

## **County Line Orchard**

*David and Bonnie McAfee, Proprietors  
Hobart, Indiana*



County Line Orchard is a you-pick apple and pumpkin farm that specializes in agri-entertainment. David and Bonnie McAfee started County Line Orchard from scratch beginning in 1985. They started on 40 acres of family owned land located in Hobart, Indiana, about one hour east of Chicago. They planted fruit trees and constructed or acquired small farm buildings. It took the McAfee's about eight years to get the orchard established.

David used his expertise as a heating and cooling equipment salesman to oversee construction of a cold storage area for the apples. Over the years they've adapted their operation to serve their customers.

They are open for business from August 31 through October 31. They employ one fulltime person year-round. During their busy season they hire up to 150 employees. The McAfee's estimate that one-quarter of their total business income comes from apple sales. Another one-quarter of total income comes from school children tours. About one-quarter of the income is from pumpkin and cider sales. Other activities and products make up the final portion of operation sales.

### **Motivation**

David felt he had not accomplished what he was capable of. He wanted to call his own shots.

### **Business Development**

Through reading and talking to people at Purdue University, the McAfee's found that apples would be OK on their property. They found potential return per acre was high. They planted trees and while they grew, they built infrastructure. Never, never stopped selling.

### **Market Access**

The McAfee's feel they have GREAT employees and they never lost sight of the customer as being #1. (Most farmers have no concept of this.) They discovered early on that their market was young families and found a great publication to advertise in that specifically targeted that group.

## Critical Steps

They always kept an eye on customers' wants and needs and were always open to satisfying them. Two examples: Customers asked the couple for apple cinnamon donuts over and over again so they built a donut room, bought a donut machine and just last year had to buy a much larger machine. The customers were right. The couple needed to sell donuts.

The school tours happened in much the same way. It started with a phone call in 1993 asking if the McAfee's gave tours to school groups. That year, 3,000 kids visited the operation on tours. In 2001, the McAfee's hosted 34,000 school kids on educational tours. (That's over a 40-day period.) The couple feels that they don't just think about the crop (apples and pumpkins) they're growing. They are constantly thinking about how to grow and improve business.



They became members of the North American Farmer's Direct Marketing Association and began attending their annual educational meetings years ago. From the past two years, they have gone on pre-conference bus tours (Arizona and Ontario) to visit others in the "agri-entertainment" business, and have come home with great new ideas every year.

## Barriers to Success

1. Themselves. The McAfee's feel they are always their own worst enemies.
2. City regulations and high property taxes.

## Unexpected Problems

The McAfee's feel that when a business is successful, neighbors can judge you harder.

## Success or Failure

Succeeded! In 1999, the Lake County (Indiana) Visitors and Convention Bureau named the operation "Attraction of the Year." In 2002, the McAfee's added a 7.5 acre corn maze, a paved walkway through the "Kid's Farm," lighted that same area, decided to stay open until 9 on Friday and Saturday nights, added a puppet show, and made physical improvements to the retail store in their big red barn. They are thinking about how they can improve for next year when after closing this year on October 31<sup>st</sup>.



## Industry/Market Changes

Agri-education and agri-entertainment are growing and will keep growing. With our access to the huge Chicago market, the McAfee's say they will add to what they do and grow and enjoy.

## Lessons Learned

According to David McAfee, "You and your family's attitude and love of what you do are key; it's more important than money or growing ability. People can help teach you how to grow, but desire, attitude and heart come from you!"

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