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## A PERSPECTIVE ON COMMERCIAL RECREATION

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to provide some perspective about the commercial recreation field through the conducting of a national survey of organizations involved in the field. Results give an indication about major problems facing the field as well as some thoughts about developmental aspects.

## A PERSPECTIVE ON COMMERCIAL RECREATION

### INTRODUCTION

In an effort to obtain a better understanding about professionals and their thoughts on the problems and future of the field, a nationwide survey was conducted to obtain information about issues. The primary focus was to identify those elements that will make the field more profitable as well as have a greater impact upon the participants in terms of social outcomes. The critical question is the future of the industry and how best to use the talents of professionals to help to better achieve organizational goals.

### METHODOLOGY

An open-ended questionnaire was sent to all organizations listed in the Commercial Recreation text by Arlen Epperson. Many of the names and addresses had to be updated but the text served as a starting point for individuals involved in the commercial sector. The organizational route was used in order to obtain a diversity of opinion on issues and form a comprehensive model. Each of the organizations was contacted and sent ten questionnaires. The director of the organization was asked to distribute at random the questionnaires to organizational members and return them at their earliest convenience. The cover letter was based on a professional appeal. Sending the results of the survey was also used as a positive incentive to increase the return rate.

Several of the organizations (16%) returned the questionnaires indicating that their organization was not directly involved in any type of leisure service. This, in itself, is an indication of definitional problems when agencies who are directly involved do not see themselves as part of the leisure industry. The response rate was 46 percent. A comparison was made between respondents and non-respondents on the basis of organizational type. There were not any significant differences between respondents and non-respondents. Data were analyzed by percentage distributions. Only findings with a distribution of greater than 20% were reported.

### RESULTS

Results of the survey will be analyzed by question type. The first question on the developed instrument was: Could you please provide a brief description of your current job task. The followings are one-word descriptions that will give an indication about the type of individuals and their tasks who responded to the questionnaire: executive directors or administrators, investment or industrial developers, program administrators or curators, personnel specialists, marketing specialists, sales specialists, communication specialists, support staff, and maintenance professionals. Over 60 percent of the respondents were program administrators.

The next series of questions was to find information about job preparation and educational background. The first question was: Could you provide a brief description of your preparation for your current job. The response to this particular question was 85 percent on-the-job trainings. These statements were followed in many cases by statements that they had to work their way through the ranks to gain their current position. The next series of questions related to years of experience and the two greatest categories identified were: 4-6 and 10-12 years. The next series of questions was about Bachelor's and Associate's degrees, the type, and the year. The one degree that was listed the most was the Bachelor's degree in Business with less than five years since the degree had been conferred. There were no other consistent trends and some of the other types of degrees listed were: Music Education, Journalism, Zoology, Physical Education, and Library Science. Eleven percent had graduate degrees and 46 % had B.S. degrees and 4% had Associate degrees. The other individuals had worked themselves into their current position through experience or on-the-job trainings.

The next series of questions was designed to obtain information about current satisfaction with their present position and the characteristics of the job that most or least satisfied them. Only 4% of the sample was currently dissatisfied with their present position. In terms of positive characteristics of the position, the most frequent listed element of the job was: the challenge of working with people and job advancement. Other frequently listed responses were: job is different every day, amiable attitudes, motivating others, casual atmosphere of work environment, sports orientation, opportunity to attend activities, challenge of programming, involvement of the participants, control over job position, long-range planning, ability to see results of work. The aspects of the job that provide the least satisfaction were: amount of starting pay and having to deal with budgetary problems. Some of the other more frequently listed characteristics were: more than 8 hours of work a day, inter-departmental problems, job too political, paper work, attitude of the public, professional level of peers, no money to do job right, repetition of job assignment, unable to use knowledge obtained in school, and public demand.

The next series of questions were composed of two parts about the value of a business background and the questions were: 1) If you have a business background, has it helped you perform your job better? If so, how? and 2) If you do not have a business background, would it have helped you to better perform your job task? If so, how? Only 4% of those with business backgrounds indicated that it was not a help. Of those making positive statements, the most frequent listed responses were: the administrative aspect of the job, job 85 % business skills, communication and management skills, budgeting skills, and learning how to deal with people in the business world. The three most listed responses from individuals who did not have a business background were: budgeting, funding, and organizational skills. Of those not having a business background, over 65 % of the sample indicated that it was extremely important to the development of these job competencies. Those with the business background related communication skills in their explanations and those without the business background identified financial competencies in their explanations.

The next series of questions was related to having a recreation and leisure background and its relation to job performance. The following question was asked: 1) If you had a recreation and leisure background, has it helped you perform your job better? If so, how? and 2) If you did not have a recreation and leisure background, would it have helped you better to perform your job task. If so, how? The three primary skills listed for those who have a recreation and leisure background were: how to deal and relate with people, knowing how to program for a leisure setting, and appreciation for the world of practice. For those who did not have a recreation and leisure background, the two most common responses were:

easier to answer questions and how better to market your program. The basic explanation for those who had a recreation and leisure background focused on the ability to provide perspective. For those that did not have a recreation and leisure background the focus was on how to better understand the audience.

The next question was: What is the future of the leisure industry? About half of the sample answered this positively and saw growth. The other half answered it negatively and saw a decline. The most common explanations for the positive or negative responses were: competition for the entertainment dollar, leadership ability, increased business because of loss of services from the public sector, lack of professionalism, corporate fitness open, inflation bad, economic impact, expansion expensive, and growth potential good.

The next question asked the respondent to identify the major problems facing the commercial recreation institution in the next five and ten year periods. Some of the most common responses foreseeing problems in a five-year framework were: fluctuation in population dynamics, financing, saturation of the industry, people moving South, economic conditions, zero population growth, attitudes of the people toward economic conditions, professional level of staff, low government support, utility costs, choice of activities, cost of gas, limited income, and limited growth potential. There was no distinction made between five and ten years and most of the same responses that were listed at five year were listed at ten-year interval. The only one that was listed in the ten-year interval and not the five-year was that leisure is a luxury, not a necessity.

The last question in the series was: What are the solutions to the current problems? The followings were more common solutions given: better management, need new marketing emphasis, need to emphasize quality as well as numbers, employment skills, education program to change people's attitudes to be willing to pay for services, program justification, finance and budgeting skills, have more opportunities for alternatives, better long-range planning, reinvesting profits, employ more senior citizens and less college students, and energy conservation.

#### CONCLUSION

Results suggest that ideas about the leisure industry are fragmented. Each interest has isolated itself and developed its own philosophy as well as its own program style. Interests are defended and barriers established. The leisure disciplines in this context may be a factor which may help these various parts understand the common base of the leisure science. Leisure preparation programs must undergo drastic change to include business skills so that the professional is in a better position to integrate business functions in relation to leisure trends. The common theme was there needs to be a marriage between leisure, that is programming skills, and the business institution. The mandate is clear but the primary question is, "where does responsibility for improvement belong?" Is it with the industry or is it with the educational program?

Results indicate those that have a dual background in both fields have advanced more rapidly, been happier with their employment, and have an overall better understanding of the profession and its operation. This type of interdisciplinary approach is needed to weld a group of professionals together who can significantly increase the quality of the profession, especially that is going to be demanded in the future with the current state of the economy. The primary question is quality of the program as well as innovative approaches to fulfill needs in a limited resource economy.

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