



May 2021

A Customer Survey of U-Pick Berry Farms in the Rochester Region

Ya-Ling Chen and Nicholas Pitas

Department of Recreation, Therapeutic Recreation & Tourism, SUNY Brockport
with Jarmila Haseler, Cornell Cooperative Extension – Monroe County and
Kristen Park, Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell

People's interest in shopping locally has been steadily increasing. Many visit farmers' markets or sign up for community supported agriculture. Consumers know that shopping locally keeps small businesses alive and communities strong.

The shift toward buying local heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some people worried about germs on their produce and looked for more direct ways to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. This led many to their local U-Pick farms. Others came for recreation after being cooped up in their homes for months. This surge of customers resulted in revenue increases for some farmers, in some cases up to 75%. The U-Pick visitors pay not only for the harvest, which is often cheaper than market price, but for an on-farm experience.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County in collaboration with Department of Recreation, Therapeutic Recreation & Tourism, SUNY Brockport, conducted a study funded by the Genesee Valley Regional Market Authority. The customer survey was developed by the researchers Ya-Ling Chen, Ph.D. and Nick Pitas, Ph.D. of SUNY Brockport. The survey data collection was conducted by the Cornell Cooperative Extension – Monroe at four farms during blueberry and raspberry picking season in Monroe County and its vicinity.

The study collected data from four farms during blueberry and raspberry picking season. While we cannot assume that the results apply to all farms, the study is valuable and uses a market analysis tool that concisely illustrates the study's findings.

Customers of four berry u-pick farms completed surveys during July and August 2020. The survey respondents were: mostly female (72.3%), Caucasian (88.2%), and residents of

Monroe County, NY (83.6%). In addition, their average age was 50.22 years-old and 44.9% of them have a graduate or professional degree.

Consumers were asked to rate the importance of several u-pick characteristics, or service factors, as well as the farm performance of these factors. The thought being, farms should pay attention to those characteristics that are important, and, in addition, need to prioritize those important characteristics that were rated below average.

The table below displays the service factors and their mean level of importance. Next to the importance, it displays the mean farm performance and then the difference between performance and importance. In every factor, the farms' performance was rated greater than the importance.

Table 1. Importance and Performance of U-Pick Farm Service Factors, *rated on a scale of 1 to 5*

Farm service factors	Mean importance	Mean farm performance
Quality of U-Pick fruit	4.59	4.67
Taste of U-Pick fruit	4.55	4.68
Helpfulness of staff	4.12	4.74
Friendliness of staff	4.10	4.78
Ease of checkout process	4.07	4.75
Cleanliness of farm	4.02	4.55
Availability of desired berry variety	3.95	4.33
Ease of parking	3.93	4.72
Pandemic related safety measures	3.92	4.51
Ease of finding the farm	3.77	4.67
Price of U-Pick fruit	3.67	4.21
Information to plan your visit	3.66	4.34
Location of farm	3.63	4.54
Information upon entry	3.45	4.25
Restroom onsite	3.07	3.71
Forms of payment accepted	2.97	3.90
Handicap accessibility	2.82	3.68
Food or drink for purchase	1.94	3.35

If a farm seems to be doing well and performing at rates better than importance, how can a farm decide what factors need better management? It is easier to see the gaps between importance and quality of performance with a figure graphing the "importance-performance" matrix (Figure 1) of the scores. In Figure 1, the red lines lie on the mean scores for each axis – the mean of all service factors and the mean of all performance. The factors in the lower right

quadrant are of "lower importance" but are of "higher performance". The farms probably do not need to focus on improving their performance of these factors.

The lower left quadrant contains those factors that are of low importance but also were not performed up to the mean or standard. Farms need to be cautious in evaluating each of the factors falling in this quadrant. For example, although restrooms, payment options, and handicapped accessibility were not important to those customers filling out the survey, the farm could be missing valuable customers to whom accessibility, payment options, and restrooms ARE a concern.

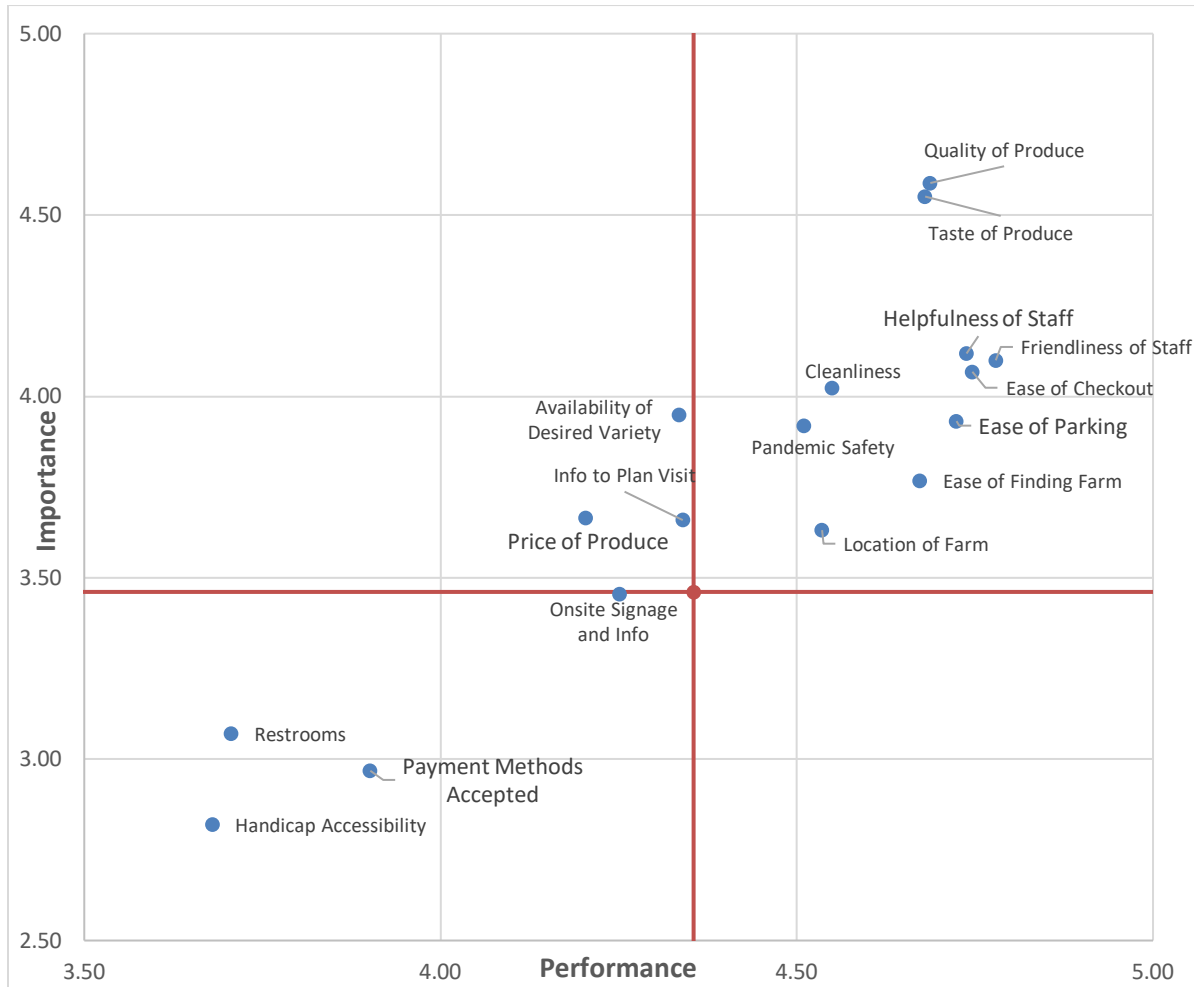
The upper right quadrant, labeled as "keep up the good work" quadrant by the researchers, is filled with many service factors that are important to customers and that the farms are performing well.

The researchers recognize that the farms should ensure high performance in these service factors that are highly important to consumers. Two factors are sidling toward the red line of the performance mean. Fruit quality and taste in particular are the leading items of importance to customers, but their performance is not as high as some of the other service factors, and farms may want to manage these factors closely.

The upper left quadrant, the quadrant for traits that are important but not performed up to the average or standard, is almost empty in this diagram. To address the factor "availability of desired fruit variety," the researchers recommend that farms be more effective with their communications, such as maintaining their website, social media, answering machine recording, and signage about what is available/not available to "avoid disappointment when visitors arrive." They noted that, "Several comments from visitors at multiple farms suggested that they had arrived under the impression that a specific type of fruit would be available, only to find it had already passed its season or had been picked over."

"Price" and "availability of information to plan visit" are the other two factors that are in the upper left quadrant that may need to be managed more carefully. Better information and up-to-date information about the farm needs to be managed across all forms of communication over all platforms, such as website, social media, etc. The researchers also suggest various pricing options such as bulk discounts or early bird differential pricing.

Figure 1. Importance-Performance Matrix



Click for the [full report](#). Click for more details about the [project](#) and its goals.

“Smart Marketing” is a marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and for placement in local media. It reviews elements critical to successful marketing in the food and agricultural industry. Please cite or acknowledge when using this material.