

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATIONS OF MICHIGAN AGRITOURISTS

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Abstract.—Michigan agricultural producers, faced with declining commodity prices, rising production costs, and increased global competition, have looked at agritourism as a way to save the farm as well as provide customers with personalized service; high-quality, fresh food; and farm, nature, and family experiences. While previous research on agritourism indicates that it taps into consumption-related trends in American society, this research assesses who patronizes Michigan agritourism operations and what brings them on-site. This paper reports our survey findings on such visitor demographic characteristics and consumption decisions. Survey results indicated the family and broader market appeal of agritourism among households with annual incomes exceeding \$30,000, the importance of local and return visitors, and the draw of purchasing/picking fresh, local produce. This paper also suggests ways to attract new, regional visitors and underrepresented age groups and to raise awareness about Michigan's agritourism destinations as sources of fresh, Michigan agricultural products.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Agritourism, or the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operation for enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation (Lobo, n.d.), is an increasingly important segment of the \$3 trillion worldwide tourism industry. Demographic trends such as the aging of America favor future growth of the agritourism market. Seniors are a key market for agritourism, given their disposable income and leisure time. Agritourism, which involves hands-on, educational activities for children and adults, also benefits from the growing trend of multigenerational travel (Rosenberg

2000, Gardyn 2001, Thrasher 2003). Agritourism attracts the increasingly urban and suburban boomer and senior populations who hold nostalgic views towards farms. According to one sixth-generation farm proprietor outside St. Louis, Missouri agritourism appeals to urbanites who want to “reconnect with the land and have an opportunity to experience what, for them, is a lost world” (“Agritourism Helps” 2004, p. 32). Finally, changes in U.S. domestic travel patterns from traditional, two-week vacations to long weekend trips also favor agritourist operations.

Farmers' traditional orientation toward commodity production, however, has hampered the growth of agritourism. While farmers look for innovations such as new hybrids, chemicals, tillage practices, and equipment to improve production, agritourism marketing and development require new, interdependent ways of doing business (Holmlund & Fulton 1999). Agritourism destinations facing stiff competition from alternatives for leisure time and food purchases benefit from cooperative linkages such as brochures and web linkages, information sharing, referrals, and purchasing linkages that help sustain a critical mass of producers who offer diverse goods, maintain land in agriculture, and thus reinforce a region's image for agritourism (Che et al. 2005). Additionally, traditional agricultural marketing channels, which are based on industrial coordination, financially reward quality efforts that are reflected in tangible product features (Verhaegen & Van Huylenbroeck 2001). But intangible quality characteristics are key to agritourism development. According to the owner of the Red Apple Farm in Phillipston, Massachusetts, the intangible, emotional connection is critical in agritourism since customers are buying a lifestyle, not just a product (Morris 2004). Furthermore, many independent producers of homogenous commodities often lack interpersonal skills and innovative value-added product development that can differentiate farm destinations (Busby & Rendle 2000).

Michigan agricultural producers, faced with declining commodity prices, rising production costs, and increased

global competition (McCallum 2003, Churchill 2004, “State Apple Industry” 2004), have looked at agritourism, a growing segment of the tourism industry, as a way to save the farm as well as provide customers with personalized service; high-quality, fresh food; and farm, nature, and family experiences. While previous research on agritourism indicates that it taps into consumption-related trends in American society, it is important for Michigan farmers to assess who patronizes Michigan agritourism operations and what brings them on-site so that operators can better serve them. Thus as part of a larger, joint Western Michigan University (WMU) and Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) agritourism project supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), visitors to Michigan agritourism destinations were surveyed to determine their demographic characteristics and consumption decisions. The methodology of and results from the WMU/MDA agritourism consumer survey study follow.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

To obtain specific information on the demographic characteristics and consumption decisions of visitors to Michigan’s agritourism destinations, a comprehensive consumer survey was developed by researchers at WMU in conjunction with experts at the MDA. This survey was developed from ideas and opinions of agritourism operators gathered as part of three focus groups conducted in 2002 in Kalamazoo, Ellsworth, and Flint, Michigan. Each focus group consisted of six to nine firm owners. The consumer survey contained questions regarding the respondents’ traveling party, distance traveled, home ZIP code of residence, site-specific visiting patterns (past, present, and future), visitation to other agritourism operations within the last 12 months, means of learning about the agritourism operation, activities enjoyed and products purchased on the day of visitation/survey, and Likert-type questions designed to identify opinions related to the reasons for the visit. In-person surveys were then conducted on-site at 31 agritourism operations (both farm and farmers markets) around the state of Michigan from August to October 2003. The WMV/MDA survey had 1,550 respondents. The following section features results from the data analysis.

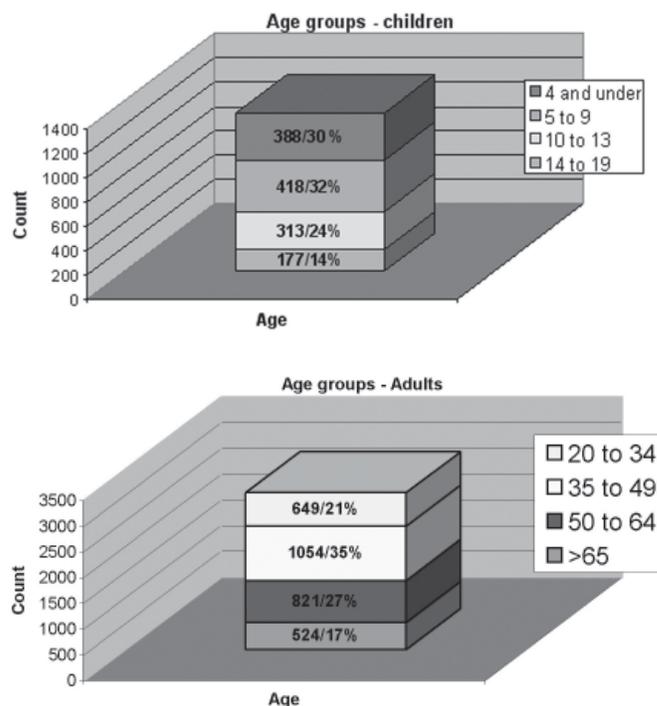


Figure 1.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Characteristics of Michigan Agritourists

An average group of Michigan agritourism visitors included 2.82 persons (standard deviation = 2.825), with a range from one person to 52 persons. Groups of one or two persons accounted for 957 of 1,550 surveys (61.9%), while three-person groups accounted for 12.8 percent of the sample. Groups of four persons accounted for 12.0 percent of the sample. Groups with five or more persons in their party accounted for 13.3 percent of the survey. Two different types of customers visited these businesses: 1) younger or older couples or individuals, and 2) families with one or more children. sixty percent of the persons in the sample of 4,360 persons who provided information on gender in the survey were female.

Taking the sample as a whole, 29.5 percent of visitors were children or young adults under the age of 20. Of these children, 62 percent were under 10 years of age, while only 14 percent were between 14 and 19 years of age (Figure 1). Turning attention to the adults that comprised 70.5 percent of total visitors, the largest group by our age categories was those between 35 and 49 (35%) (Figure 2). In many cases, these were families. The number of 20-somethings was low (21

percent), suggesting that this segment of the population is less interested in agritourism activities. Alternately, more age-specific forms of advertising or programs may be required to increase their participation rates.

Once self-reported household income was over \$30,000 per year, there was no significant difference in attendance rates by income group (Figure 3). Families reporting annual incomes of below \$29,999 were underreported in the sample. This finding may indicate that lower-income families do not currently shop at on-farm venues, but it may also simply be an artifact of the survey.

3.2 Customer Reasons for Visiting Agritourism Operations

Survey respondents were asked, in an open-ended question, to state “the most important reason why you came here today” for the operation where they completed the survey. While there were a variety of answers incorporated in the 1,528 responses, the most frequent answers related to the products the operations were centered on, or to a view that the visit was a family activity. The answers related to the particular places (i.e., cider mills) at which the surveys were distributed. The top answer, yielding over one-quarter of the responses (26%), related to procuring vegetables, such as “to buy fresh vegetables,” “to get fresh produce,” and “to pick vegetables.” The second most popular response (16.6%) related to obtaining apples, such as “to pick apples” or “to buy apples.” The third most cited response (7.3%) involved viewing the trip as a family activity, with answers such as “family outing,” “family fun,” “family party,” and “family trip” (Table 1).

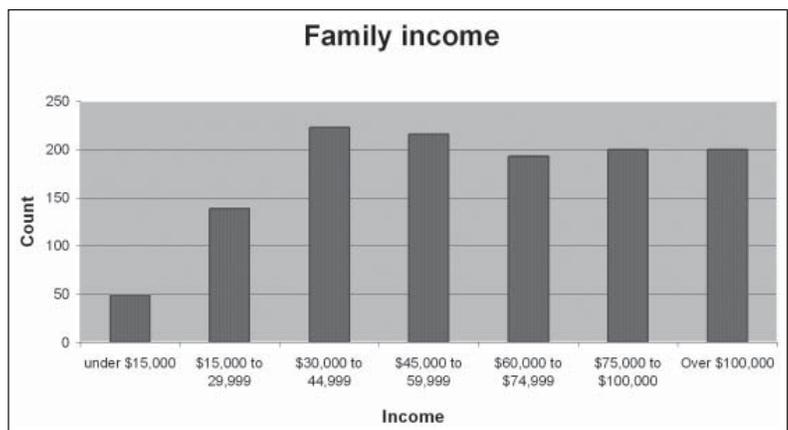


Figure 2.

Respondents were also asked to list the activities which they participated in while at the operation. The most popular activity mentioned by respondents, picking fruit or buying fresh vegetables, not surprisingly centered on fresh fruits or vegetables. Of respondents, 14.6 percent listed it as at least one of their activities. The activity that was second most likely to be cited was shopping, in general, with 13.4 percent of respondents listing “shopping” or “browsing.” Other activities frequently listed included picking or buying apples, eating, hay rides, and petting or looking at animals (Table 2).

3.3 Importance of Returning and Local Customers

From questions included in the survey to determine the visitation pattern of the typical adult filling out the survey, it was clear that customer loyalty and repeat business were critical to the economic health and well-being of these operations. Of this question’s 1,550 respondents, 85.9 percent reported a previous visit to the business prior to the day of the survey. Results indicated that 76.1 percent of respondents had visited

Table 1.—Most important reasons for coming to the agritourism site

Reason	Frequency	Percent
To get fresh vegetables, fresh produce, to pick vegetables	397	26.0
To pick or buy apples	253	16.6
Family outing, family fun, family party, family trip	111	7.3
To buy cider	90	5.9
To buy pumpkins	88	5.8
Fun for kids, kids’ activities, kids’ trip	72	4.7
To buy corn	70	4.6
To buy fresh fruit	67	4.4

Table 2.—Activities at the Agritourism Site

Activities	Percent
Picking or buying fresh produce	14.6
Shopping, browsing	13.4
Picking apples, buying apples, buying caramel apples	12.1
Eating food, eating snacks	8.0
Petting, looking at animals	6.7
Hay rides, wagon rides	6.8
Buying pumpkins	5.5
Buying or making cider	5.4
Eating or buying donuts	4.5
Sightseeing, looking around	3.0

the business within two years, but only 57.6 percent of respondents came during the previous year. Visits may be cyclical. However, 96.9 percent reported that they would return during 2003 or 2004. The use of home mailings, common among the firms participating in our surveys, would seem to be well founded in light of the “brand loyalty” exhibited by the respondents. Most people participating in the survey also regularly visited other agricultural tourism businesses. Of the 1,548 people responding to this question, more than 70.8 percent reported visiting other agricultural tourism operations in the past 12 months. Direct mailings can be used to assure return business, but other forms of advertising should be used to expand the customer base. Once people visit these operations, there is a very high probability that they will return.

Each respondent was asked to provide information on the trip that included their visit to the agritourism business where they completed the survey. Information on the actual miles traveled, as well as the ZIP code information assuming that not all customers were coming directly from home or alternately returning to their home after their visit, was collected. More than 95.8 percent of our respondents reported a Michigan ZIP code for their residence. The average number of miles traveled was 22.0 miles (standard deviation = 54.66). As reflected by the standard deviation, the range, however, was very large (from one mile to 1,200 miles), reflecting the impact of out-of-state customers on the agritourism businesses of Michigan. While the long-distance customers certainly grab our attention, it should again be noted that many of the customers for these businesses were neighbors. Many

customers lived within 25 miles of the firms where they were surveyed. Thus, these “home-grown” customers are critical to the financial success of many of these operations. More than one-half of the respondents to this consumer survey lived within 10 miles of the business. But there is still considerable potential for increasing customers living within 30 to 50 miles of the businesses.

3.4 How Customers Found Out About Agritourism Operations

To learn how customers found out about the agritourism operations that they were visiting, respondents were given six options, of which they could select as many as applied. These options included “saw when drove by,” “saw ad,” “read about in tourist literature,” “word-of-mouth,” “saw on Internet,” or “saw on sign.” Once again, the answers reflect the local nature of the customer base. The most popular response was “word-of-mouth” (37.9%), followed by “saw it when drove by” (25.9%). Very few respondents learned about any of the operations from the Internet or through the tourist literature.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the WMU/MDA consumer survey conducted at Michigan agritourism destinations, conclusions can be drawn about visitor demographic characteristics and consumption decisions. Customers include families across the \$30,000+ income groups. Reflecting the family nature of agritourism, many visitors (survey respondents and members of their accompanying parties) were part of families with young children. To attract teenagers and 20-somethings, whose numbers were low, more age-specific

programming might be necessary. Michigan agritourism operators could perhaps learn from the experience of Cedar Hill Farm in Hernando, Mississippi, which has successfully attracted teenage boys with a paintball course. This age-specific programming can be successful as long as the five or 10 acres dedicated to it are set away from activities such as pony rides and the petting zoo. For this farm, paintball has expanded the business from a one-day activity primarily for families with young children to one with activities for all members of the family. Such non-traditional activities may also expand a farm's operating season (Warren 2004).

While the Michigan survey results revealed the importance of local and return visitors to the success of agritourism operations, potential exists to attract both more customers living 30-50 miles away from the business and out-of-state visitors. To attract these individuals, who may be less likely to drive by a location or hear about the business from a family member or friend, the Internet, travel brochures, and greater promotional linkages with convention and visitor bureaus are critical to raising awareness about Michigan's agritourism destinations. For instance, by working with the Grand Rapids, Michigan, Convention and Visitors Bureau, Robinette's Apple Haus & Gift Barn is now on regional familiarization tours for motorcoach operators. Consequently, over 50 percent of the tour companies that have visited Robinette's on a familiarization tour have later booked a tour stop. Additionally, through its membership in the Grand Rapids Convention and Visitors Bureau, Robinette's is also represented at the American Bus Association and the National Tour Association conventions, giving it exposure that this individual business could not otherwise afford (Eckert 2004).

To reach new customers, agriculture could also be better integrated into existing state tourism promotion campaigns by using a Michigan fruit (e.g., cherry or apple) as a focal point or symbol for visitors who are interested in the many activities connected to agriculture. Tourism promotion material could also stress the agriculture-related activities possible in Michigan such as visiting a cider mill or farm and picking your own

pumpkin. Visiting cider mills could be highlighted as a Michigan's tradition one could take part in while participating in another tradition, the fall leaf color tour. Agritourism could thus reach new people, who could then become return visitors and word-of-mouth promoters of Michigan agritourism.

5.0 CITATIONS

Agritourism helps bring more people to the farm.

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