

Farm & More Conference 2010

Along with a number of Welsh farm retailers, I attended the Farm and More conference, organised by FARMA in Shropshire January 25th to 27th. I work with a number of clients in farm retailing so I was keen to network and pick up on the latest ideas and skills from industry experts from around the world.

I also have a 20 acre holding which we are developing into a mixed sustainable unit so I am always on the look out for information and inspiration. It was a three day event with farm retail tours, an awards dinner, the conference itself and a trade show.

The conference was held at Telford International Centre in Shropshire and attracted more than 300 delegates including farm retailers (shops, pick your own etc), farmers' market organisers and producers (also retailers), representatives from Local Authorities and trade associations.

The conference itself had six streams of seminars and workshops: Business Development, New Business, Farmers' Markets, Green Theme, Farm Attractions and Food & Service.

My conference diary

The conference opened with Gareth Jones from FARMA sharing research that shows interest in buying from farm shops is increasing and outlining 2 new accreditation schemes for farm retail businesses: GO - Genuine Own Produce for those in Farmers' Markets and GOAL - Genuine own and local for farm shop retailers. Consumer trust proved to be a recurring theme throughout the day.

Then I heard from Dennis Reid a fast talking Kiwi from Retail Performance Specialists who inspired us with practical ways to increase our profit. Always coming back to the numbers, he outlined: goal setting, measuring performance, adjusting performance and achieving those goals. His background working with olympic athletes showed us that what was in our heads was the greatest indicator of how our businesses would run.

Jurek Leon from Terrific Trading in Perth Western Australia gave a lively presentation on customer service. Specialising in teaching selling techniques to people who hate selling, Jurek demonstrated the need to really connect with your customers and understand the emotional response that interactions with your business provoke.

A fascinating presentation from Martin Lane of Field Science explained the impact that mineral deficiencies can have on crops and livestock. Soil science is a complex area and this presentation was clear and compelling, graphically illustrating the effect of poorly balanced soils on the nutritional value of food. This is a fundamental way we can improve our produce and our margins.

Two short pieces on wind energy and power saving devices for refrigeration units gave me useful information for my own 20 acre holding.

If you spend time pondering on the future of food and farming, you might want to read Colin Tudge's book, "Feeding People is Easy". A member of The Campaign for Real Farming, Colin set out his vision for the future: sustainable, mixed farms, funded by ethical investment, supplying good food, locally.

In the final session, the audience asked a panel of speakers questions on topics such as loyalty cards, e-commerce websites and how to use the new social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter.

There were several delegates from Wales including Kate Morgan, Pembrokeshire Food Officer. We both felt that many more farm retailers in Wales would find the conference hugely beneficial. Other delegates from Pembrokeshire included James Ross from Pembrokeshire Produce Direct and Sian Bowen from Bethesda Meats. The following day I attended the trade show with more than 150 stands. After the intense information gathering of the conference it was great to be able to network freely during the trade show. Halen Môn Sea Salt from Anglesey and Patchwork Pate from Ruthin Denbighshire were exhibiting at the Trade Show.

I met a whole range of people from organic fudge producers from Devon to UK truffle researchers to geese producers from Worcestershire, to ethical loyalty card providers and so many more.

All in all it was a very stimulating two days and I would recommend anyone in farm retailing to go to this event next year.

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