

Assessing How Agritourism Operators Make Promotional Decisions

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Introduction/Need for Research

Agritourism, or agricultural activities for the benefit or entertainment of visitors, is an expanding industry (Murphy & Melstrom, 2017; Tweeten et al., 2008). Agritourism offers producers the opportunity to diversify their income, particularly in the face of dropping commodity prices (Amanor-Boadu, 2013). In Oklahoma, the agritourism industry accounts for more than \$6.5 million in revenue (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). Although this revenue is promising, marketing is an area where agritourism operations have shown a need for improvement and increased support (Schilling & Sullivan, 2014). Past research indicates operators relied on a combination of word-of-mouth and internet marketing to communicate about their businesses (Sharpley & Vass, 2005). Moreover, tourists often make decisions based on information found on the internet (Platania, 2014).

The main purpose of utilizing social media and the Internet is to create stronger bonds with customers, which increases their desire to become returning customers. (Abrams & Sackman, 2014). Previous research suggests producers should focus on producing quality, rather than massive amounts of Facebook content (Bowman, Settle, Riggs, Tomas, & King, 2020). The agritourism sector would benefit from further research regarding how agritourism operators are currently promoting their businesses and determine what can be done to assist them in future growth and promotion. The purpose of this study was to understand how agritourism operators promoted their businesses. Understanding this process aligns with the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) National Research Agenda Priority 2: New Technologies, Practices, and Products Adoption Decisions (Linder et al., 2016).

Methods

In order to understand the complexity and nuances of agritourism and its promotion in Oklahoma, 10 semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with Oklahoma agritourism operators. Interview participants were purposively sampled and recruited through the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. The researcher-created interview guide was reviewed by the author team. Interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and were audio recorded. The primary researcher took notes throughout the interviews. At the conclusion of each interview the researcher summarized the main points of the interview to participants to serve as a member check (Flick, 2009). The audio recordings were transcribed using Temi.com. The primary researcher listened to each interview and compared the audio to the transcription in order to ensure accuracy. Data were analyzed using Glaser's constant comparative method (1967).

Results/Findings

Three main themes emerged. The first theme was that agritourism operators primarily promoted their business through Facebook. One participant said, "It was all Facebook and word of mouth. And so people came out, they loved it, they loved the farm, they were so excited about it." Another participant said, "We have tried to get articles in local newspapers and we haven't

been very successful with that. . . . But I think local newspapers just aren't real active right now because of Facebook.” The second theme was that agritourism operators were self-taught in their use of social media. One participant said, “I mean we just tried, just started trying stuff. Really. I don't think anybody taught us anything.” The third theme was that operators found that networking with other operators was a great source of information and support. One participant said “it's asking a lot of questions and talking to other Outfitters and guides and stuff through the years it's got to be and how they're doing things.” Another participant said they promoted their operation by “getting other businesses, um, to sponsors. And then we'll share their information on Facebook, tag each other.”

Conclusions & Recommendations

The findings of this research support past research that showed operators viewed word-of-mouth recommendations, Internet marketing, or a combination of both as the most successful and effective ways to market their business (Sharpley & Vass, 2005). Facebook being the most commonly used promotional tool makes sense because it is the largest social networking site (Pew Research Center, 2019b). Facebook's use also coincides with producers seeing that other promotional avenues did not offer an adequate return on investment, with newspapers being noted as a source that was being less used over time, which coincides with declining newspaper readership over recent years (Pew Research Center, 2019a).

Although agritourism operators greatly relied on themselves as well as trial and error for marketing their businesses, they also expressed a desire to continue to learn from other operators, which is in line with past work about the adoption of innovations where many users want to see other users be successful before adopting (Rogers, 2003). As a whole, the agritourism industry in Oklahoma would benefit from connecting operators to one another and teaching them to utilize social media in the most effective ways possible, but it is also important to ensure some of those operators are accessing more formal training or information from experts. While peers offer the advantage of social learning, there are no guarantees their peers are engaging in the most effective practices.

It is important to note that because social media and technology have changed in drastic ways, marketing has changed in major ways since many of these operations started or since the operators were in school. Therefore, many operators may need to be assisted in adapting to this new culture. Those who have become active on social media recognize that it is incredibly beneficial. There was recognition among participants in this study that they needed to adapt their promotion practices over time as the media environment changed around them.

Future research should assess other states' agritourism operations to see if this study's findings apply to other settings. Quantitative research should survey agritourism operations to determine how they are promoting their operations in a manner that can be generalized to a larger population.

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