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# amenities

## got horses? programming essentials for this trend option

by Sarah L. Mesa



Imagine a beautiful, living, breathing amenity for your resort that attracts visitors of all ages, cultivates repeat business, and is a fraction of the cost to build and maintain compared to a golf course. Think of every horse-obsessed little girl or boy you know and every adult who still harbors a wish to gallop across open fields or to be a cowboy for a day. All of these people are potential vacation buyers, who are among the 4.6 million Americans currently involved with horses.

What are these vacationers looking for? An equestrian amenity.

### AN UNTAPPED MARKET

There is no doubt that the horses are big business. The American Horse Council recently found that the equestrian industry generated \$102 billion for the U.S. economy. Approximately 1.96 million people own horses, and 28 percent of them have an annual household income of more than \$100,000. There is \$11.9 billion being spent in this country on recreational horseback riding, and your resort can be a part of this growing market.

However, just like any other successful amenity, an equestrian facility cannot be built in a vacuum. You can build the world's most beautiful facility, but without proper programming from the very beginning, you have no idea if people will be attracted to it. Thoughtful and careful planning is especially critical in equestrian enterprises, as failures in your equestrian amenity can open a Pandora's Box of troubles. Poor planning and design, inadequate staffing, and improper equine care can lead to lost money, unsafe conditions, sick or injured animals, and a myriad of liability issues that could leave you and your resort completely exposed.

All of these problems can easily be avoided and equestrian facilities can flourish if there is proper programming in place. Programming starts on day one—before you open, build, or even design your barn.

A recent tour of a poorly planned and overbuilt equestrian facility at a very upscale resort was a prime example of ineffective programming. There were three to four very small paddocks for turning the horses out to graze and exercise, a very small outdoor riding arena and a very beautiful—but essentially empty—40-stall-barn with only four horses stalled after three years of operations.

The planning was such that the center was land-locked with no possibility of expanding the pasture or turn-out area. Horses that are not turned out regularly become unhappy, neurotic, and sometimes dangerous, which in turn creates unpleasant and possibly hazardous riding conditions for your guests.

### PROPER PLANNING: PROPER PROGRAMMING

Even a lifetime spent with horses may not prepare you for the multitude of issues associated with creating and operating a functional and aesthetically pleasing equestrian facility. Many people can design a barn—that is the easy part. The complex and key component to success is a precise understanding of what the barn and any associated facilities are to achieve. This is equestrian programming, and the success or failure of any horse amenity depends on it.

To achieve success with an equestrian project, it is necessary to think backwards from the end. Decide on what your ultimate goals are before you begin to design or build your facility. If you need your facility to cover its expenses or turn a profit, what kind of equestrian program will you need? Should you design a boarding or lesson barn? How many horses will your vacationers need? What are the demographic profiles of your vacationers? What is the "right" and most lucrative equestrian discipline to ensure that your equestrian amenity helps you sell vacations?

The answer to these questions may



depend on your location. A top-notch dressage facility may be perfect in southern Florida but may not be the best option for a ranch setting in Colorado. Do your vacationers want to relax on meandering trail rides or challenge themselves in lessons with industry professionals? By determining who your vacationers are and what they want in terms of an equestrian facility before you built it will ensure that this amenity will help to generate sales.

There are dozens of different disciplines within the equestrian industry. If you know whether your vacation buyers are western pleasure riders looking to relax or amateur show jumping competitors looking for a training vacation, then you can tailor your facilities and program to those specific needs.

### SUCCESS IS IN THE DETAILS

It is also important to consider what limitations you may face. The total acreage available for the facility, budgetary constraints, and municipal regulations are just a few of the significant issues that can affect programming and design criteria.

It is crucial that you begin your programming phase with a fully detailed

operational analysis. What are your costs for operating the facility, including labor, electricity, water, manure removal, hay, feed, bedding, etc.? Have you allocated appropriate funds for repairs and maintenance? What about payments on the tractor, truck, and horse trailer? What about replacement costs in the future?

Analyzing how many of your visitors will use the facility before you build it will help you to reach an optimal level of capacity and activities. Even if your barn is a ghost town during only one season, that is one season too many that you are losing money. A comprehensive and thoughtful approach to running your equestrian

stuck inside. They can still go for a ride on snow-covered trails or take a riding lesson in the indoor arena. Conversely, during the summer months when ski slopes sit empty, horseback riders are hitting their stride, enjoying the mountain views and scenic trails.

#### **GOOD MANAGEMENT FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS**

Once your barn is built, you have to maintain programming and implement effective management that will guarantee your success in the long term. Don't let your resort sit empty like the one described earlier.

If staff turnover is a huge problem in your barn, you are not alone. Historically, staff turnover in the horse industry has been a chronic problem. Employees are expected to work for low wages, no benefits, and few opportunities simply because they are being given the privilege of working with horses. This "emotional slavery" creates unhappy, restless, and financially insecure employees.

The problems associated with unhappy employees in an equestrian amenity go beyond high turnover rates. Overworked, unhappy employees are more likely to cut corners, slack off, and create dangerous

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When programming for a resort, there are many other issues to take into consideration. Will the facility be open to the area-at-large or only to vacation owners? Will you need to create trail easements? Is your resort seasonal? How will you plan for the seasonal or weekend influx of guests? Are you building (or did you build) a huge facility that sits empty for part of the year?

amenity as a profitable business will prevent these seasonal lapses. In fact, with proper programming, your barn can help fill in the gaps between your other seasonal amenities.

In the winter, when there is snow on the ground and the temperatures are falling, no one wants to play golf. But that does not have to mean vacationers end up

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situations. You can never forget that being around horses is inherently dangerous—these are large, powerful animals that can cause a lot of damage when not handled and cared for properly. If your staff starts skipping tasks that are designed to keep your barn and customers safe, they are tempting fate.

As a barn owner, liability can be your worst enemy. The first step to guaranteeing safety in your equestrian amenity is hiring a well-trained staff, freeing you from the worries of sloppy mistakes and poor choices that can lead to big problems. Go one step further and have your employees trained in First Aid and CPR, making them truly prepared for any situation—this is all part of proper operations programming. Remember, every step you take as an owner to make your facility safer will help you keep the number of accidents (and therefore your liabilities) down to a minimum.

#### **WORTHWHILE INVESTMENT**

Developing a profitable, flourishing equestrian facility requires good resources, meticulous planning, and preparation for anything that comes your way. But, each step that helps you create and maintain a lucrative and pleasing facility will help you create a memorable and happy experience that will bring your vacationers back, time and time again. **D**

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