



EXTENSION

Agritourism Operators' Marketing Preferences

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Overview

Agritourism is a booming industry and includes any agricultural operation with activities for public participation. In Oklahoma, operations from commodity farms to wineries have added an agritourism aspect to their business, where some hunting outfitters and overnight lodges have been built on agritourism (Murphy et al., 2017). Agritourism operators, whose primary daily responsibilities are necessarily focused on the agricultural functions of their operations, tend to learn what works for their audience on-the-go, while juggling the everyday operations of their agritourism business (Miller et al., Accepted). Of note are social media sites, which are free to use, though it is possible to do paid promotion through the sites. More than 90% of non-agricultural operators use Facebook and 64% use Instagram (Stelzner, 2018). Agricultural producers consider social media a part of the agricultural sector (White et al., 2014), but many only have limited knowledge of how to use social media for marketing (Meyers et al., 2015).

Methods

Interviews with 10 agritourism operations from across the state were conducted to learn about marketing methods operators use and plan to use. Operators were asked how they market their business, how they think it's going and what they want to do in the future. These participants represented long-established and new agritourism enterprises as well as a variety of types of agritourism operations. Interviews were transcribed and coded, using MaxQDA software, to identify common themes. These themes were grouped into categories for the findings for this study. This fact sheet is based on the findings of the Miller et al. (Accepted) research project.

Findings

How do agritourism operators decide what to do?

These business owners learned and continue to learn how to market their business through trial-and-error over years

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of marketing experiments. Most agritourism operators had no formal training in business marketing, especially beyond required courses in college. Operators instead leaned on previous experiences in their careers and observing other similar businesses' marketing to start their own promotion. "We just tried, just started trying stuff, really. I don't think anybody taught us anything," said one operator of a Christmas tree farm. While this might be a good start, it did not lead owners toward marketing methods specialized for their unique operation. Some operators were open to taking practical, skills-based courses that would provide a direct, positive impact to their marketing efforts when these courses are conveniently available and affordable.

What do agritourism operators do?

The most common promotion for these operations is posting on Facebook when the operator has some extra time or a particular picture or story they would like to share. "Facebook ... I'm going to keep saying Facebook." A U-pick farm operator said, "Facebook has by far been the most successful means of marketing." Other online tools, like a dedicated website or other types of social media, are sometimes added based on the comfort level of operators and the target audience. If operators do use additional forms of digital marketing, it almost always leads back to their Facebook page, which serves as their main point of contact for most of their customers. Print and radio advertising are rarely used, except in the case of specific community promotion. "That stuff kind of worked in the game in the beginning, but as technology's changed and years have gone by, it's not really worked," said an agritourism ranch manager.

How does this work out?

Agritourism operators often take enormous amounts of time and energy to run the business, and operators rarely leaned on third-party marketing or hired outside help. They have little resources to put toward marketing their business. In general, they believed they were receiving a reasonable amount of benefit compared to the amount of effort they put into marketing. "Right now, I wouldn't change anything," another U-pick farm operator said. If they do not immediately receive benefit, they are quick to move resources to other avenues, which was the case for more traditional forms of marketing like print or radio advertising. Regarding print advertising, a bed and breakfast operator said, "I've taken little ads out in a

couple of regional magazines, and I always ask people how they hear about us and no one said those magazines. So I don't do that anymore."

What are future goals?

Operators recognized the need to compete for the time and attention of current and potential visitors. Social media was recognized as a free tool, but some operators planned to use future available funds to increase the quality and quantity of their marketing materials. After noting that everything they currently do is free, a petting farm operator said in the future "I would do more paid social media and then I would also do video, media, TV, radio, stuff like that." This is the point where some operators may choose to find a marketing manager or other third-party content creator to increase their promotional effectiveness. This does not apply to those operations that have already reached their goals for attendance through returning customers and word of mouth.

Conclusions

Agritourism operators must sometimes shelve their marketing when developing a new business and putting available resources to daily operations. When time and budget allow, they recognized the need for high-quality, online promotion. The first step for operators is to find cheap, easy-to-access educational resources. Then they move on to more expensive, personalized marketing resources. For communicators seeking to help agritourism operators, the key is to help operators maximize free resources as effectively as possible. This should ideally require little time or technical expertise from operators. A possibility for outreach is to provide platforms for operators

who are interested in joining groups of similar businesses, which can increase cross-promotion and provide knowledge from agritourism operators who have tried certain methods before. A Facebook group would be an example of this. As operations progress in their marketing goals, paid promotions become more viable. It would be advantageous to provide training that helps them navigate the transition from free to paid promotion.

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