Development of Extension Programming to Support the Advancement of Agritourism in the Northeast

Introduction

Northeast farmers are increasingly reliant on agritourism to expand farm income, create employment for family members, and strengthen relationships within the local community. For many farmers, however, agritourism is a new business model, necessitating a shift from a production-centric focus to one that includes service and hospitality. This transition challenges farmers to offer products and services that are attractive to target markets, and to execute effective marketing strategies that draw customers to the farm. Importantly, agritourism also increases a farm's legal liability as farm visitors may be exposed to risk factors with which they are unfamiliar, possibly resulting in injury or other harms.

In 2011, Northeast SARE awarded a professional development grant (Award No. ENE11-121) titled "Development of Extension Programming to Support the Advancement of Agritourism in the Northeast." A multistate (NJ, VT, ME, DE) team of Extension faculty was convened to develop and deliver educational programming to agricultural educators and service providers working with Northeast farmers interested in agritourism development.

Educational Resources

The training program comprises a set of core instructional modules and web-based resources focused on:

- identifying and minimizing farm safety risks;
- managing liability;
- mitigating financial risk through enterprise budgeting; and
- improving marketing strategies.

A dedicated website (http://agritourism.rutgers.edu/training/) was created to increase accessibility to educational resources developed over the course of the project, which include: PowerPoint training modules, fact sheets, farm-assessment checklists, a series of *Managing Risk on Your Agritourism Farm* educational videos, an online enterprise budget tool, webinar recordings, and links to other web-based resources. The project has received more than 15,800 page views since being launched in September 2013.

Program Delivery

The team delivered educational content through a multi-tiered delivery system that included 27 workshops, classroom style trainings, and small-group farm assessments throughout the Northeast, as well as 4 nationally advertised webinars.

These training events reached more than 1,450 Extension educators, farmers, agency staff, and other agricultural service professionals (e.g., tourism and marketing professionals, economic development professionals, attorneys, farm lenders, etc.). Strong interest in the training program resulted in the presentation and dissemination of materials beyond the Northeast to national audiences through professional meetings of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents, National Extension Tourism, National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals, and American Society for Horticultural Science. The program was featured in several presentations and a farm safety/liability management workshop at the 2017 National Extension Tourism Conference held in Princeton, NJ.

These professional association engagements, coupled with national exposure achieved through project webinars and Extension networking, also resulted in Extension professionals from outside the Northeast region requesting the use of curricular materials in Virginia, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Colorado, Indiana and Wisconsin. At least two international requests for project resources were received (Canada and Antigua).

Program Outcomes and Impacts

The intended beneficiaries of this professional development project were agricultural educators and service providers. The defined performance target was to have ***30 agricultural educators utilize training from this project to develop and deliver outreach programs to Northeast farmers, leading 200 farmers to develop or revise marketing strategies to increase agritourism revenues or adopt new risk and liability management strategies to improve farm safety***.

Extension educators and other agricultural service providers in NJ, VT, DE, and ME were surveyed at the end of the project to evaluate the extent to which knowledge gained through this program and supporting education resources have been used in professional practice.

A sample of 21 project participants reported that they had used project training and/or disseminated project materials to an estimated 1,576 farmers in their service areas. Training participants reported that changes in marketing practices were the most common outcome observed (283 farms), followed by improvements in farm safety practices (n=177), liability or risk management strategies (n=162), and employee training procedures (n=119).

Examples of Project Recognitions

- Project website has earned regional or national awards, including the National Association of County Agricultural Agents (NACAA) Communications Award (Northeast winner) and American Society for Horticulture Sciences Extension Division (National Award for Outstanding Website)
- Educational/training modules have been recognized by the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (Northeast winner and National runner-up in the educational package category) and NACAA (Communications Award, Learning Module Category).
- One educational resource ("Budgeting for a corn maze" - Rutgers Cooperative Extension publication E343) was a National Finalist for the NACAA Communications Award.

Examples of Scholarly Output

- Infante-Casella, M., Schilling, B., Bamka, W., Komar, S., Melendez, M., & Marxen, L. (2018). Evaluation Checklist for Agritourism and Direct Market Operations: Farmer and Extension Resources. *Journal of Extension* 56(1). Article 1TOT2.
- Schilling, B. & Marxen, L. (2013). Visit NJ Farms: an online resource to support statewide marketing of agritourism. *Journal of Extension* 51(6). Article 6TOT5.
- Schilling, B., Komar, S., Bamka, W. & Sullivan, K. (2013). Conventional corn grain productions vs. corn maze production: implications for enterprise budgeting. *Journal of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents* 6(1).
- 9 Extension fact sheets (available at: http://agritourism.rutgers.edu/training/) and # of professional meeting presentations

Other Activities Emerging from Project

An extension of the project in New Jersey has been a growing number of farmers requesting individual farm assessments from Extension personnel (e.g., farm safety evaluation, review of marketing practices, etc.). This resulted in a team of Rutgers Cooperative Extension faculty, led by Michelle Infante-Casella, developing a farm SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) assessment program and related assessment tools to aid new and established agritourism farms.

Project Team

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William Bamka - Agricultural and Resource Management Agent, Rutgers University

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