

Preparing for Baby Boomers as an Agri-tourism Market

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Abstract

The tsunami of baby boomers has led to an increase in people over the age of 60 traveling and agri-tourism environments or settings. Coupled with this new trend, is an increase in the number of travelers with disabilities or mobility impairments, who have comfortably traveled domestically through accommodations, afforded through the Americans' with Disabilities Act. The advent of the agri-tourism industry now can utilize many of these accommodations expected by baby boomers. This paper addresses current issues and recommends strategies to intervene in order to meet the needs of the agri tourism market in the United States. Implications for curriculum development and continuing education are also discussed.

Keywords: Agri-tourism; Americans with Disabilities Act; Baby boomers; Travel; Hospitality industry

Preparing for the Boom: Baby Boomers and Beyond as a Tourism Market

The tsunami of baby boomers has led to an increase in people over the age of 60 traveling, and venturing to rural and agri-tourism environments or settings. According to the Bureau of the Census, we have more people over the age of 60 than at any time in history. Coupled with this new trend, is an increase in the number of travelers with disabilities or mobility impairments, who have comfortably traveled domestically through accommodations, afforded through the Americans' with Disabilities Act. According to the Administration on Aging, by the year 2030, we can expect that 30% of our population in the United States will be 65 or older. Baby boomers have more disposable income today than any previous generation, and expect to travel to unique sites, especially agri-based tourism. While baby boomers are living longer than people roughly 20 years their senior, they are not necessarily healthier. In addition, this group is more likely to be more obese than the previous generation of similar age, and have more incidences of diabetes, high blood pressure, emphysema or heart conditions [1]. These health care needs in tandem with increased disposable income will need to be considered by tourism operators when planning tours to meet the needs of this target group, especially when planning for people within the agri-tourism industry. This paper will address the needs of baby boomers and how the tourism and hospitality industries can prepare for this aging tsunami that will want to access agri-tourism opportunities, examines the tourism and travel industry from the lens of the agri-based host sites, and will discuss strategies to address the comfort and needs of this emerging consumer group.

Agri-tourism

Agri-tourism involves attracting paying visitors to farm tours, harvest festivals and hospitality services such as bed and breakfast, petting zoos and other attractions [2]. Agri-tourists can choose from a wide range of activities that include picking fruits and vegetables, riding horses, tasting honey, learning about wines, learning about and experiencing cheese making, or shopping in farm gift shops and enjoying hand crafted gifts. Agri-tourism has been increasing over the last ten year and is one of the fastest growing segments in the travel industry. Activities related to the agri-tourism industry include visits to working farms, ranches, wineries, and agricultural industries [3] and destinations offer a variety of entertainments, education, recreation,

outdoor adventures, shopping and dining experiences. The agri-tourism is growing by leaps and bounds because people want new experiences and the opportunity to escape from the stress of traffic jams etc., and "get back to nature." Parents aspire to have their children understand how food is grown, and that milk actually comes from cows and not cartons. Families enjoy a drive to the country and spending the day together, especially during these times [3]. Often these family experiences include a multi-generational group including parents, children and grand-parents.

The travel trends that support the growth of agri-tourism includes tours that are increasingly travelled by cars. Tourists are taking shorter trips and planning at the last minute. Travelers are looking for new experiences as part of the trip. Families want to strengthen their relationships by being together [2].

Agri-tourism while growing in popularity brings forward new challenges to the hospitality industry, especially those who want to promote their rural based sites. These challenges include equipping their sites for consumers who are advancing in age and consumers with mobility or health related challenges, who still want to remain vital and travel to such sites with their loved ones and families. The ruggedness of agri-tourism sites may be appropriate for a segment of the population, however increasingly, those with disposable income may have been catered to by provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act in order to adapt. Increasingly the community integration movement for people with disabilities has led to the building of strategies to include all in the community.

Background to disability and community integration

A century ago, the population of people 60 and older was barely 5 percent of the population [4]. People with disabilities were virtually hidden from society, and rarely were they found in agri-tourism

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settings, let alone hospitality and tourism settings. Advocates for people with disabilities have fought fiercely for the right to full personhood and participation in community. This advocacy effort led to the Independent Living Paradigm [5], which set the stage for a theoretical framework which pushed for independence for people with functional impairments through a restructure of the environment. Accessibility issues were posited to be a function of the environment, rather than with the person, and all people regardless of ability had the right to participate in social life.

The notions of people with disabilities hidden and protected from society is sharply contrasted with our social expectations today, where Baby Boomers and the 60+ population is growing and outpacing any other age group, and are active regardless of functional ability. This group also has disposable income for travel and hospitality, and has expectations of the travel industry. These expectations are also shaped by accommodations which have been designated through the Americans' with Disabilities Act (ADA) [4]. On a domestic front, consumers are comfortable with travel, especially travel to rural communities because they can rely on resources or accommodations to meet their needs which are guided by the ADA, such as wheelchair/scooter availability, curb cuts, accessible rooms, raised toilets, larger print menus, etc. These accommodations have shaped traveler's expectations and experiences domestically within urban and rural/agri-based tourism settings. It is common to see travelers with walkers, scooters, cans, oxygen, guide and support animals as well as companions who serve as attendant care, and these situations are growing within agri-based tourism settings.

What is disability?

Disability has been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a way that is considered normal for a human being". Disability can mean impaired, hearing, mobility, intelligence or mental health. Physical disability may mean the inability to work or move freely and may extend to the inability to perform normal movements in a timely manner at a reasonable level [6]. According to the European Commission [7] a physical disability often involves reduced mobility, and disabled people often survive with the use of wheelchairs, canes, crutches or other means of mobility [7]. Rodgers and Wiggins also have suggested that people with diabetes should fall into the category of people with physical disabilities since this condition can impact a patients' mobility.

The recent International Classification of Functioning (ICF) endorsed by the WHO has focused the source of impairment within the environment rather than the person, and has identified both barriers and facilitators to individual functioning within given environments. With this perspective in mind, the onus to provide an environment that enables people with mobility or activity limitations to function thus rests upon tour operators rather than the consumer. Hence, generalizing this to the agri-tourism industry, leads us to address specific accommodations which will be needed to enable people, regardless of functionality to thrive within agri-tourism settings.

A growing number of studies have examined the tourism industry and people with disabilities, to find that this industry is on the rise and the market segment dedicated to people with disabilities is also on the rise over the past decade. With this rise in the baby boomer traveler industry and the increase of market segment occupied by people with disabilities, it is imperative that we address adaptations to the agri-tourism industry through components of the Americans with Disabilities Act (PL101-336).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Although the ADA (PL 101-396) is comprised of five titles, three have a direct impact for people with disabilities. Transportation, public services and accommodations for sensory impairments are three specific arenas which are informed by Title's II, II and IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act. What role does this play for the hospitality/tourism industry as we move into agri-tourism settings? How do we need to prepare our hospitality and tourism workforce to meet these growing needs?

Strategies for Accommodations

In this section each title of the Americans with Disabilities Act are reviewed with the goal of providing some specific strategies for addressing ways to address the tourism industry and accommodate for people with disabilities, especially baby boomers with some type of functional impairment.

(i) Employment

Under Title I of ADA, people cannot be terminated on the basis of disability or impairment from their place of employment. Consequently, as employees age, or develop some functional impairment, we can expect that they may continue to be employed within hospitality and tourism related settings with some accommodations. It may not be uncommon to see people sitting in chairs or using scooters, as opposed to standing for long periods of time, or walking distances if they have some functional impairment. Thus we can expect to see people with disabilities and impairments working in hospitality and tourism settings domestically.

Given this culture, which is mandated by the law (ADA, PL 101-396) in the United States, consumers/baby boomers may expect to see diversity in employees and see people with functional impairments working abroad with accommodations. However, we cannot expect that domestic consumers would expect to see employees with disabilities working abroad in eco-tourism and tourism related settings. In turn, this may impact tour operators or people within the hospitality industry to be less adequately prepared to meet such guests who are visiting and who have functional impairments or disabilities.

(ii) Public services

Under Title II of the ADA, public services need to provide reasonable accommodations to clientele within publicly funded settings (transportation, bus, trains, flights etc.). People with mobility impairments or disabilities that impact their mobility on a domestic front have become accustomed to the opportunity to be served and participate fully in community life, despite their impairment, and these expectations are also transferred onto transportation modes. Baby boomers and consumer expect some of these same accommodations when traveling to agri tourism sites using US based tour operators and parent companies. Thus, it becomes important to be able to be aware of what types of accommodations people from a domestic front are accustomed to since they may carry these expectations with them when travelling both to agri-tourism sites.

Standards for architectural design have been established based upon federal legislation in the United States, and is monitored state by state in the United States. Agri-Tourism operators can use these standards to help with identifying if their own establishments meet these expectations. Some of these standards include entrances to establishments that are accessible, with a dignified entrance. Signs can also be installed at inaccessible entrances so that people with mobility

impairments are aware that these entrances are accessible. As much as possible, consider strategies which will promote the independence of individuals, such as a temporary ramp, so that a person can easily ambulate within that area.

(iii) Public accommodations

Through the ADA, the establishments providing accommodation to the public need to provide services which take into account the public's mobility and ability limitations. This will impact hotel rooms, food establishments, and public washrooms within these establishments. Hotel rooms with accommodations will include grab bars, a roll in shower and a shower chair within the bathroom, along with a hand held shower head. Hotel rooms will also include a lowered sink with levels to turn on the water at the sink unit, and can also be lowered to accommodate a wheelchair. Some of the toilets can include raised toilet seats and grab bars to help with raising/lowering oneself from the toilet seat. Entryways will also need to consider wheelchairs and adequate space to maneuver one's chair adequately. A person in a wheelchair needs 36 inches of clear width for forward movement and a five-foot diameter or T-shaped clear distance of 48 inches clear for a door swing between two doors of an entry vestibule [8].

Doorways and passages will also need pictograms or symbols to identify rest rooms, and braille characters should also be included. Doorways should include at least 32 inches clearances and doors should be opened easily [8]. Washroom stalls can accommodate for people with limited strength by opening with limited strengths.

Furnishings such as chairs and trash cans should be kept out of the area and not "clutter" the environment. Partitions should also be moved or removed so that they are not easily knocked down. Pathways between aisles in shops also need to be having adequate space between aisles for people with walkers, wheelchairs or scooters to be able to mobilize adequately.

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Door handles should not be higher than 48 inches and should be operable with a closed fist. Some strategies to accommodate for this could include lowering door handles, and replacing an inaccessible knob with a lever or loop handle [8]. One may also want to consider retrofitting a handle with an add-on level extension. Grab bars and handles inside showers along with a lavatory of at least 27 inches from the ground are recommended [9].

One additional accommodation which is expected within the United States is for the availability of personal to assist with shopping, banking and food service. These individuals would assist a person with a disability or mobility impairment to utilize all aspects of a public establishment, and reach for items on shelves too high for the patron or complete banking slips and transactions. Thus, this may be a consideration when building tour groups who may have invisible disabilities.

Once again, the public will expect this type of accommodation when working with American based tour operators or hotel chains both within ecotourism settings and traveling to rural settings within the United States. Accommodations, particularly within agri-based tourism settings will also enhance the market share within agri-tourism settings amongst this target group of baby-boomers.

(iv) Telecommunications

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 expects that communication be available to accommodate different communication needs (hearing and visual impairments). These expectations will include braille menus or larger print menus, closed captioning on television monitors and hearing or taped devices to relay information to consumers. In the event that travel occurs within agri-tourism settings, it will be critical to assure that some form of assistance be available to consumers to assure that people with sensory impairments have their needs met.

Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD) and emergency management systems also need to accommodate for these needs and boomers will expect these accommodations, whether they are on domestic soil, or working with domestic tour operators, and traveling internationally. Since these sensory needs have been accommodated domestically as a result of the Americans with Disabilities Act, it will also be important to assure that such needs are attended to, regardless of location for people. For example, the installation of amplifiers on telephones in guest rooms, and flashing lights which serve as warning signals are helpful to those who are hard-of-hearing [9-12].

Current Issues for Boomers and Beyond within the Tourism Industry

In light of the Americans with Disabilities Act, there are a number of issues which need to be examined when preparing for baby boomers as they gravitate to the agri-tourism industry. These include mobility, accessibility, meals, accommodations, interpreter services and stamina. In this section, we will visit a number of issues to consider when preparing for agri-tourism excursion. Although many of these may seem obvious, they may not necessarily be obvious and clear when working with sites outside of our domestic culture, or within agri-tourism ventures.

Mobility

With respect to one's mobility, it is important to consider how comfortably can a patron walk on an uneven surface? Often agri-tourism environments include opportunities to be "native" and do not include pristine surfaces to accommodate the mobility impaired. Pebbles or uneven rocky surfaces may cause instability for people with gait issues. Thus, walking tours and parks may need to take these issues into consideration and consider the context of accessibility. In addition to the lack of even surfaces, tours and tour operators may also need to consider how to accommodate for mobility devices such as walkers, wheelchairs and scooters.

The practice of curb cuts also improves accessibility and mobility. How can curb cuts and lack of curb cuts affect mobility? This is something that also needs to be considered when working within an agri-tourism environment. Surfaces which do not accommodate for wheelchairs can be problematic; these routes should be considered which will allow for people to easily mobilize themselves.

Accessibility

In line with mobility, accessibility also plays a role with ensuring that the boomer consumer will be comfortable with a tour within rural and agri-based settings. Tour operators need to consider issues such as aisles within souvenir shops and cottage industries – are they wide enough to accommodate mobility devices? Other issues to consider are as follows:

- How do we accommodate people with visual and hearing impairments?
- How accessible are routes that are walking routes for people needing power assist mobile devices? Is there an opportunity for a charging station in order to charge one's power device?
- Can people easily mobilize themselves in and out of chairs for meals or relaxation? Often consumers with severe arthritis need arms of chairs to help push them up when seated. This is something that requires consideration, and arm chairs should supplement benches, stools or other sitting options.

Meals

Meals are another area which in the current tourism climate which requires address. This includes such areas like planning for meals for people who are diabetic, gluten free diets, high protein diets and the need for hydration. Some considerations for tour operators include:

- Are meals available to meet the needs and range of dietary restrictions (diabetics, heart smart, low carb and/or gluten free)?
- Are meals served by serving personnel or buffet style? If buffet style, can the individual easily mobilize themselves to get food? If not, is someone available to assist?
- Are meals easily ordered off the menu?
- Is large print available for sight restricted people?
- Is there a plan for snacks and nutritional breaks at reasonable intervals during tours?
- Are hydration resources available (cold water on a routine basis, despite location).

Although many of these areas may seem obvious, they are not necessarily considerations in locations that are agri-based, and should be thought through as US tour operators build tours in agri-based settings.

Accommodations

Although the concept of accommodations has been discussed within the segment of the ADA earlier within this paper, it is important to note that some very specific areas related to accommodations should be considered by tour operators interested in pursuing agri-tourism opportunities. These include the following:

- Do accommodations allow for grab bars, accessible washrooms, raised toilet seats, etc.
- Are showers and all bathing facilities accessible?
- Are the chairs equipped with arms to assist an individual to help themselves up independently?
- Are there opportunities for TDD relay devices that will accommodate the individual to hear the fire alarm, telephone, door knocks or door bells?

Interpreter services

Interpreter services, although often times appear obvious, are often a neglected entity. Such services should be available for hearing challenges, visual impairments, language differences, cultural differences, regional and cuisine differences. Although interpreter services for hearing and visual impairments seems like something that should clearly a need to be considered, the average tour operator does not consider the importance of addressing cultural, languages and cuisine differences, particularly within agri-based tourism settings.

Cultural differences may be an essential consideration, because in some cultures, the concept of ability differences could invoke stigma, or disdain. If not easily understood within the destination site, natives from the destination site may make the consumer visiting feel like they are "on display" through staring, picture taking and rude advances. The discomfort that a patron may feel through this type of interaction can be easily avoided if patrons are prepared ahead of time with some education about the norms and expectations of the culture they are visiting. The same may hold true for expectations around social graces and local cuisine.

Stamina

One would be remiss if we did not discuss the importance of stamina and consideration of stamina when working with people who have disabilities or mobility impairments. A full day of activity without rest breaks may not be realistic for the boomer with some health challenges. Energy levels may vary among patrons thus, it may be helpful to offer alternatives to activities such as rest breaks, or opportunities for movies/lectures, which those with higher stamina levels go exploring or on walking excursions. In light of varying stamina levels, tour operators should consider how long one is expected to endure or be active in any given day. Another consideration are tours with early rising and movements may be a burden to those with reduced energy levels. Assistance with luggage and packages is also a consideration for people with compromised stamina or mobility levels.

Other considerations

Baby boomers and their generational cohort has more disposable income than previous generations. Culturally, the boomer generation has grown up with the consumer expectation and sophisticated mindset, thus, these expectations color what is expected when utilizing tourism and hospitality resources. Tourism operators, particularly within the agri-tourism market will need to take these cultural expectations into consideration when planning agri-tours for this specific market.

Strategies for intervention

Overall, one cannot stress enough the importance of accommodation when planning for agri-tourism and the baby boomer market. Accommodate, accommodate, accommodate should be the mantra for tourism operators interested in working with this demographic. In addition to the notion of accommodation, agri-tourism operators should consider intervention strategies which will facilitate participants across the life span. Hence, grandparents may want to take their grandchildren on tours or family vacations in settings that are more close to nature, or take their family on such vacations. In these situations, you may need to consider accommodation and planning for people across at least three generations. In such situations, incorporate alternative activities to adapt to stamina and energy levels for young, middle aged and young/old consumers [13-20].

People who need accommodations due to mobility restrictions,

health issues or disabilities easily access information about accessibility through a host of sources. These sources include social media (Facebook, the internet, Twitter and websites) Automobile Association vendors and travel agencies, Centers for Independent Living, Elderhostel programs, Advocacy organizations and via word of mouth. Most advertisement will also include a “stamp of approval” to denote that the site is accessible for people with a host of mobility impairments. For tour operators, new to servicing and marketing to this target group, one may be surprised at the traffic that these sites/resources provide, especially as non-commercial advertising.

Intervention for tourism operators and the travel/hospitality industry may also be critical as more demand for agri-tourism sites evolves. This type of intervention for the travel/tourism/hospitality industry would include continuing education offerings through local academic institutions, or as pre-conference workshops. Trade associations may also target this topic for seminars or continuing education offerings for their members as well. Handbooks or resource guides to include best practice models would also help promote accessibility for agri-tourism destinations and tourism/hospitality professionals.

Lastly, it may be helpful to consider a needs assessment of patrons to help identify accommodation needs and needs for people with multiple needs due to mobility limitations and disability within agri-tourism settings. Offering patrons a small discount on their destination vacation in return for feedback can be a win-win situation for both tour operator and consumer, and will ensure that the consumer feels their voice is heard while tour operator receives valuable input to help plan for a vacation which is more user-friendly.

Conclusions

Based upon this series of issues discussed in this paper, there are a range of needs and accommodations that a growing older population will need when considering travel in agri-tourism or tourism/hospitality on a domestic front. In order to accommodate this growing market, new strategies will have to be considered. Increasingly as baby boomers prepare for retirement or the use of their disposable income, the tourism industry will need to adjust and meet their demands. The end result will include adjusting the way we conduct our business and work with this specific target group.

In light of this new and burgeoning market, preparation for tourism/hospitality professionals will also be necessary through training programs and continuing education efforts. Academic institutions such as community colleges and post-secondary institutions can help with addressing this niche by offering continuing education credits for course work, webinars or short courses which addresses issues and strategies to meet the needs of the agri-tourism market and the baby boomer consumer. The demand for these services will only continue to grow in the future, and addressing these educational and dearth of literacy oriented resources can only help in preparing our future workforce adequately.

Academic preparation can be integrated at several levels to be certain that we have begun to acquaint our workforce about the needs of baby boomers interested in agri-tourism opportunities. Workforce can include student preparation within tourism and hospitality coursework, continuing education and certificate coursework for seasoned tourism and hospitality personal, and educators attending conferences.

Implications for domestic tourism

The rise of travelers with accommodation needs on an agri-

tourism front may challenge the tourism industry in a variety of ways. These include the need for accessible tourism sites and lodging/accommodations. The pace of visits may also need to be adjusted to accommodate the stamina levels of a growing older population. On a domestic front, tourism/hospitality professionals can benefit from best practices on a European front, where some of these issues have been tackled and addressed by the community of people with disabilities. In Europe, it is estimated that 10% of the population has a disability, and thus, accessibility within the tourism is a right, rather than a privilege or commodity.

Strategies for accommodations

A series of accommodations and adaptations are addressed in this section of the paper. These will range from simple adaptations such as raised chairs and large print menus to more elaborate adaptations such as headsets with recorded tours for hearing impaired or lefts/scooters for people who are mobility impaired. These are only a fraction of the range of types of accommodations to be considered.

Implications for training the hospitality and tourism workforce

The baby boomer tsunami which will become our growing market for agri-tourism travel will bring about new expectations for the hospitality and tourism industry. These expectations will lead to the need to train our hospitality and tourism workforce about the needs of those growing older adult population and the needs of people with mobility impairments and disabilities. All too often we think about the consumer market as being gender, ethnically or socio-economically driven, however we fail to consider the importance of addressing the needs of a growing market with specific mobility or sensory needs. In addition, the building codes in developing and rural communities are very different than building codes in urban arenas. This reality will also push curricular and workforce development to meet the challenges of this market and to be prepared to meet the needs this trend of consumers will bring. Tourism/hospitality professionals will need preparation in disability awareness, travel accommodations, dealing with stereotypes, and educating tourism operators/hospitality establishments in rural and agri-tourism settings about addressing boomer needs. This paper has attempted to begin to provide some guidelines for the agri-tourism industry in this regard.

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