



# Information Channels Reaching Agricultural and On-Farm Nature Tourism Visitors

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A study conducted in 2004-05 examined consumer demand for agricultural and nature tourism in Sacramento and Yolo Counties. This research brief discusses media readership and information sources that reached agritourism visitors. Aspects of visitor preferences and motivations to visit agritourism sites were summarized in an earlier research brief: "Consumer Demand for Agricultural and On-Farm Nature Tourism" by D. Jolly and K. Reynolds, *Small Farm Center Research Brief 2005-01*, available from the UC Small Farm Center.

The ease of attracting visitors to agritourism sites can vary with factors such as location, type of operation, and time of year. For example, homemade road signs are a common (and low-cost) way of publicizing farm stands or U-pick operations. Special events such as harvest festivals or on-farm bird watching walks might be advertised in local newspapers or by flyers in area businesses.

Agritourism operators may try out various outlets to find the most effective method for publicizing their sites, and it may take a few seasons to find the best publicity outlet. Moreover, the costs of paid advertising can reduce the potential revenue of agritourism enterprises, especially advertising that doesn't reach likely visitors. Without surveying visitors, it may be difficult to judge exactly which publicity methods work best. To this end, a study conducted by the Small Farm Center in Sacramento and Yolo Counties in 2004-05 assessed various aspects of information channels among visitors to agritourism operations.

## Methods

Utilizing a purchased mailing list, we surveyed a random sample of residents from Sacramento and Yolo Counties in California<sup>1</sup> to: assess



the level of participation in agricultural and nature tourism; to identify consumer preferences for agritourism experiences; to assess on-farm spending at agritourism venues; and to uncover consumer values and habits regarding food and the agricultural system. Questionnaires with cover letters were delivered to 1,919 residents in November 2004.

<sup>1</sup> Of note is the proximity of the Napa Valley wine region, which is within two to three hours' drive from most locations in Sacramento and Yolo Counties.



Impossible Acres in Yolo County hosts school tours and agritourists each year.

A reminder postcard was mailed in December, and a second questionnaire was mailed in January 2005. Survey questions were close-ended with spaces for respondents to write-in additional remarks. Responses from the two counties were entered into a database, and aggregated for analysis using SPSS statistics software. Data on information sources and periodical readership are included in this paper.

## Findings

### Demographics of Respondents

The response rate was 15 percent and though this response rate was lower than expected, the demographic distribution of respondents allowed for analysis of questions important to assessing characteristics of potential visitors to agritourism operations. Of 294 respondents, 27 percent were under 44 years of age, 23 percent were between 45 and 54, 20 percent were between 55 and 64, and 30 percent were aged 65 and above. Forty-eight percent of

the respondents were female, and 52 percent were male. Respondents with higher incomes (\$75,000 annually and above) and higher levels of educational attainment (college and beyond) were more highly represented (40% and 67% respectively). Seventy-eight percent of respondents were of European descent, and diverse ethnic groups represented relatively equal proportions of the remaining responses, which totaled 17 percent. Respondents were 79 percent urban/suburban residents, and 21 percent small town/rural residents. These data, while not entirely representative of the population in Sacramento and Yolo Counties, were distributed sufficiently to allow for inferential analysis based on the sample size.

For reporting purposes we have defined “participants” or “visitors” as those who participated in a select number of on-farm/ranch activities. These were: bed and breakfasts<sup>2</sup>;

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<sup>2</sup> Though bed and breakfasts are not solely farm-related activities, this option was included due to its importance in the agricultural tourism market as a whole.

on-farm camping; farm vacation; ranch vacation; youth exchange; Elderhostel<sup>3</sup>; wagon rides; horseback rides; U-pick; on-farm processed product purchases; on-farm agricultural craft and product purchases; farm/ranch tours; school tours; garden tours; winery tours; technical agricultural tours; historical exhibits; petting zoos; and exotic animal farms.

Respondent Information Sources

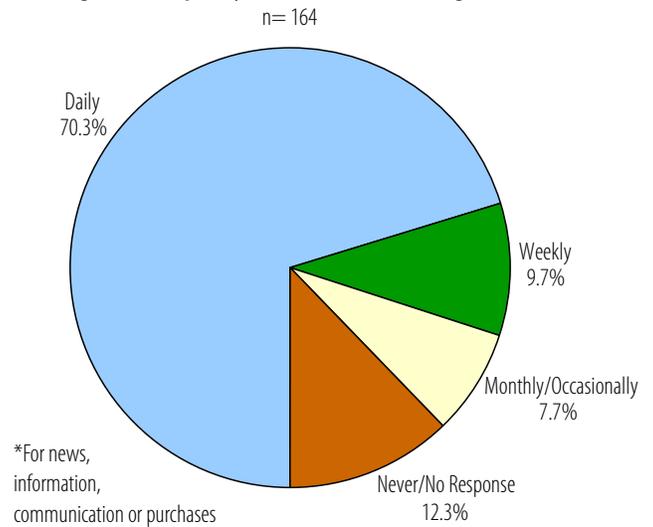
In deciding where to advertise, it is generally useful to know which types of publications reach potential customers (visitors to agritourism sites in this case). Agritourism visitors in this study reported high levels of readership in general, with over 69 percent reading daily newspapers (see Table 1). Over 60 percent reported monthly or occasional readership of travel, nature or cuisine magazines, and 56 percent reported reading environmental magazines monthly/occasionally. Additionally, 70.3 percent of respondents reported using the Internet daily (see Fig. 1). Nearly all of those who used the Internet daily used it for communication (65.4%), but respondents also reported using the Internet daily for news (39.4%), information (38.2%), general purchases (2.6%) and ticket purchases (1.3%; see Fig. 2).

**Table 1. Visitor readership**

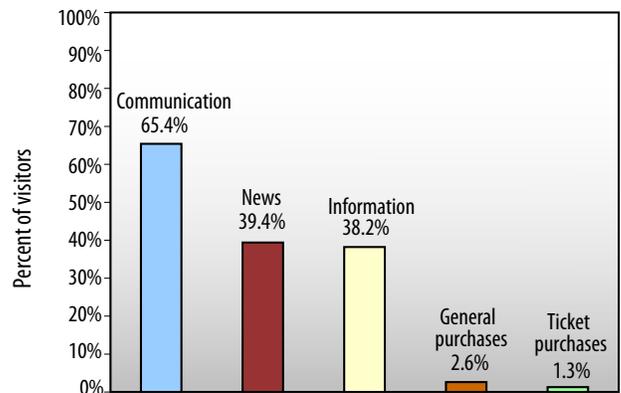
Newspaper (daily)	Travel magazine (monthly/occasionally)	Nature magazine (monthly/occasionally)	Cuisine magazine (monthly/occasionally)	Environmental magazine (monthly/occasionally)
69.2%	66.5%	66.0%	64.7%	56.8%

Note: Due to missing responses, sample size (n) for each item varied from 155 to 159.

**Figure 1. Frequency of Internet use\* among visitors**



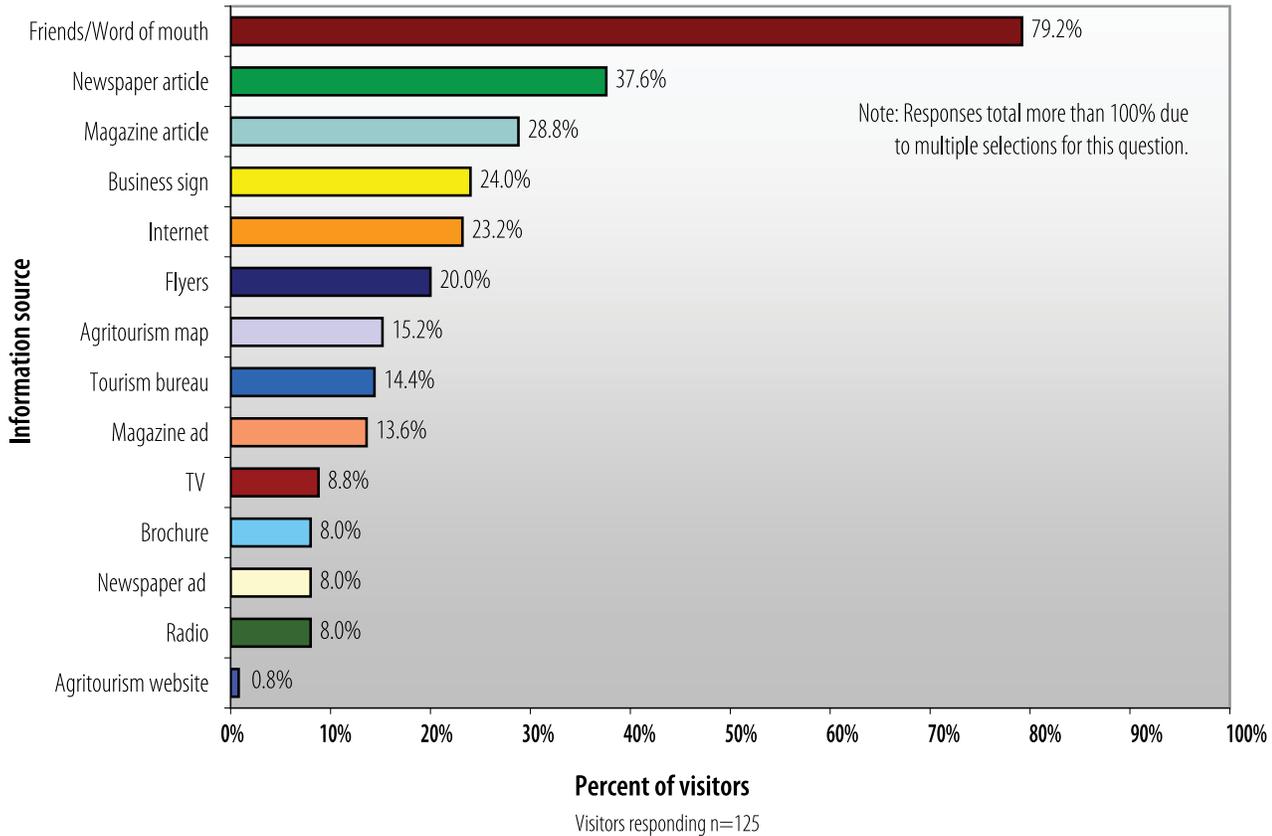
**Figure 2. Daily Internet use by visitors**



Note: Due to missing responses, sample size (n) for each item varied from 155 to 159.

3 Elderhostel is an organization that conducts tours that are not necessarily rural or agricultural in nature. Because this organization was included in the survey instrument, it has been included in this analysis.

**Figure 3. Where visitors learned of agritourism sites**



**Information about agritourism sites visited**

The survey also examined how respondents had learned of the agritourism operations they had visited. “Friends/word of mouth” was by far the single-most frequently cited outlet, with 79.2 percent of visitors having heard about the agritourism sites they had visited through personal references (see Fig. 3). Newspaper and magazine articles were the next most frequently cited information channels, reported by 37.6 percent and 28.8 percent of visitors, respectively. Other outlets included business signs, the Internet and flyers. Agritourism maps, tourism bureaus, and magazine ads were reported with similar frequency (between 13 and 15%), while TV, brochures, newspaper ads and radio reached about 8 percent of respondents. Agritourism websites were reported by

just one respondent, representing 0.8 percent of the responses for this question. These findings are consistent with research conducted in New York state (Hilchey and Kuehn 2002), which reported word of mouth advertising as the most effective for agritourism marketing. Another national study on outdoor recreation also reported that reported friends and family were the most frequent source of information regarding farm tourism (Barry and Hellerstein 2004).



Roadside signs—like the ones for Erickson Ranch, at left, in Solano County and, below, at Willow Creek Ranch in Calaveras County—are common forms of publicity for agritourism operations.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study give general insight into how agritourism operators might conduct the most effective publicity for their operations. The data on periodical readership and Internet use suggest venues through which agritourism operators might expect to reach the highest numbers of potential visitors.

This study found that though readership of newspapers and magazines was high, paid advertising of agritourism sites reached a relatively low number of visitors. Though newspaper and magazine articles (which do not typically result in costs to the operator) reached 38 percent and 28 percent of visitors, respectively, paid advertising in similar outlets was considerably less effective, reaching only 13 and 8 percent. What cannot be inferred from this study is whether paid advertising in newspapers and magazines did not reach or attract the interest of potential visitors, or if it was under-utilized by operators. Further research into where agritourism is currently publicized may shed light on these topics.



Advertising costs can significantly affect the overall economic viability of any enterprise. In the case of agritourism, effective management of these costs may ultimately contribute to sustaining the farm or ranch as a part of the agricultural landscape. Therefore, caution should be observed by limited-resource operators in terms of investing in the most cost-effective marketing strategies.

For agritourism operators who choose to use magazines to advertise their agritourism operations, the high levels of readership of nature, travel, cuisine, and environmental magazines suggest that these types of peri-

odicals would be effective publicity venues. However, the decision to use paid publicity outlets must also include assessment of the costs and desired duration of advertisements. This is especially true given that word-of-mouth advertising appears to have reached the highest number of respondents in this study.

In California, with its regional specialties (Napa Valley wine or Salinas vegetables), two types of additional studies would help refine the knowledge of effective agritourism publicity: additional region-specific studies into cost-effective advertising; and on-site visitor surveys exploring information sources about specific types of agritourism operations. Access to this type of information would help indi-

To be successful, agritourism operators must manage both farming and customer service. At right, Steve O'Shea hosts a hands-on tour of Laguna Farm in Sonoma County.



vidual operators make decisions about how to best allocate their financial resources for marketing.

Finally, since word-of-mouth advertising has consistently been noted as an effective publicity technique for agritourism sites, operators should

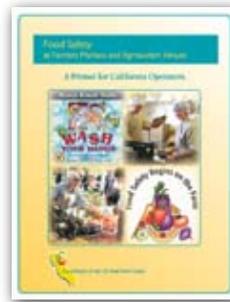
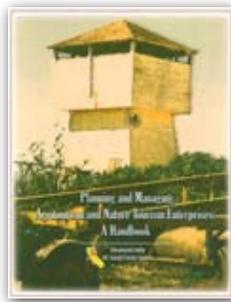
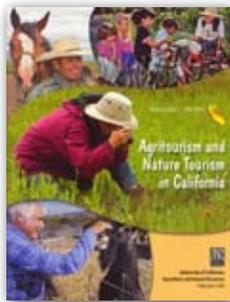
keep in mind that a visitor is likely to tell her/his friends about a positive (or negative) experience. Therefore, in addition to any formal advertising, attention paid to the customer service aspect of an agritourism operation is likely to enhance the reputation of the site and maintain a flow of visitors. After all, agritourism and on-farm nature tourism combine elements of farming and ranching with the service sector. Agritourism operators are thus likely to be most successful when they are able to skillfully manage both.

## References

- Barry, J. J., and D. Hellerstein. 2004. Farm Tourism. In *Outdoor Recreation for 21st Century America*, edited by H. K. Cordell. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.
- Hilchey, D., and D. Kuehn. 2002. Agritourism in New York: a market analysis. *New York Sea Grant, Fact sheet. SUNY, CESF 1-8.*

## Resources for agritourism development available from the UC Small Farm Center

- *Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California*. By Holly George and Ellen Rilla. Published by UC ANR, No. 3484. 159 pp. \$25.
- *Planning and Managing Agritourism and Nature Tourism Enterprises: A Handbook*. By Desmond Jolly. 2006. 40 pp. \$10.
- *Food Safety at Farmers Markets and Agritourism Venues: A Primer for California Operators*. By Desmond Jolly and Chris Lewis. 2005. 36 pp. \$8.
- "Consumer Demand for On-Farm Agricultural and Nature Tourism." By Desmond Jolly and Kristin Reynolds. UC Small Farm Center Research Brief 2005-01. 7 pp. No Charge.





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