AGRITOURISM MARKETING STRATEGIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF APPLE ORCHARDS IN SOUTHERN QUEBEC AND NORTHEASTERN NEW YORK/VERMONT

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Abstract
Farmers are becoming flexible in managing their roles as primary producers of agricultural products while providing growing agri-tourism services that are highly profitable. This research investigates whether there are differences of significance in the marketing strategies implemented by 24 apple orchards to meet the needs of visitors in southern Quebec and northeastern New York/ northwestern Vermont. More similarities than differences were found. Quebec orchards offer better quality products, better attractions such as picnic areas, petting zoos, live music, guided tours, and lower prices, while more coupons, bundle and group rates were given by American orchards. Improvements in promotion and personal selling initiatives is needed in both regions to attract more visitors.

Résumé
Les fermiers font preuve de flexibilité dans la gestion de leurs rôles comme principaux producteurs de produits agricoles qui offrent également une gamme accrue de services agrotouristiques très profitables. Cette étude a cherché à savoir s'il y avait des différences entre les stratégies de marketing mises en place par 24 vergers afin de répondre aux besoins des visiteurs du sud du Québec et du nord-est de New York / nord-ouest du Vermont. Nous avons trouvé plus de ressemblances que de différences. Les vergers québécois offrent des produits de meilleure qualité, de meilleurs attraits touristiques comme des aires de pique-nique, des zoos pour enfants, des performances musicales, des visites guidées et des prix plus bas alors que les vergers américains offrent plus de coupons, de forfaits et de tarifs de groupes. Les deux régions auraient avantage à améliorer la publicité et les ventes personnalisées afin d'attirer plus de visiteurs.

Introduction

In response to changes in agriculture and the globalization of our food system (please see Darren Bardati's essay, "The Emergent Local Food System in the Eastern Townships" in this volume), small farms have diversified into agritourism to add income to their farm family's household (Hara and Naipaul, 2008). The United States Department of Agriculture's census of agriculture estimated that agritourism activities bring an average of US$24,200 in additional income to each participating farm (Newman, 2011). As farmers become more operationally efficient, there has been a gradual rise in the diversification of product offerings that can be directly attributed to the rise of interest in agritourism today. In order to promote a successful agribusiness, farmers must understand the needs of their target consumers and design a marketing strategy (i.e., Product, Price, Promotion, Place) that will appeal to them. This research paper examines the marketing strategies *implemented* by apple orchards and whether significant differences are found in Southern Quebec and Northern New York/Vermont, two of the largest apple growing regions in the world.

At its core, agritourism provides a dedicated opportunity to keep the family farm alive by creating new revenue streams and a way to keep the younger generation involved through creating new business roles and challenges (Eckert, 2004). Agritourism is growing as a niche rural travel market because it meets the needs of modern families. Visitors are nostalgic for a simpler time and want to escape the hustle of the city, connect with their cultural heritage, be with family in a natural environment, and enjoy a richer and authentic leisure experience (Ainley and Smale, 2010; Che et al, 2006). Agritourists comprise travelers who holiday (single or multi-day) to engage in such activities as visiting an entertainment farm, staying at a farm or guest ranch, participating in harvest operations, and/or picking fruit at a farm (Che et al, 2006). Visitors have the opportunity to work in the fields alongside real farmers and wade knee-deep in the sea with fishermen hauling in their nets. According to one survey (TAMS, 2007), 10.4% of adult American have participated in an agro-tourism activity while on an out-of-town, overnight trip. Going to an entertainment farm (4.9%), or a fruit-picking farm (4.6%) were the most popular activities, followed by dining at a farm (2.8%) and visiting a harvesting or other farm operation (1.2%). Whether it is product offerings such as corn maze, crop art, hay rides, or simply picking your own apples, farmers are becoming flexible in managing their roles of being both the primary producer of the products while providing supplementary services that are customized for the target market and service a niche that has been steadily growing and highly profitable.

Apple orchards have closely followed this agritourism trend and diversified their offerings. For example, Vergers Lafrance in Saint-Joseph-du-Lac, a family farm that started with eight or nine apple trees at the turn of the last century, now owns orchards with 12,000 fruit trees, comprising over twenty varieties, spread out over 100 acres (Demers, 2002). As apples were becoming less profitable due to the growing number of local orchards and foreign apples coming into the Quebec market, Vergers Lafrance had to diversify to remain profitable. They sold their apples to middlemen who distributed them to grocery stores, and opened a small stand where they sold apple products such as jelly, butter and jam. They expanded a few years later to include a variety of apple juice and cider recipes. The cider was so successful that it sold throughout the Société des alcools du Québec (SAQ). They offer 11 different apple-based alcoholic beverages. Furthermore, they opened a café to sell homemade pastry items, and plan on passing on a very successful agritourism operation to their sons.

The Apple Industry

Canada and the United States are among the largest apple producers in the world. While the United States has become one of the top 5 apple producers in the world with a farm gate value of US$2.7 billion each year (US Apple Association, 2014), Canada's apple production has been declining in recent years, to CDN$150.5 million (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2012).

In the United States, New York is the second largest apple producing state after Washington. The top ten apple varieties grown in the United States are: Red Delicious, Gala, Golden Delicious, Fuji, Granny Smith, McIntosh, Honeycrisp, Rome, Empire, and Cripps Pink. Vermont apple growers have been proactive in producing cider, apple sauce or provide customers a destination for agritourism.

In Canada, Ontario is the largest apple producing province, with a total marketed production of 126,623 metric tons of apples in 2010, followed by Quebec with 90,200 metric tons of apples. While Ontario's share of apples has decreased from 52% to 38% from 2001 to 2010, Quebec's share has increased from 15% to 27% in the same period. Quebec has a long history of apple production that can be traced back to the colonization period, with the most popular apple variety, McIntosh, being introduced in 1836 (Fédération des producteurs de pommes du Québec). The other major varieties grown in Quebec are Cortland, Spartan and Empire. The majority of Quebec apple production comes from the Eastern Townships, Montérégie and

Laurentides regions in southern Quebec and represents CDN$35.7 Million in farm gate value.

As consumers are becoming more educated about the benefits of eating fresh fruit, apple consumption in Canada has increased by 10% over the past 5 years. Consumers are also moving to new varieties of apples such as Honeycrisp, Ambrosia, Gala and Fuji that command a premium price compared to more traditional varieties.

According to an Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada report (2012), in addition to the forces of nature, Canadian apple growers are facing important challenges in an increasingly competitive environment. Market pressures include world oversupply, retailer consolidation, the rising value of Canadian currency, and greater foreign competition. However, it should be noted that the Canadian currency exchange has been variable since 2012, and has recently strongly depreciated. The growing consumer trend of "buy local" could potentially help Canadian apple growers regain some of their market share. The Washington State Apple Commission has promoted Washington apples through coordinated advertising efforts over several years. The estimated average return to advertising topped US$8.7 per dollar of advertising (Wilmot et al, 2008). Continuing selected promotional activities could increase revenue for growers if these activities could be carried out by voluntary, coordinated efforts. In addition, the shift to new varieties of apples opens up new opportunities for local apple growers. Therefore, a better understanding of marketing strategy in the agritourism industry for apple orchards could help foster sustainable economic development in these regions.

Other Agritourism Research in the Region

In an agritourism marketing study of maple sugarhouses in Quebec, Ontario, and New York/Vermont (Héroux et al, 2008), maple syrup producers were found to be more comfortable with the production side of the organization, largely ignoring the marketing needed for a business. Pricing of maple products is one of the most important differences found in the three regions. Quebec seems to have lower prices and offer more value to consumers in the form of a social event. The sugarhouse is part of a long-standing tradition in Quebec. When consumers go to the sugarhouse, they are not only there to buy products, but to enjoy a whole social experience involving a large meal of maple-related dishes with groups of relatives and friends. In New York and Vermont, there is no dining and/or social experience associated with the sugarhouse. It is merely a sales counter like an indoor farm stand. Most sugarhouses sell maple syrup and other maple-related products (e.g., maple candies, maple spreads, etc.)

using private labels. Most of the sugarhouses have established long relationships with many of their customers. This may help explain the relative lack of promotion in all three regions.

Purpose of this Study

The successful marketing strategy of apple orchards requires the identification of a target market and development of a marketing mix (product/service, place, price and promotion) that will best satisfy the needs of this target market. This research was conducted to investigate marketing strategies *implemented* by apple orchards and whether differences of significance are found in Southern Quebec and Northern New York/Vermont, among the largest apple growing regions in the world.

Methodology

This exploratory study, using 24 case studies, was undertaken in the contiguous regions of southwestern Quebec (Eastern Townships and Montérégie) and northern New York/Vermont. There is substantial economic integration and cross-border traffic between the two countries in this area, and the hospitality industry targets business and leisure travelers of both nationalities (Church and Héroux, 1999).

A census of the apple orchards in two communities in this cross-border region was included in this research. The online *Yellow Pages* directory for the United States and Canada was used to identify the sampling frame of apple orchards in the contiguous geographic regions along the border. The region under study was expanded until 24 establishments were identified, representing the regions as follows: 12 from Quebec and 12 from New York/Vermont. The typical apple orchard in this study was an independently owned and operated family business that directly controlled its marketing strategy.

Marketing strategy refers to the target market of the establishment and the marketing mix variables designed to attract these customers. The marketing mix variables are categorized according to the popular 4P framework (McCarthy and Perreault, 2000): Product; Place; Price; and Promotion. Three of these categories of variables are subdivided in this study to capture the breadth of the categories: Product consists of product variety variables and service-related variables; Place refers to the location of the establishment as well as store atmospherics; and Promotion includes advertising variables and personal selling variables. A more detailed marketing strategy evaluation grid was developed from the commonly accepted variables in the marketing strategy literature (McCarthy and Perreault, 2000; Kotler and Armstrong, 2013; Jain, 2010; Pride and Ferrell, 2014; Perreault et al, 2013, 2014; Lamb et al, 2012). These variables were also used in recent marketing strategy research (Astuti et al, 2014; Ataman et al, 2010; Dobrescu, 2012; Leonidou et al, 2013). The grid was used to collect detailed qualitative observational descriptions and quantitative data of the apple orchards' marketing strategy variables. The comparison framework therefore consists of two cultural/geographic regions examined according to seven marketing variable ratings. (See table 1).

Table 1: Summary Marketing Strategy Variables Evaluation Grid

Marketing Mix (4Ps)		
Product	*Product variety variables*	Breadth of product line, assortment of accompanying products, size variations, quality, private labels/brands, special features, overall evaluation. (6 variables, maximum score of 30)
	Service variables	Customer services, customized/ standardized, credit cards, empathy, reservations (computerization), hours of operation, guarantees, customer satisfaction (complaint handling), overall evaluation. (8 variables, maximum score of 40)
Place	*Location variables*	Primary/secondary road (visibility), site evaluation (nearness to target market), outside appearance, private/ public parking availability, detached building versus strip, general ease of access, overall evaluation. (6 variables, maximum score of 30)
	Establishment atmospherics	Interior layout (free form, grid, racetrack); atmospherics—scent, lighting, color, mirrors, music, noise, signage; fixtures; cleanliness; size of crowds; type of clientele; access to disabled; overall evaluation. (12 variables, maximum score of 60)

Price	*Pricing variables*	Relative high/low prices, competitive in region, group reductions, coupons/ rebates, bundle or value pricing (packages offered), variety of payment options, overall evaluation. (5 variables, maximum score of 25)
Promotion	*Advertising variables*	Newspapers, magazines, trade publications, television, radio, telemarketing, direct mail, internet, special promotions (sales, coupons, contests), outdoor ad and/or signage, advertising theme—testimonial, comparison, informative, humorous, etc., overall evaluation. (6 variables, maximum score of 30)
	Personal selling variables	Approaching the customers, helpfulness, presenting product/service, making the sale, knowledgeable, art of listening, verbal/non-verbal cues, general appearance of staff, overall evaluation. (8 variables, maximum score of 40)

Summary rating:
Overall marketing strategy evaluation: addition of the overall rating in the categories.

The observational research was conducted by international marketing students who were familiar with the marketing concepts. Observers received training on a variety of dimensions of the research process. They received a detailed explanation of each of the variables in the Marketing Strategy evaluation grid and how each variable is operationalized. They were shown how to find and approach their assigned apple orchards, how to record their qualitative observations, and how to determine a quantitative score (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being superior implementation) for each variable. For example, for breadth of product line, students would look at the assortment of products on the premises and make a judgment on the rating scale as to its appeal to consumers (5 would represent an outstanding assortment, beyond expectations; 3 would represent an average assortment usually found in such farm stores; and 1 would be the minimum one would expect).

The trainer and trainees performed a "walk-through" of the research process prior to visiting the apple orchards to ensure their understanding and consistent implementation of the data collection. Observation and listening were usually sufficient to gather information about each variable. For example, for the target market, they could look at license plates in the parking lot and see how many cars came from what state or province. They could tell what language, French or English, was spoken by the customers. They could ascertain, if they were repeat customers, if they appeared familiar with the establishment when they arrived, when they referred to past purchases, or when they were on first name basis with the staff. However, if some variables were difficult to observe, students were given guidelines for asking questions of the staff.

Twelve teams of three trained observers were assigned a pair of establishments to compare in the two regions. Each team spent four to five hours in each location to record detailed notes of how each marketing strategy variable was implemented. Then, the three observers had to discuss and come to an agreement on a score (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 representing superior implementation of the strategy) for each variable in an attempt to quantify the observational data. Since this process resulted in one rating for each variable, inter-judge reliability measures were not relevant. Each item within a variable category was weighted equally in this research. The data collection thus consisted of qualitative data, the recorded observations, and quantitative data, the assigned scores for each variable. This methodology was effectively applied in other rural tourism marketing contexts (Héroux, 2002; Héroux and Burns, 2000; Héroux and Csipak, 2001, 2005).

Findings

The findings are discussed below in terms of quantitative results and qualitative results. Table 2 presents the **quantitative results** of the scale ratings for each of the seven variable categories. Given the small number of cases, preliminary indicators of significance can be inferred; inspection of the table reveals that there are more similarities than differences in marketing strategy variables in the two regions.

Product Variety

At the majority of locations, there was a wide range of supplemental products and services offered to customers. Within the American orchards, this included four to five different types of apples, accompanying products such as apple cider, maple syrup, pies, quilts, jams, honey, candy, crafts, t-shirts, ornaments, wall hangers, mugs, hard apple cider and many baked goods. For Quebec orchards, there were similar products but higher quality, better brands and above average features. These included a petting zoo, picnic area, and live band for adults, pears grown and pear wine sold, recipes offered featuring cider, and testing packages for groups along with guided tours.

Table 2: Comparison of Quebec and New York/Vermont Apple Orchards on Marketing Strategy Variables Ratings

	Overall Sample		New York/ Vermont		Southern Quebec	
Product Variety	**Mean**	**St.Dev**	**Mean**	**St.Dev**	**Mean**	**St.Dev**
Breadth	4.28	0.90	4.27	1.00	4.30	0.82
Assortment	4.14	1.10	4.18	1.40	4.10	0.73
Size	3.61	1.35	3.72	1.27	3.50	1.50
Quality	4.33	0.73	4.18	0.87	4.50	0.52
Brands	3.85	1.35	3.72	1.42	4.00	1.33
Features	3.57	1.74	3.54	1.74	3.60	1.83
Service						
Services	4.09	0.88	3.90	1.04	4.30	0.67
Customization	3.57	1.20	3.54	1.12	3.60	1.34
Credit	3.80	1.50	4.09	1.44	3.50	1.58
Empathy	4.04	1.56	4.09	1.57	4.00	1.63
Reservation	2.57	1.56	2.18	1.25	3.00	1.82
Hours	3.52	1.36	3.63	1.36	3.40	1.42
Guarantees	4.00	1.54	4.27	1.34	3.70	1.76
Satifaction	4.71	0.56	4.54	0.68	4.90	0.31
Location						
Visibility	4.04	1.20	4.00	1.48	4.10	0.87
Site	3.80	1.20	3.45	1.50	4.20	0.63
Appearance	4.14	0.91	3.90	0.94	4.40	0.84
Parking	3.66	1.35	3.36	1.36	4.00	1.33
Building	3.09	1.60	2.90	1.70	3.30	1.56
Access	4.47	0.60	4.54	0.68	4.40	0.51
Establishment Design						
Layout	3.90	1.30	3.63	1.50	4.20	1.03
Scent	4.19	1.20	4.36	1.20	4.00	1.24
Light	4.04	1.07	4.00	1.18	4.10	0.99
Color	3.19	1.56	3.36	1.62	3.00	1.56
Music	2.00	1.30	2.00	1.26	2.00	1.41
Noise	2.28	1.23	2.27	1.10	2.30	1.41

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Signage	3.28	1.41	3.18	1.32	3.40	1.57
Fixtures	2.66	1.39	2.45	1.29	2.90	1.52
Clean	4.33	1.06	4.27	1.27	4.40	0.84
Crowd	3.14	1.27	2.90	1.30	3.40	1.26
Clientele	3.61	1.32	3.63	1.20	3.60	1.50
Disabled	3.47	1.69	3.36	1.74	3.60	1.71
Pricing						
HiLo Pricing	3.95	0.86	3.72	1.00	4.20	0.63
Competitive	3.71	1.41	4.18	1.25	3.20	1.47
Group Rate	2.00	1.41	2.36	1.62	1.60	1.07
Coupons	1.52	1.03	1.54	1.21	1.50	0.84
Bundle	2.38	1.39	2.63	1.50	2.10	1.28
Promotion						
Print	3.00	1.70	3.27	1.73	2.70	1.70
Broadcast	2.33	1.55	2.63	1.62	2.00	1.49
Other	2.14	1.55	1.90	1.30	2.40	1.83
Promos	2.09	1.48	2.45	1.75	1.70	1.05
Outdoor	2.71	1.67	2.72	1.55	2.70	1.88
Theme	2.42	1.56	2.36	1.56	2.50	1.64
Personal Selling						
Approach	4.09	1.22	3.63	1.43	4.60	0.69
Helpful	4.38	1.24	4.36	1.28	4.40	1.26
Present	3.90	1.13	4.00	1.18	3.80	1.13
Make Sale	3.00	1.61	2.90	1.70	3.10	1.59
Knowledge	4.33	1.06	4.45	0.82	4.20	1.31
Listening	3.71	1.41	3.81	1.53	3.60	1.34
Cues	2.90	1.60	2.90	1.70	2.90	1.59
Personal Appearance	4.28	0.84	4.18	0.87	4.40	0.84

Service

Because 80% of an orchard's total sales come from 20% of their visitors, it is important that brand loyalty is developed so that there will be repeat sales annually. Though this may be done by offering tours to visiting schools or offering internship opportunities to help build a relationship with the community, the greatest measurement of an orchards quality of service can be attributed to customer satisfaction and the empathy shown by the business owners. While analyzing the data, it was evident that a premium was placed on ensuring customers were satisfied by offering refunds for dissatisfaction, offering U-pick choice for those wanting to pick their own apples, and being very cordial/friendly when relating to customers and attending to their questions, comments and concerns. Also, in the American orchards where more people prefer paying with credit cards, machines were set up with minimal payment limits (such as $10) to facilitate a successful consumer transaction.

Location

Most apple orchards were either very visible from the primary road or had large signs directing tourists to those orchards located on secondary roads. Also, many of the sites were very near to their target markets or within driving distance of the consumers. For parking, most of the orchards had private dedicated spaces on their property or were located where enough public parking was available for patrons. Overall, both American and French-Canadian orchards were easily accessible for customers and very easy to find for visitors.

Establishment Design

Most of the apple orchards farm stands in both regions followed a free form design similar to what would be found in a boutique. In some instances, buildings were scattered in close proximity on the property. See Table 3.

The majority of the locations were overall very clean and inviting with varying crowd sizes observed due to the time of the visits and other mitigating factors such as the weather. However, a wide range of clientele demographics was observed, including senior citizens, families and students.

Table 3: Atmospheric Variables

Atmospheric variables	New York/ Vermont	Southern Quebec
Scent	Candles burning Food scent	Apple scent
Lighting	Bright or track lighting	Dim lighting
Music	None	None
Signage	Large visible signs in front	Large visible signs in front
Noise	People talking	Little to none

Pricing

Because agritourism is a service industry, owners and operators of apple orchards rely on the concept of relationship marketing - that is, building a steady customer base over time, not by daily sales but instead by letting the customers get to know you and count you as a friend. As such, many of the orchards in both regions tended to have low to medium pricing for all their products and services offered. Likewise, orchards offered discounts for group tours, and coupons in competitive areas to reward repeat buyers and to show appreciation for their business. More coupons, bundles and group rates were given by American orchards while Quebec orchards had better high/low pricing.

Promotion

Lack of promotion is the weakest element of apple orchards' marketing strategies in both regions. Some of the promotional activities that were adopted by orchards included local newspaper ads, radio, apple grower magazines, local magazine ads, business cards, word of mouth, road signage and a company website. It was rare, however, to see an orchard utilize many of these promotional methods simultaneously. Rather, the orchards chose to rely on word of mouth advertising or advertise in media they had previously used.

Personal Selling

Within the northeastern New York/Vermont apple orchards, students tended to be approached more readily by the employees than in similar situations at Quebec orchards. In spite of that, the Quebec orchards obtained a higher overall score for approach, helpfulness, and personal appearance while the New York/Vermont orchards were noted for their knowledge, listening and for presenting their products and services.

Implications and Conclusions

Both the northeastern New York/Vermont and Quebec orchards exhibited proficiency in fulfilling many aspects of the marketing mix (product variety, services provided, pricing, location, and establishment design). See Table 4. Each region, however, could develop and improve some aspects of their marketing strategies to more successfully meet the needs of their target market.

Table 4: Summary of Marketing Strategy Ratings

Marketing Strategy Variable Ratings	New York/ Vermont N=12 Mean*	%**	Southern Quebec N=12 Mean*	%**
Product Variety (30)	**24.16**	**80.5%**	23.33	77.8%
Services (40)	30.41	76.0%	30.22	75.6%
Location (30)	22.58	75.3%	**24.11**	**80.4%**
Establishment Design (60)	39.16	65.3%	**41.44**	**69.1%**
Pricing (25)	**14.50**	**58.0%**	12.33	49.3%
Promotion (30)	**15.50**	**51.7%**	13.66	45.5%
Personal Selling (40)	30.75	76.9%	30.44	76.1%
Overall Marketing Strategy	**177.06**	**69.4%**	**175.53**	**68.8%**

*Mean: Average of the sum of ratings for all variables in the category.

**%: The mean results are represented as a percentage of the maximum score that could be achieved for the variable category.

With respect to the Product variables, Quebec orchards provide a good benchmark for northeastern New York/Vermont orchards that offer a good product assortment, but could do more. They can work to increase the level and/or perception of the quality of complementary products they offer by improving the packaging and labeling of the products. In addition, they can expand the activities offered to extend (a) the length of visits, (b) the number of people in the visiting party, and (c) the number of visits per season, all of which can lead to higher sales. For example, most Quebec orchards permit visitors to pick their own apples, but only a few American orchards allow it. When people pick their own apples, they stay longer and tend to buy much more than if they purchase apples that have been already picked. Farmers who are concerned about damage to the trees and next years' apple production generally show first-timers how to pick the apples properly. Visitors are given to understand the importance and implications of picking the fruit properly and endeavor to do so. When facilities are available, offering kid-friendly activities such as a maze, animals in pens, a petting zoo, or rides through the orchard, can increase the number of return visits by families. For adults, providing apple-related cooking demonstrations and tastings as well as printed recipes can increase the quantity and variety of apples purchased since consumers find more uses for the fruit. This can be as simple, for example, as offering a tasting of ginger apple slices for snacks, jams and jellies, salad ingredients, or in cooked meals and baked goods. The number of people, length of visits, and repeat visits can also be increased by creating apple-based dining experiences, either by the orchard itself, or in a cooperative effort with a catering firm or local restaurant.

With respect to Service variables, both regions offer excellent services that lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty that ensures repeat sales. Quebec orchards could benefit from accepting more modes of payment, such as lower limits (e.g., $10) for use of credit cards to facilitate purchases. Both regions could expand educational tour opportunities from local elementary schools to older age groups such as high school cooking classes and senior centers, and use these events to generate free publicity in local media.

Place variables were very well implemented in both regions. It is important to always maintain clean and attractive facilities when dealing with food.

Pricing strategies were also very good in both regions. In northeastern New York/Vermont, price levels could be lowered to better meet expectations of visitors. Customers expect to pay less for apples when they go to the orchard than they would in grocery stores since they are providing the transportation and not the farmer. In Quebec, orchards could offer more sales promotions such as coupons, group rates, and bundle pricing to increase their sales.

In both regions, there was a definite need for increased Promotion as well as increased proficiency in personal selling tactics. This is a concern for the future sustainability of these orchards as agritourism destinations since the whole premise is predicated on customer service. In addition, by not utilizing promotion fully, owners and operators are not reaching out to new customers to grow their business. Most orchards use only one or two media outlets, relying principally on word-of-mouth and repeat customers. Since the cost of advertising is often the reason for low usage, they could increase the use of inexpensive media sources such as social media, website, and e-mail to reach their existing customers and expand their reach. An easy and inexpensive way to develop a private e-mail list is to have a guest book near the register and ask people to sign in and give their e-mail address to receive discounts and other offers by e-mail. A more effective approach involves having a weekly drawing for free apple products or basket with any purchase, with a given farmer simply providing printed slips of paper (with customers supplying their name and e-mail address), required to enter. This gives a reason to send weekly e-mails to the customer list during apple season informing them of this week's winner and to provide promotional incentives for customers to return (e.g., 10% off purchase if you bring this email with you, free gift with purchase of a certain dollar amount or more, cooking or baking demonstration, apple-related recipe, etc.). Quebec sales representatives could receive more training on how to better answer questions and how to showcase the products to make them more enticing. For example, farmers could provide their staff with descriptions of the taste and texture of different apple varieties for different consumer preferences, as is done in vineyards. They can provide more information on what type of apple is best for different uses (such as baking, salads, etc.). Northeastern New York/Vermont sales representatives could better approach the customers and offer to help, and have a neater farm-appropriate appearance when dealing with the public as opposed to working in the orchard.

This research found that the overall ratings of the marketing strategies of apple orchards in the two regions were very close. The results also highlight the need for improvement in promotion and personal selling initiatives in both regions to grow the agritourism opportunity for apple orchards.

This is consistent with previous comparative research in the rural hospitality industry in these two countries (Héroux, 2002; Héroux and Burns, 2000; and Héroux and Csipak, 2001, 2005), even when using a different methodology, such as surveys (Church and Héroux, 1999).

Given that festivals have the potential to generate substantial economic activity in a region, local chambers of commerce could get involved by coordinating cooperative advertising and promotion activities among apple producers and other hospitality businesses to provide “bundles of value” that would attract visitors from a wider radius. This would lead to increased spending in the region in the form of increased apple product sales, restaurants, accommodations and other economic activity that benefit the community.

This research has explored marketing strategies as they are currently applied in the apple grower industry in southern Quebec and northeastern New York/Vermont. More research is required to comprehensively assess the outcome of the marketing strategies in these regions in terms of sales volume and profitability of apple orchards that cater directly to consumers. Finally, based on the above stream of research, practical guides to marketing strategies for apple orchards and distributors could be developed to help apple growers who have production expertise but lack marketing knowledge to develop agritourism initiatives that could lead to sustainable economic development in the region (Adam 2004; Kuen et al, 2000).

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