

**A Qualitative Approach to Understanding Consumer Perceptions After Extension-Led
Farm Tours**

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Introduction/Need for research

There is a knowledge gap between agricultural producers and consumers (Smart, 2009). This knowledge gap leads to a perception problem that the agriculture industry has faced for a number of years. Part of this perception problem could be attributed to urbanization and removal from the farm. It has been suggested that as people become more suburbanized, they perceive agriculture differently (Duncan & Broyles, 2006).

Farm tours are a way to bridge the knowledge gap between producers and consumers and address the misconceptions and misperceptions that exist. However little academic research has been conducted to see if farm tours are beneficial in shifting perceptions of consumers. With the increasing perception problem in agriculture, there is a need for a way to bridge the gap between consumers and producers. Farm tours could be a part of the solution to that problem.

Theoretical Framework

It is believed that knowledge is not equally distributed; it is dependent upon wealth, access to education, technology, and other information. Knowledge gap theory argues that as socioeconomic status increases the ability to acquire information increases, which creates a gap in knowledge (Tichenor et al., 1970). As consumers are more removed from the farm, a knowledge gap is created and widened. With most consumers four generations removed from the family farm (USDA, 2012) that knowledge gap exists. Using the Knowledge Gap theory, this study examined the perceptions of consumers following a beef cattle farm tour in order to determine the effectiveness of farm tours of increasing agricultural knowledge and shifting consumer perceptions.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the effectiveness of farm tours as a means of consumer education in creating a more positive perception surrounding agriculture, specifically beef cattle operations. The research objective was to explore participants' perceptions post-tour. The sample consisted of nine volunteers who chose to participate in the University of Arkansas and Arkansas Extension] "Moms on the Farm Tour." Following the tour, a focus group discussion with the nine participants and tour leaders about overall perceptions occurred at a local extension office. Questions were created prior to the study to guide the focus group discussion. The researcher served as the moderator for the session, with extension agents available to answer clarification questions if prompted. The questions began by asking the group how they heard about the tour and why they decided to participate. The next group of questions was about the farms they visited, asking what they liked, disliked, anything that surprised them, and whether they thought they were an accurate representation of agriculture in Arkansas and the United States. The next group of questions asked if the tours increased their knowledge of beef production and asking specifically one thing they learned. The last group of questions focused on the participants' perceptions prior to and following the farm tours. This set of questions focused on if their perceptions changed, and if they did, what caused the change.

The focus group session was audio-recorded to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings and then transcribed into a Word document. The information was analyzed to label

patterns or trends that occurred in the discussion. A constant comparative method was used to look at labels, repetitions, commonalities, categories, and connections through line-by-line coding (Merriam, 2009). Themes emerged and the researcher grouped them into seven categories. The data was then formally analyzed using NVivo 10[®]. Credibility was established through triangulation; transferability was accomplished through descriptive adequacy; and confirmability was ensured by providing an audit trail.

Results

In the data, seven themes, regarding perceptions of beef cattle operations emerged. In order of most prominent, they were hard work, government, perception, animal welfare, consumer education, environment, and education. Most were surprised at the passion and pride farmers had for their work - they were astonished at the amount of work involved in agriculture. Three participants were unaware of government involvement in agriculture, expressing overall surprise at the regulations farmers must follow. Animal welfare and animal care were brought up by three participants. Two participants simply stated that they could tell the farmers cared about their animals. Two participants referenced consumer education following the program. The first statement was pertaining to the perception of educating consumers. The environment was also mentioned post-program by two participants. With one statement simply reflecting that the participant could tell the farmers were concerned about the environment. Least discussed was education, with one participant stating farmers met on the program were college graduates.

Conclusions

Perceptions post-program demonstrate the knowledge gap that exists shown by surprise and revelation of misunderstanding and misconceptions prior to the tour. The findings suggest the program had a positive and powerful impact on participants' perceptions of agriculture, especially the beef industry. The positive perception shift can be attributed to decreasing the knowledge gap according to Specht et al. (2014) who found the knowledge gap did exist and influenced perception. The seven themes that emerged demonstrate subjects that participants found interesting, relevant, or memorable which can influence and guide future studies. These themes can help shape future farm tour programs on topics that should be discussed and studied. The success of a program and subsequent evaluation comes from the ability to not only educate consumers but to be able to measure that education as well. These themes and perceptions can also shape future communication with consumers, print, online, and in person.

Implications/recommendations/impact on profession

The findings of this study show the benefit of farm tours in shifting participants' perceptions of beef cattle operations in Arkansas. It is recommended that data about farm tour effectiveness be collected when farm tours are conducted. Utilizing the seven themes that emerged from this study, Agricultural organizations should share the success stories of farmers constantly caring for their animals and the environment as both of these have been shown to resonate with consumers. This study looked specifically at beef cattle operations, a study focused on agriculture in general or other specific commodities – livestock, crops, horticulture, aquaculture, and entomology would be beneficial in determining if the findings are similar across the industry.

References

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