

From Farm to Fork: An Exploratory Study of Oregon's Agritourism Industry Using Walking Interviews

Introduction

Agritourism is defined as a commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or tourism to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or agricultural business (AgriTourism, 2023). The idea of visiting a farming operation in rural communities has become more popular in recent years (Oromjonova 2022; Khanal et al., 2020). The public is drawn to these locations to learn more about production agriculture, while the owners have another income to support their operations (Oromjonova, 2022). Agritourism can benefit an operation through farm diversification, increased profit, and environmental improvement; however, there are significant challenges that these operations face, such as lack of accessibility to resources, financial constraints to update infrastructure, and lack of transportation to rural communities (Canvi, 2019; Petrovici, 2013). For an agritourism operation to effectively communicate with its audience, owners need to utilize online platforms and marketing efforts to highlight a compelling onsite experience; this is seen as a huge challenge due to the lack of accessibility and knowledge of those skills and resources (McCabe, 2013). The purpose of this pilot study was to identify some of the successes and challenges [State] agritourism owners face and their current communication strategies. The following questions guided this study: (RQ1) What are the successes within an agritourism operation?; (RQ2) What are the challenges within an agritourism operation?; (RQ3) What are some communication strategies employed by an agritourism operation?

Conceptual Framework

The agritourism conceptual framework for industry analysis (Chase, et al., 2018) guided this study. The agritourism conceptual framework divides agritourism activities into two tiers: core and peripheral (Chase, et al., 2018). The core tier includes activities that are directly related to the operation, such as farm direct sales and educational events on-site. The peripheral tier includes indirect activities that may happen off-site, but are there involved with the operation (Chase, et al., 2018). In this study, we looked at the challenges and successes of agritourism operations through the lens of core and peripheral activities.

Methods

In this study, the first author used walking interviews with two agritourism operations. She used semi-structured walking interviews with two agritourism-related operations (operation A & operation B). Walking interviews were used to add value and understanding of the lived experiences at each operation (Bartlett et al., 2023). This method involves the researcher walking and revealing barriers within an environmental space (Bartlett et al., 2023). She used a purposive sampling with participants due to location and availability to interview. Operation A was a diversified operation consisting of a dairy, beef, poultry, with various row crops with on-site public events. Operation B was a U-pick blueberry operation. We analyzed the transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark 2017), where we used process coding to generate the themes.

Findings

RQ1: The themes *connecting with community* and *serving the industry* addressed how operators discussed success. Serving the community included personal satisfaction over financial gain with working in agriculture and sharing with the public. Participant 1 said, “It is super important for us to stay engaged and communicate with the people who want to buy our food.” Participant 2 said, “If it is an enjoyable thing to do, that’s a success, profitable but having an enjoyable time farming as well.” Participants emphasize the value in their work and serving the local community.

RQ2: The theme *working with the county* and the *lack of clarity of what agritourism encompasses* addressed the challenges that agritourism operations face. Participants discussed a lack of clarity with county zoning and varying county regulations. For instance, participants discussed uncertainty if zoning would change and also how hosting events/activities on-site would not be worth the trouble. According to Participant 2, “All the troubles I am running into with the county feels like red tape and bureaucracy.” For *lack of clarity of what agritourism encompasses*, participants admitted they were unsure of what agritourism means. Participant 1 described their operation as a working farm and stated, “We are producing food for our community and “...that is super important regardless of whether we call it agritourism or not.” However, Participant 2 said they felt as though they were an agritourism operations, “We are more agritourism than not agritourism.” Both of these themes pose barriers to the operations that are out of their control.

RQ3: The theme of *authenticity of communication* and *online engagement* addressed how operations discussed communication strategies. Participants discussed how they self-taught and self-seeking learning when creating communication efforts. However, participants had differing experiences with their online presence through their social media platforms and websites. For instance, Participant 1 said, “Professional photography would make you stand out but an authentic story would stand out even more.” In contrast, Participant 2 would prefer to hire a professional photographer. Each operation lacked specific communication strategies on how to market their operation to the local community.

Conclusions

There were varying levels of success and challenges in an agritourism operation. The owners described success as being a part of agriculture and the local food community but face many challenges and barriers, including a lack of knowledge of communication strategies (McCabe, 2013). Unlike previous challenges in the literature, zoning, and county regulations posed a myriad of issues, and financial barriers were rarely mentioned as a challenge by participants.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Recommendations include practitioners offering communication-based workshops to help develop operations communication plans and defining what agritourism is for [State] operations. Future studies can look at the sense of place, emotion, and connection owners have with their land in order to garner the emotions of consumers and attract them to operations. With adequate communication strategies, agritourism can be used as an opportunity to educate consumers about the agricultural industry and where their food comes from.

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