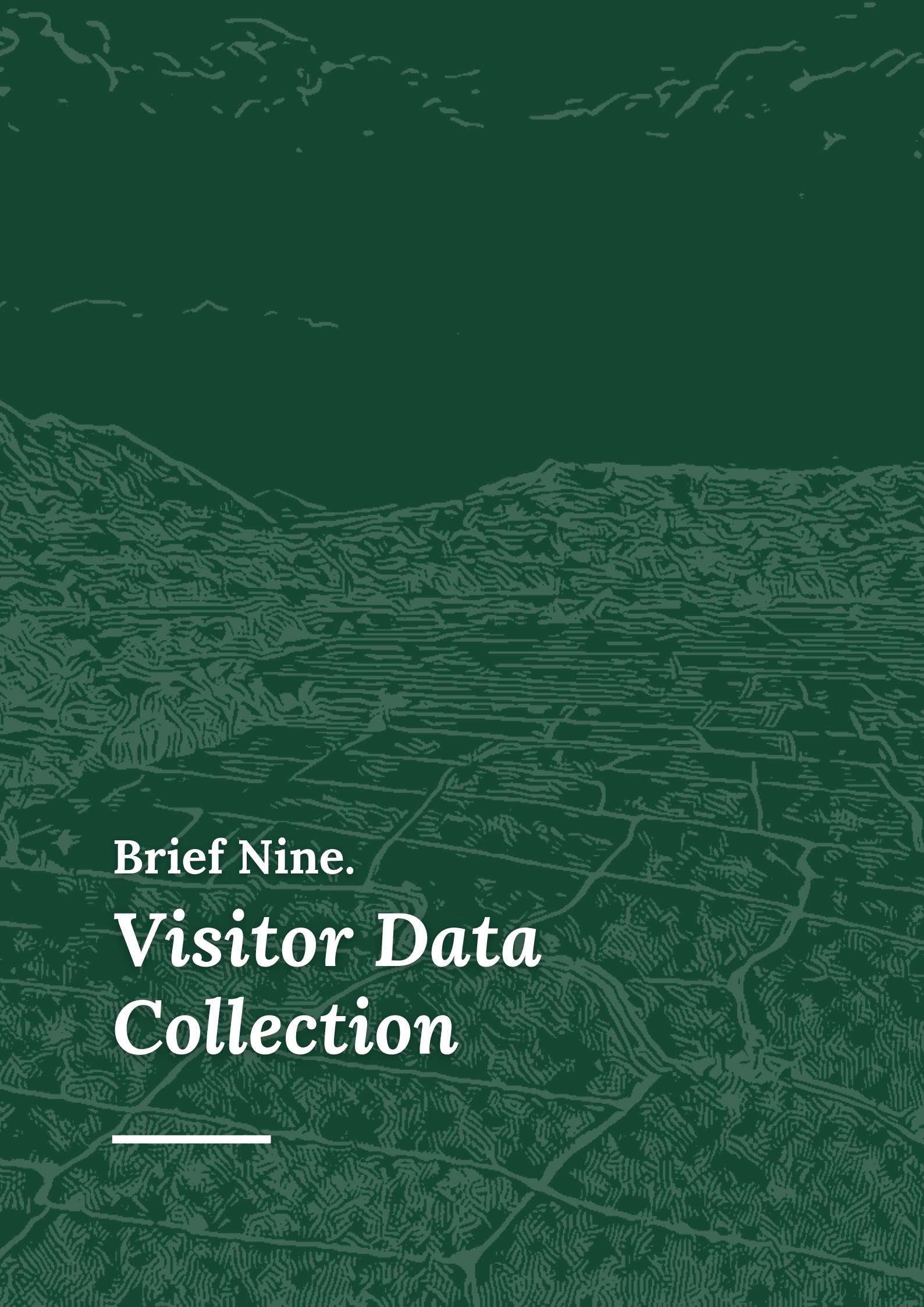




Brief Nine.

Visitor Data Collection

9. Visitor Data Collection

The previous brief about marketing agritourism discussed the need for agriculture-literate marketing expertise that helps farmers direct their limited resources in the most effective way. The reality is that this expertise may not yet exist: research on US agritourism customers is limited, and farms lack the capacity to collect and analyze their own customer data. This brief summarizes the current picture of farm-based visitor data and recommend first steps for building this necessary expertise.

We began this inquiry by asking the ten farms we interviewed how, if at all, they collected data on their visitors. Just one out of ten was engaged in purposeful visitor data tracking and analysis—a nonprofit educational farm that was driven to collect data about the people they served because it was “vital for us to get more funding.” Many farmers felt they knew their visitors by interacting with them, and one who hosted farmstays remarked, “well, I sit at the dinner table with them.” Some farms did collect data by default because their activities required pre-registration, but they did not have time to analyze the data: “I have people register on the website, so I think there's the address and everything in there....so it's data in in in, but we're not really evaluating the data.”

Though nine out of ten farmers did not collect and analyze visitor data, many saw opportunities for how data could help them target marketing and outreach campaigns and inform business decisions.

“The agritourism is growing. It's slow, and it'll take us a while... before we get to a profitable position. But I believe we can get there if we have tools like data collection to be able to know what areas we need to work on, what populations are coming in, you know, where's our best market, that sort of stuff. And then building marketing materials to be able to reach that. I think those are the kind of things that we really need to be able to get to that level.”

Interviewee



“Data, boy, I wish we [collected it]. We wanted to do, have people sign up, give us their emails and those kinds of things... what I thought we could do is have these young people with clipboards and a questionnaire or survey... get [the pick-your-own customers] when they're kind of just getting ready to leave or something.”

Interviewee



"I would like to have, like, maybe if there's something that's proven, like... if I would like to do the [email] blast... what would be... the best timing."

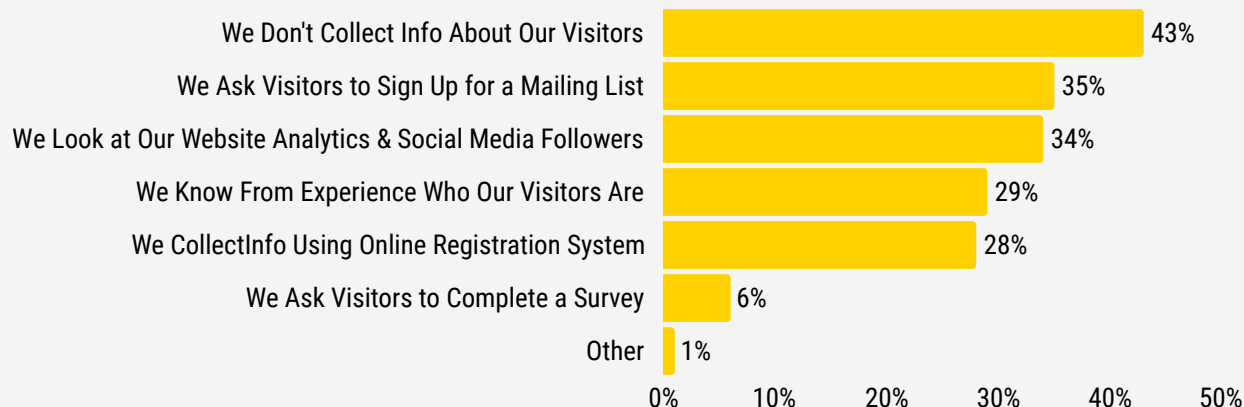
Interviewee



These discussions informed the survey question about visitor data collection (Figure 12). Forty-three percent of respondents stated that they did not collect data about their visitors. Among those who did, the most popular strategy was to ask visitors to sign up for a mailing list (35%), followed by looking at website analytics and social media followers (34%). The next stage of analysis sorted farms into two buckets: those engaged in

some form of active data collection (survey, mailing list, point of sale or registration system, and selected write-in responses) and those who either did not collect data at all or only did so passively (knowing from experience who their visitors are, looking at analytics and followers). We found that 49% of respondents were engaged in some form of active data collection, and the remaining 51% were not. Yet interview findings suggest that even if half of farmers are collecting some kind of data, they may not have the bandwidth to analyze those data and use them to inform marketing decisions.

Figure 12. Visitor Data Collection



N = 1,031

Note. Other responses included: guest books or other physical records; online reviews; and other tech analytics ("wifi;" "geofencing").

Recommendations

Farmers need actionable information on how to reach and retain agritourism customers. The field of US agritourism research likewise lacks robust data on the demand side of agritourism (Santeramo & Barbieri, 2017). Together, these two gaps offer a ripe opportunity for applied research that fills a gap in the literature and benefits farmers. Like with farm finances (**Brief #5**), we recommend state and regional research projects that partner with

farms engaged in varied agritourism activities to collect and analyze visitor data and produce recommendations for where farmers should focus their marketing efforts.

The appropriate methods will vary depending on the type of agritourism. Some activities, like farmstays, classes, and tours, require advance registration. In these cases, the registration form can be adjusted to ask questions related to marketing (i.e., “how did you hear about us?”) Some farms may have existing registration data ready for analysis, like the interviewee who stated “we’re collecting data but I’m not having the time to put it all together in an Excel and evaluate.” For pick-your-own operations and other agritourism farms with large volumes of walk-up visitors, data collection will be more intensive, requiring “people with clipboards and a questionnaire or survey,” as a farmer suggested above. These efforts are necessary to create the agritourism-focused marketing expertise we called for in **Brief #8: Marketing Agritourism.**



Photo Courtesy of Liberty Hill Farm