you want to position your product among your competitors? What do your competitors offer, and at what price? Do you want to compete for the low-end, moderate or high-end market? Since these different market segments cater to different groups of customers, deciding your general price up front will help in devising your marketing plan. Avoid undervaluing your product. Remember, it is much easier to reduce prices later than increase them. You can even promote these reductions as discounts or special prices for slow periods of the year.

Next, determine your base price by accurately estimating your costs and determining the most reasonable price you could charge without encountering direct losses. This includes out-of-pocket expenses such as maintenance of wildlife habitat and roads, fuel for transporting hunters, legal expenses, insurance premiums and other costs incurred from the enterprise. Of course, don't sell at this price because you will not make any profit, and it will lead to indirect losses since you are not getting paid for your time, energy and efforts.

After determining the base price, add value to your product to meet expectations of your price class of customers. Examples of such values may be excellent customer support; a family approach to dealing with your customers; offering quality homemade food and sleeping quarters for those who spend more than a day; and recreation opportunities for families or "free" fishing in your pond. Be creative in refining your product and service so you can make the maximum profit while providing customers a sense of satisfaction and of caring quality service they may not get elsewhere.

Following are some questions to consider.

- If similar products or services are also offered by your competitors, what is their price range?
- For those products or services, where would you like your prices to be?
 - Lower —————> Why?
 - Same —————> Why?
 - Higher —————> Why?

- If you have products or services not offered by your competitors, which market segment will you target by setting your prices?
 - Low end → Why?
 - Medium → Why?
 - High end → Why?
- Considering your costs, what percent of your price is profit per customer?
- What can you add to the product (i.e., recreation experience) to make your enterprise unique or different from others?

Place

Place is where your customers find products that you offer. If you already own a considerable amount of land and do not have immediate plans to expand your ownership, your place is set – you will have little control over place in your wildlife enterprise. On the other hand, if you plan to acquire land for your enterprise, form a landowner cooperative or have access to nearby public lands, you have some flexibility over where your business is located.

The location of your wildlife enterprise has a significant impact on marketing strategies. Wildlife enterprises by definition are located in rural areas that may or may not offer easy access. However, traveling to rural areas is an expectation for many hunters where limited access is part of the hunting experience. Even some hunters may consider remote locations as added value to the experience you are offering. Property located closer to urban centers offers professionals from the city the opportunity to “get away from it all” for a few days. Properties located more distantly may provide longer stays for those traveling farther distances or using pick-up services from airports.

Following are some questions to consider:

- Do you already own all the land you need for developing a wildlife enterprise?
- If not, how much more land do you need to acquire, and at what cost?

Use an aerial photo or map to designate the following on your land. Check those that apply:

- Hunting area
- Fishing pond
- Hiking trail
- Boating area

- Family recreation area
- Living quarters, kitchen, etc.
- Roads
- Protected area/reserve
- Other

Promotion

This probably is the most important of the four Ps of marketing. The success of your enterprise depends largely on how you promote it. Promotion is your vehicle for reaching customers. Depending on the size of your wildlife enterprise, word of mouth or a sign along a highway may be sufficient for a few local clients. Larger ventures will need effective promotion to make your enterprise a highly sought-after business with a large customer base. With a well-prepared promotion campaign, you have the potential to reach customers who are willing to travel great distances and pay hefty fees to enjoy your products and services.



Figure 2. Promotional efforts can start with simply placing a sign near a busy road. Be sure to seek permission if you don't own the property and check roadway ordinances. Photo by Kevin Quinn, University of Arkansas Extension Service.

A promotion campaign will not only make your customers aware of your enterprise, it can also establish your business's uniqueness in the minds of potential customers. How is your hunting experience different from your competition? The perceived uniqueness of your product could be the reason why a customer will choose your wildlife enterprise. Be honest and don't advertise something that you don't have. A dissatisfied customer will tell five to eight people, and you will lose customers as well as potential customers.

Today's businesses have a variety of promotional tools and venues at their disposal. Advertisements in newspapers, magazines, trade publications, radio, television and web sites are options. Direct marketing tools such as mailing advertisements to hunters can be effective. Hunting and outdoor trade shows/conventions offer promotional venues for setting up booths and meeting potential customers face-to-face. Celebrity endorsements may be of value for high-end wildlife enterprises. A well-designed web site, facebook page, blog or other social media venue can attract customers and link your business to other local or regional attractions and services. The Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism (www.arkansas.com, 1-800-NATURAL) may also assist with marketing and promotion. However, keep in mind not all tools are useful to all enterprises nor are they affordable. Therefore, select the ones that work best for your particular circumstance and customer base.

It is likely that you will need different promotional strategies for various groups of customers. For example, an advertisement in a local newspaper or radio station or even posters around town, may be sufficient to attract local hunters. To reach professionals in large urban areas or a national audience, you can advertise in hunting magazines or the internet. Social media tends to attract yet a different audience. Brainstorm your options by first listing the names of newspapers, magazines, etc. Determine the cost for advertising for each option. Frequently, there will be several ways to reach the same group of people. Objectively evaluate these alternatives based on their costs and effectiveness. Remember these costs can directly affect your profit margin. Do not select a marketing tool that your wildlife enterprise cannot afford, either in terms of cash outlay or your time. Maintaining a social media web site may take you away from other activities that are necessary for your business. On the other hand, you should not select an ineffective tool just because it is cheap or requires little effort. Find the best compromise between cost and effectiveness.

Following are some questions to consider.

What is your target customer base?

- Local residents
- In-state residents
- Out-of-state residents
- Corporate or organized groups
- Other

Based on your target customer base and cost involved, choose the best promotional tool(s):

- Word of mouth
- Road signs
- Fliers/handouts
- Local newspaper
- Local radio/TV
- In-state outdoors publications
- National outdoors publications
- Web pages
- Other

Understanding Your Market

Customers will determine whether your wildlife enterprise will be a success. While a well-planned promotion strategy will help notify hunters about your business, it is important to understand your potential customers when designing your enterprise.

- What type of customer will the enterprise target?
- Will individuals or family units be targeted as primary customers?



Figure 2. Targeting your audience from a crowd of potential customers is critical for developing an efficient marketing strategy.

- Are there certain characteristics of your customers that are unique to this enterprise? (For example, some enterprises may focus on corporate groups who may have limited hunting experience and different expectations than trophy hunters.)
- What will the enterprise offer that makes it attractive to customers?

- ❑ What special considerations or accommodations might be necessary to meet or exceed your customers' expectations?
- ❑ Will your customer base be primarily local, regional or national?
 - Local:
 - Is the local population base large enough to support the enterprise?
 - Is your enterprise likely to be viewed positively or negatively by the local population, including your neighbors?
 - Regional or national:
 - Do you have available services, or will you need to create package plans with other area businesses to provide meals and lodging?
 - Will the state tourism and economic development agency help promote your business?
 - Are there other attractive venues for recreation in your community or nearby?

To further assist in your quest for customers, one option is to contact agencies and organizations who can help describe the attributes of your customer base. Contact agencies where your business is located and/or where you are seeking customers. Locally, county Extension agents work with local clientele on a daily basis and can offer useful insights. Question county agents about perceived interests of your potential customers in their communities.

Another resource is the nearest university offering degrees in forestry and wildlife. Universities often conduct scientific research on hunters, people's attitude about hunting, recreation and other related issues. The Cooperative Extension Service and universities sometimes offer short courses and workshops that may be relevant to your wildlife enterprise. Add your name to their mailing lists so you will be notified when such opportunities occur. Use the opportunities not only to gain natural resource information but also to network with potential customers and to keep in touch with their needs and interests.

Hunting and outdoor magazines are also a source of information. Articles provide insights about your hunting clients. Read letters to the editor to assess their opinions. Visit a local library for previous issues. Magazine advertisements are also valuable in learning about competitors and their promotional tools.

Trends Affecting Wildlife Enterprises

In the business world, information on general trends in the industry can assist new business owners in determining whether a business will be successful. Data about hunting participants is available for every state through the Bureau of the Census web site. About every five years, a national survey of fishing, hunting and wildlife-associated recreation (<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/fishing.html>) is published. Nationally, small-game hunting participation has been declining for a decade or more; however, big-game hunting is increasing. Spending on hunting equipment and associated expenditures remains strong, and most hunters are also wildlife watchers and anglers.

Retaining Customers

Customer satisfaction is the goal for retaining and recruiting new customers. If your customers are satisfied, your business will grow. Surveys are a useful tool for assessing customer satisfaction. Asking customers to complete a survey will help you identify your business's strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement.

Survey researchers use a number of methods to assess customer opinions, including focus groups, personal interviews, telephone questionnaires, mail questionnaires and web-based questionnaires. You can even ask customers to complete a survey before they leave. Although any of these survey approaches will usually provide helpful information, many enterprise managers would benefit from using mail questionnaires for assessing customer satisfaction.

Concluding Remarks

Designing an effective marketing strategy is an important part of an overall business plan for developing and maintaining a wildlife enterprise. New entrepreneurs should start small and pilot their enterprise with a few customers. After the first year or two, review your learning experiences, analyze data from your questionnaires and adjust your marketing strategy to target the projected size of business you want to achieve. Some enterprise managers may be satisfied with small, incremental growth in their customer base from word of mouth, while others may be ready to dive into a larger promotional campaign. Design your marketing strategy with the four Ps in mind: product, price, place and promotion. Develop promotional strategies for a specific audience that match the experience you

are providing. Retain customers by being attuned to their needs and satisfactions. Be flexible enough to adjust to customer needs within the parameters of your enterprise.

Resources

For additional information about starting a wildlife enterprise, check into these resources:

Developing A Wildlife Enterprise – Is It For You? A web module hosted by The National Web-Based Learning Center for Private Forest and

Range Landowners. <http://www.forestandrange.org/modules/wildlifeenterprise/>

Natural Resource-based Alternative Enterprises. A web site hosted by the Mississippi State University Extension Service. <http://www.naturalresources.msstate.edu/>

Wildlife Leases and Liability Issues on Private Lands. A fact sheet from the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, FSA9089. <http://www.uaex.edu/>

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