
Communications Training Needs in Arkansas' Agritourism Industry

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Abstract

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Keywords

agritourism, tourism, agricultural communications, marketing communications, rural development, risk management, survey research

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Introduction

A collection of academic literature demonstrates how adding agritourism enterprises to small and mid-sized farms could be a legitimate step toward economic sustainability of small and mid-sized farms (e.g., Bruch & Holland, 2004; Das & Rainey, 2008; Hall, Roberts, & Morag, 2003; Hordur, Leistriz, & Wolfe, 2005; Honadle, 1990; Ryan, Debord, & McClellan, 2006). This sentiment is even more important in light of the observable fact that many farms likely to benefit from agritourism are in or near impoverished rural communities. While farmers may not get rich by starting new agritourism enterprises, they may well be able to preserve their family farms and the heritage and culture attached to them in the rural landscape. As a result of intensified industry development and promotion during the past 20 years in the U.S., the amount of income for individual farms participating in agritourism continues to increase annually (U.S. Department of Agriculture-National

Portions of this research were presented at the 2011 Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists annual meeting in in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Agricultural Statistics Service, 2007b). Yet, as the industry establishes itself more firmly across the country, not every new agritourism enterprise is successful. The number of agritourism operators in many states actually decreased significantly between 2002 and 2007. Still, revenue per farm increased in some states by as much as 100% or more in the same time period (USDA-NASS, 2007b).

As state governments and other public and private entities attempt to foster agritourism growth and limit failures, many of them have commissioned and conducted research to better understand the industry in their states and to identify issues that could cause barriers for agritourism entrepreneurs. As cases in point, researchers in Pennsylvania (Ryan et al., 2006), Vermont (Comen & Foster, n.d), and Tennessee (Bruch & Holland, 2004) have published reports describing their respective states' agritourism industries. While these studies are especially important for policy-making purposes affecting rural community development in each state, the collection of state-level descriptions, which grows each year with further state-level research, adds to the U.S. agritourism industry's knowledge base on a national level.

The Arkansas Agritourism Survey

Pittman (2006) asserted in his description of Arkansas' agritourism industry that examining the industry and its potential economic impact is paramount to the industry's future in the state and could be beneficial to decision-makers in other states whose agritourism industries are developing similarly. To address this need, researchers in Arkansas joined the national trend and examined their state's industry, seeking particularly to identify the current and potential economic impacts of the industry on the state's economy and to identify barriers to progress as well as educational needs of those involved in the industry. A broad-ranging survey project was needed to help describe the industry in Arkansas and to generate data that could be used to support the growth of agritourism statewide, nationally, and globally.

Though the results of this survey were specific to agricultural tourism operations in Arkansas, their implications may have relevance to agritourism practitioners and researchers across the U.S. and the world. And because research on the state of the U.S. industry is key to its future (Pittman, 2006), the collection of state-level studies will constitute a description of the industry nationwide. In addition, if viewed as a case study, the results of this geographically specific analysis in Arkansas may have great value to others who may find similarities between the industry in Arkansas and the industry in their specific regions.

Objectives

Though the Arkansas survey's purpose was to describe broadly the state's agritourism industry in terms of economics as well as demographic characteristics, this article focuses on the survey data that was related to the educational needs of Arkansas agritourism business owners (Economic impact data is reported in a separate article.). In particular, this article places a special emphasis on data related to agritourism operators' need for training in marketing communications and promotion. By most experts' opinions, no aspect of running an agritourism business is more important than the marketing and promotions aspect (Dunn, 1995; Eckert, 2008; Hall et al., 2004). State Cooperative Extension Services are in a good position, with their already established audiences and channels of communication, to be the frontrunners in educating agritourism business owners about these important communications-related skills (Hondle, 1990). The conclusions and recommendations of this article should help guide Extension personnel and other promoters of the agritourism industry as

they develop nonformal educational materials to help agritourism entrepreneurs learn to strengthen their marketing communications skills.

This article describes the findings, conclusions, and practical recommendations stemming from the survey of Arkansas agritourism business operators, which was guided by the following objectives:

1. Describe demographic characteristics and current practices of Arkansas agritourism business operators.
2. Identify agritourism business operators' perceived educational needs, with a special emphasis on needs related to marketing communications.
3. Identify respondents' preferred educational delivery methods with regard to their reported educational needs.

Recent Agritourism Research and Literature

Thematic among agritourism literature is the concept that agritourism ventures are viewed positively by state and local business and political leaders because of agritourism's potential beneficial impact on local and state economies. Several states, including Tennessee (Bruch et al. 2005), New Jersey (Schilling, Marxen, Heinrich, & Brooks, 2007), Maine (Allen, Gabe, & McConnon, 2006), Pennsylvania (Ryan et al., 2006), and Vermont (Comen & Foster, n.d), have completed in-depth studies describing their industries. Such studies make clear that growth exists economically as well as in terms of popularity among tourists. They also provide other state industries with case studies and ultimately a national collection of knowledge about the industry on which to base decisions affecting future industry growth and industry-related public policies.

McGhehee (2007) developed a model describing the agritourism enterprise from the perspective of systems theory. Though her Weberian model of agritourism emphasized the need for improved communications, especially marketing communications, only a relatively small amount of recent research has described marketing tactics and marketing communications tools used in the agritourism industry. Dunn (1995) noted that the most popular methods of targeting agritourists in both Arizona and Michigan was word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, print publications and print advertising, radio advertising, and outdoor advertising. This description has held true across several states. Studies in New Jersey (Schilling et al, 2007), Illinois (Dougherty & Green, 2008), Tennessee (Holland & Wolfe, 2001) and Pennsylvania (Ryan et al., 2006) all confirmed that WOM was the most important marketing communications tactic for agritourism operators. Researchers have not yet begun to explore the impact of electronic WOM in agritourism, but some literature in the broader hospitality management discipline supports the importance of electronic WOM through websites, blogs, and other social media (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2007). In addition to WOM, newspaper advertising and brochures, along with websites, were most popular in Illinois (Dougherty & Green, 2007). Roadside signage, newspaper advertising, and newspaper articles were key in Arizona (Dunn) as well as in New Jersey (Schilling et al.). Eckert (2008) observed that having a professional web presence in the form of a promotional website is an absolute necessity for a successful agritourism business.

Many state-level studies have assessed operators' concerns and barriers to industry growth. Marketing and promotion was among the chief concern for agritourism operators in Pennsylvania (Ryan et al., 2006), Tennessee (Bruch & Holland, 2003), Michigan (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005), and New Jersey (Schilling et al., 2007). Some studies recommended more state-funded promotion activities in support of agricultural tourism (e.g., Tweeten, Leistriz, & Hodur, 2008). Other important concerns

included liability issues and hiring qualified employees (Bruch & Holland, 2003; Ryan et al., 2006; Shilling et al., 2007).

Some recent research exists on the educational delivery techniques preferred by farmers, though none has focused on agritourism operators specifically. Of note is the common conclusion that many farmers are somewhat averse to new communications technologies and still prefer face-to-face training situations and traditional publications over any other kind of delivery method (Gaul, Hochmuth, Israel, & Treadwell, 2009). Lasley, Padgitt, and Hanson (2001) as well as Radhakrishna, Nelson, Franklin, and Kessler (2003) and Howell and Habron (2004) all found a preference for fact sheets and newsletters and a definite lack of preference for Internet technologies.

Methods

The University of Arkansas Survey Research Center (SRC) conducted a telephone survey of 102 operators of agritourism businesses in Arkansas who agreed to participate in the study. The population consisted of 310 operators (each of whom researchers attempted to contact) whose names were part of a contact list compiled by the state's lone agritourism industry group, the Arkansas Agritourism Initiative. It is known that the list of 310 was not comprehensive and was most likely representative of the more publicly engaged and well-connected agritourism business owners statewide. The population appeared to contain a number of agritourism entrepreneurs who had interests in promoting local agriculture-related festivals to draw tourists to their area, and the group lacked representatives of agritourism operators in the hunting and fishing industries. Still, this list represented the largest known database of agritourism enterprises in Arkansas and served as a legitimate population for the survey.

Following standard telephone survey procedures outlined by Dillman (2007), the SRC conducted telephone interviews between February 19 and March 5, 2009. Interviewers conducted a 140-item survey, which lasted approximately 15 minutes per subject. A somewhat similar study conducted previously in Tennessee (Jensen, Dawson, Bruch, Menard, & English, 2005) served as a guide for survey question development, as did Ollenburg and Buckley's (2007) survey on motivations of agritourism operators.

The instrument and survey procedures were pilot-tested and evaluated by agritourism experts and survey research experts—university faculty in agricultural economics and agribusiness and agricultural communications, as well as survey researchers in the University of Arkansas Survey Research Center—to enhance validity and reliability and to improve the effectiveness of the data collection procedures. As a result of feedback from the pilot test, several survey questions were combined to shorten the telephone survey time, thereby reducing participant attrition. The pilot testing also resulted in minor rewording of the survey questions themselves to clarify the questions for the participants.

Results

Description of Agritourism Operators

Length of Operation

Most respondents' agritourism enterprises had been in operation for 10 years or longer. Thirty percent of the agritourism operators had been in business for 10 years or less (Table 1). Thirty-four percent of respondents had been in business for 11 to 20 years. Additionally, 37% had been operating their agritourism enterprises for more than 20 years.

Table 1*Duration of agritourism business operation in Arkansas (N=102)*

Duration	Number of Operations	Percent of All Operations (%)
0-5 years	11	10.8
6-10 years	19	18.6
11-20 years	35	34.3
21-50 years	27	26.5
More than 50 years	10	9.8

Types of Operations

Several types of agricultural operations existed among respondents. On-farm retail outlets were the most common agritourism activity provided to customers, with 62 of the respondents offering this service (Table 2). Other highly cited activities include agriculture-related festivals, pick-your-own (U-pick), and farmers' markets, with 49, 46, and 45 respondents reporting these activities respectively. Pumpkin patches and on-farm lodging (e.g., bed and breakfasts) were also popular enterprises.

Table 2*Types of agritourism operations in Arkansas (N=102)*

Type of Operation	Number of Operations ¹	Percent of All Operations (%)
Winery	4	1.32
Christmas Tree Farm	6	1.99
U-pick	46	15.23
Pumpkin patch	26	8.61
Ag museum	10	3.31
Ag festival	49	16.23
On-farm Retail Outlet	62	20.53
On-farm Hunting	17	5.63
On-farm Lodging	22	7.28
On-farm Fishing	15	4.97
Farmers' Market	45	14.90

¹Most operators reported more than one type of agritourism operation at their farms

Reasons for Engaging in Agritourism

Though increasing income appears to have been the top motivator for this group of entrepreneurs, many respondents had other motives for starting their businesses. The most-cited reason (32%) for engaging in agritourism was to supplement the agritourism operator's income (Table 3). Responses regarding other reasons for working in agritourism were the operator enjoyed working with people (26%), the operator liked the eco-friendly nature of activities (20%), and the operator enjoyed the opportunity to teach visitors about the farm heritage (17%).

Table 3

Reasons Arkansans engage in agritourism (N=102)

Principal Reason for Engaging in Agritourism	Number of Operations	Percent of All Operations Reported (%)
Supplement income	65	63.7
Teach visitors about farm heritage	34	33.3
Enjoy working with people	53	51.9
Like eco-friendly nature of activities	40	39.2
Other reason	10	9.8

Age, Gender, and Education of Operators

The respondents were an aging group, a fact that mimics the national demographic of farmers, whose average age is about 57, according to USDA-NASS (2007a) census figures. Only 2% of the respondents were under the age of 30, while nearly two-thirds of the respondents (66%) were over the age of 50.

Though the respondents were mostly male, a number of female respondents were identified as agritourism business operators. Sixty-three percent of the respondents were male and 37% were female.

The agritourism providers in this study tended to be better educated than the general population in Arkansas. Fifty-three percent of the operations' owners had a bachelor's degree or higher. This compares to 19% for the overall Arkansas population at the time of the most recent census estimate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Another 33% had graduated high school and attended college for some amount of time.

Operators' Concerns and Educational Needs

Another objective of this study was to identify perceived barriers or concerns regarding the operation of the subjects' agritourism businesses. These concerns, along with the respondents' perceived educational needs, may provide some indication of the issues that educational materials should concentrate on. Concern about communications-related issues was thematic throughout the responses. The most important concern among respondents, with an average of 3.46 on a 5-point scale (1=no

concern, 2=slight concern, 3=moderate concern, and 4=high concern, 5=very high concern), was promotion and marketing (Table 4). Two other concerns with average responses above 3 on a 5-point scale were liability issues (3.08) and affordable health insurance (3.06). Signage (2.92), finding and hiring quality employees (2.84), and financing (2.79) were of lesser importance to the respondents, yet their means were well above the median on the 5-point scale.

In all, nine educational topics among a list of 16 were rated 3.0 or higher on a 5-point scale measuring average level of value to operators (1=not at all valuable, 2=slightly valuable, 3=somewhat valuable, 4=valuable, and 5=very valuable). The most important self reported educational needs included legislation and government support (3.74), grant resources (3.47), advertising (3.44), niche marketing opportunities (3.44), liability insurance and risk (3.37), and media relations (3.31) (Table 5).

Table 4
Arkansas agritourism operators' concerns (N=102)

Issue	Mean Level of Concern (5-Point Scale)	SD	Percentage of High or Very High Concern (%)
Promotion and Marketing	3.46	1.27	53
Liability Insurance	3.08	1.31	41
Affordable Health Insurance	3.06	1.63	54
Signage	2.92	1.29	35
Finding & Hiring Quality Employees	2.84	1.54	43
Financing	2.79	1.37	33
Licenses & Permits	2.50	1.31	21
Zoning	1.81	1.16	10

Note: (1=no concern, 2=slight concern, 3=moderate concern, 4=high concern, and 5=very high concern).

Marketing and Communications Methods

Promotion and marketing emerged as an important issue for agritourism operators. Further data regarding common marketing and promotions tactics were collected, which further points to the need for education and training on these important business functions. Agritourism operators reported that the marketing communications tactics they used the most in promoting their businesses included word of mouth (97%), websites (70%), print and broadcast advertising (63%), and local media relations (56%). The least-used tactics included media relations with travel magazines (18%) and ads in travel magazines (23%) (Table 6).

Table 5*Importance of educational topics to Arkansas agritourism operators (N=102)*

Educational Topic	Mean Level of Value (5-Point Scale)	SD	Percentage of Valuable or Very Valuable (%)
Legislation & Government Support	3.74	1.40	67
Grant Resources	3.47	1.59	60
Niche Market Opportunities	3.44	1.37	54
Advertising	3.44	1.37	52
Liability & Insurance Risks	3.37	1.42	53
Media Relations	3.31	1.37	49
Finance, Accounting, & Tax Issues	3.19	1.48	48
Infrastructure Development	3.00	1.51	40
Property & Water Rights	2.96	1.60	48
Personnel & Labor Issues	2.84	1.56	42
Estate and Succession Planning	2.58	1.52	31
Supply Chain Management	2.39	1.44	29
Zoning & Safety Code Issues	2.35	1.41	25
Transportation & Logistics	2.21	1.29	21
Lodging Management	2.15	1.42	21
Restaurant & Food Service Management	1.91	1.33	16

Note: (1=not at all valuable, 2=slightly valuable, 3=somewhat valuable, 4=valuable, and 5=very valuable).

Table 6*Most-used marketing communications tactics (N=102)*

Marketing Communication Tactic	Percent of Respondents Employing Tactic (%)
Word of Mouth	97
Web Site	70
Print, Radio, TV Ads	63
Local Media Relations	56
Direct Mail	33
Trade Association Listservs	33
Trade Association (print) Ads	28
Media Relations with Trade Associations	25
Travel Magazine Ads	23
Media Relations with Travel Magazines	19
Other	18

Preferred Educational Delivery Methods

Survey respondents also were asked to indicate of the usefulness of different forms of educational materials to learn about practices that could improve their agritourism businesses. Possible responses to these questions were “not at all useful,” “slightly useful,” “somewhat useful,” “useful,” and “very useful.” Periodic newsletters emerged as the most useful educational materials, in addition to news releases, regional workshops, and books or resource guides. Table 7 illustrates the percentage of responses associated with each type of resource.

Table 7
Usefulness of educational delivery methods (N=102)

Level of Usefulness	Resources						
	Book or Resource Guide (%)	Regional Workshop (%)	Fact Sheet (%)	Online Training Module (%)	College-level Internet Course (%)	Periodic Newsletter (%)	News Release (%)
Very Useful	30	36	24	21	19	30	33
Useful	25	23	29	23	23	39	31
Somewhat Useful	20	21	21	19	11	17	20
Slightly Useful	12	6	6	11	14	7	5
Not At All Useful	13	15	15	25	33	7	12

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

According to McGehee’s (2007) Weberian model of agritourism, one key to a more successful industry is a better understanding of industry issues among all stakeholders. The data produced by this study facilitate that shared understanding. In a more broad sense, this description of agritourism operators in Arkansas contributes to the collection of state-level industry descriptions in the U.S. (e.g., Schilling et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2006; and Bruch & Holland, 2004) and adds to the collection of knowledge about agritourism operators and their needs, especially in terms of training in marketing communications, which was another important aspect of McGehee’s systems model.

The Demographics of Agritourism Operators

Demographic data showed that the study participants were mostly males and mostly well-educated. This conflicts with some opinions in the literature that females commonly manage the farm-based tourism enterprise (Comen & Foster, n.d.). It also could possibly indicate a shift in responsibilities, as some agritourism businesses become the primary economic engine for the farm (Busby & Rendle, 2000). Though many operators were motivated to start their agritourism business

to increase their income, nearly as many were motivated by other factors, including a desire to work with the public and a desire to share their passions for being good environmental stewards. This description is in line Ollenburg and Buckley's (2007) description of agritourism operators worldwide. Further, data from the Arkansas study show that agritourism business operators appear to share a passion for educating others about their own culture. This characteristic also appears to be shared with agritourism business operators worldwide, as demonstrated by Ollenburg and Buckley. The survey participants represented agritourism businesses that focused heavily on retail sales (including on-farm and off-farm markets), festivals, or pick-your-own systems. Additionally, there were fewer new business owners than may have been expected, considering Eckert's (2008) prediction of 30% industry growth in the U.S. This is in line with recent USDA-NASS (2007b) data showing a reduction in agritourism operations yet a rise in overall agritourism income. Most of those surveyed had been in business longer than 10 years. These findings are most likely mitigated somewhat by the pool of accessible subjects, which included agritourism operators who were well-connected to public education efforts and engaged in previous non-formal educational activities sponsored by the Arkansas Agritourism Initiative.

It follows that educational programs targeted toward the clientele involved in this study should be developed with these empirically based demographic data in mind. Extension educators should be mindful of inaccurate stereotyping of agritourism in Arkansas. Though the more stereotypical enterprises—such as pumpkin patches, Christmas tree farms, and wineries—exist and may be at the forefront of Arkansas' agritourism industry, they are not necessarily the most prevalent types of enterprises in the state. The findings of this study also may counter stereotypes related to age and gender in the industry. And certainly, with 84% of the operators surveyed having completed at least some college, certain stereotypes regarding the education levels of agritourism operators should be more closely examined when developing educational programming for the industry.

Educational Topics in Agricultural Business and Communications

A new understanding of the important concerns reported by respondents can guide educators who desire to serve this sector. In particular, the agritourism operators in this study were concerned about their ability to market and promote their enterprises. McGehee's (2007) model of agritourism placed high importance on improved industry communications, especially marketing communications. The results of this study show that Arkansas agritourism operators are aware that the lack of skill in marketing communications is a barrier to economic success.

Operators also had concerns about liability issues, securing affordable health insurance, developing signage, hiring quality employees, and securing financing. Obviously, if these are important issues for the agritourism operators in Arkansas, the operators would be motivated to take advantage of educational efforts to strengthen their knowledge of these subjects.

In addition to examining respondents' concerns, this survey also required participants to rate the value of specific educational topics related to the agritourism industry. The responses to the Arkansas survey clearly indicated that the operators wanted to learn more about how to obtain government help in the form of legislative support and grant funding and government-sponsored promotion for their industry. This finding is congruent with Tweeten et al.'s (2008) description of industry needs. The responses also indicated a desire among respondents to learn more about topics related to marketing communications, including advertising, niche marketing opportunities, and media relations. Each of these topics appears to be a legitimate subject for inclusion in future educational materials

for these clientele.

The findings related to the use of marketing communications techniques provide further direction for specific educational programming for this group of entrepreneurs. Ninety-seven percent of respondents listed word of mouth as an important marketing communications tactic, yet only 18% used any media relations efforts with travel magazines to reach their target audience, and 30% reported not having an Internet presence (website or other social media). Though previous industry analysis has shown that word-of-mouth (WOM) has historically been an important marketing tool (Dougherty & Green, 2008; Dunn, 1995; Holland & Wolfe, 2001; Ryan et al., 2006; Schilling et al., 2007), the fact that it is such a popular tool by far among Arkansas agritourism operators warrants further investigation.

Two possible implications for the WOM finding exist: (1) Operators are simply relying on an old-fashioned method of marketing and need to learn more about better, more efficient marketing communications techniques; or (2) WOM is a successful marketing technique in its own right, and since operators use it so prolifically, educational materials should be developed to help facilitate WOM techniques in the agritourism industry, including electronic WOM via blogs, message boards, and social media (Litvin et al., 2007). Further, the findings of this survey showed that respondents' knowledge of how to conduct media relations with specific types of print, broadcast, and Internet-based media, as well as their knowledge of web-based marketing could be strengthened via Extension programming efforts.

Preferred Educational Delivery Methods

The Arkansas agritourism operators surveyed will be most likely to use traditional nonformal educational methods, such as newsletters, news releases, regional workshops, and books or resource guides in their efforts to educate themselves about how to operate their businesses. These findings are not surprising when viewed in context of other studies of farmers' communication preferences, many of which described farmers as preferring very traditional modes of communication when consuming educational information, including face-to-face meetings, workshops, and demonstrations (Hall & Rhoades, 2009; Franz, 2009) and non-technology driven media such as fact sheets and publications (Howell & Harbon, 2004; Gaul et al., 2009). The demand for more technologically advanced delivery methods, such as on-line training modules and Internet-based, college-level courses is not as large with this group, though some interest does exist.

Overall Recommendations for Research and Practice

Though these conclusions and recommendations are most applicable to educational programming for agritourism operators in Arkansas, readers may find some similarities between the case in Arkansas and their own state. Continuing education and training efforts across the U.S. will likely continue to increase and develop, and this study helps add to the knowledge base that will guide programming focused on education agritourism operators.

The prescriptive recommendations for practice related to this research are mostly covered in the discussion above. However, the importance of basing decisions about educational programming for agritourism businesses upon sound empirical research cannot be understated. The conclusions of this study, when considered by Cooperative Extension Service educators or by college faculty, are likely to change opinions and spark new ideas regarding the topics and delivery methods of educational programming targeted toward agricultural tourism operators like those participating this study.

Further research on this topic should focus on obtaining even more descriptive information about agritourism operators and their educational needs, especially those related to marketing communications. The prominence of WOM marketing tactics in the agritourism industry is most intriguing and deserves further investigation. Further, it is possible that there is a significant relationship between sales receipts and preferred marketing communications tactics of those involved in this study. Analysis of this relationship is underway. Also, on a more broad scale, aggregating and comparing the results of similar state-level studies would be beneficial. An understanding of the regional differences among agritourism operators and their educational needs would surely help guide regional and national efforts that could be shared via eXtension.org and other regional and national educational channels. Finally, numerous opportunities for case study and qualitative-type research exist that might lead to the discovery of not only “best management practices,” but also the subtle nuances among the marketing communications and business management practices of the more successful agritourism businesses.

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