

“Tilling the Soil of Opportunity,” NxLevel™ Guide for Agricultural Entrepreneurs, is a comprehensive business planning course that was developed specifically for farmers. Tilling is designed to help you test your ideas, explore new marketing opportunities and develop a business and marketing plan specific to your farm.

The first session of the course is focused on helping you develop your vision, mission, goals and objectives. The remaining sessions cover all aspects of a business and marketing plan, including how it is structured, what the pieces are and how they fit together. Farmers who have completed the course say that they like having the structured time to focus on their businesses and create sections of their plan week by week.

The cost of the course is \$599, half the cost of comparable professional business planning programs. This price allows for two people from the same farm to participate. A copy of the comprehensive “Tilling the Soil” curriculum with text and worksheets that cover all aspects of farm business planning is included. At each session, there will be refreshments and ample time for networking with other farmers. Scholarships are available based on need.

Topics Covered

Take Stock of Your Resources

Explore your "entrepreneurial fit" and answer questions such as, do you have the resources, skills and knowledge necessary to grow your business? What are your current available resources -- farm, family, personal assets? How do these resources relate to your new business endeavor? What are the mission, goals and objectives of your business start or expansion? Do you want to become organically certified? Do you want to direct market your product to customers? Are you seeking diversification of your farm production? What is your business concept? Actually developing your concept and putting it down on paper is the first step in writing your plan---what do you want to do?

Basic Equipment Required: Planning and Research

You will gain a greater understanding of the business planning process and why it is important to the success of your business. You will begin to explore your industry and learn how your business fits within the industry. You will also begin to define the products or services in your business.

The Legal Terrain

What should be the legal structure of your business? During this session you will explore the characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of business legal structures. Agriculture is a highly regulated industry with many regulatory players. What are the key regulatory and taxation issues that pertain to your business? Where do you go for inspections, licensing, etc.? How do you correctly handle contracts to ensure risk minimization?

Manage from the Ground Up

During this session you will address key questions that provide a solid foundation for your business. Who are your "management team" members, do you look inside the business or outside for expertise? What are your current and future employment needs? What types of employees do you need to help run your business? What are your farm, business and personal risks? How can these risks be minimized?

Topics Covered, continued

Plant It, Grow It, MARKET IT!

Marketing is more than just selling your product when the price is right. It's about giving the customer what they want, when they want it and at a price they are willing to pay. It's about pleasing the customer! During this session you will learn the key concepts, terms and how-to's in marketing. You will also begin to analyze your competition.

Marketing Strategies- The 4 P's of Marketing

How do you develop a marketing strategy? What is the difference between marketing and advertising? During this session you will become more familiar with the image of your product, the distribution of your product, its pricing structure and how you get the customer to buy your product -- The Four P's of Marketing. What are the different ways you can use to get your product to market -- Farmer's Markets, Subscription sales, grocery chain stores, cooperative sales, brokers?

Get Your Budgets In Line

What makes a good budgeting system? The involvement of the owner and key employees is essential. What is the role of assumptions? Assumptions are the justifications or reasons that explain why budgets contain the dollar amounts you have assigned to them. As a management tool, how do your budgets work with your farm tax reporting? Managing your cashflow is one of the most important tools you will need to perform in your business -- it is an indicator of the health of your business.

Analyze: Cash Flow and Financial Statements

Financial statements are a means of standardizing business information. During this session, learn how accounting and financial matters relate to your overall daily business operations. Your financial information helps you evaluate the performance of your business (both internally and with other similar businesses) and identify planning opportunities and needs. Financial statements are your communication tools when working with lenders and other business interests.

Cultivate Your Money Resources

After analyzing the cashflow, is there an expected shortfall? What are the various options for financing a business? Do you need working capital or equipment monies? Do you need to purchase a new building or land to start or expand your business? How you finance your business is a major decision in the long-term success of your business.

Harvest Your Future

Is the business feasible? If so, what do you do now? This last chapter helps you address some of these issues, steering you down the right path for success.