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THE SOPHISTICATED, DISCERNING RECREATION CUSTOMER

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ABSTRACT

Higher standards of enjoyment and expectation are being established by more sophisticated, discerning recreation customers. Better market "targeting" and a greater concern for improved service must be recognized by recreation enterprises and the recreation/tourism industry if they are going to survive and prosper in the next two decades, like they have prospered in the past two decades.

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It is interesting to note the transition which has occurred within the recreation industry during the past two decades and at the same time to look to the future and try to predict the direction now being set. During this span of time it is apparent that the industry has either matured or is beginning to mature. The economic and sociological forces that work together in demanding a high quality recreation experience will ultimately be reflected to a higher degree in the operating methods of the industry. Many of these demands are necessary and desirable. This industry has seen very rapid growth over the last two decades as evidenced by the investments which have taken place in projects both large and small throughout the country.

During this period the recreation customer has developed into a whole new breed. A highly sophisticated, discerning customer at times (perhaps not so sophisticated at other times), but with desires and demands that have literally revolutionized and pushed the recreation world into its present state. They are no longer content with the hardy outdoor life, in many cases, but want quality service and comfort, neither of which is inexpensive to provide.

This has resulted in drastic changes in operating methods of many recreation businesses. The recreation industry probably through its own creativeness, has glamorized many types of recreation activities, focusing on the excitement, thrill, adventure and outdoor experience, all contributing to the expectation of the customer. (1)

During these expanding years there has been an emergence of the giants in the industry who have changed recreation into big business. And conversely, the economic forces involved have forced many of the

smaller enterprises out of business. In many cases this is due to the fact that more sophisticated and discerning recreation customers have established higher standards as to how and where they will spend their recreation (vacation) dollars. The industry has also recognized that there is a need to be able to withstand, as well as possible, bad seasons, recession, high interest rates, gas shortages, airline strikes and other economic challenges which have been thrown at them. Those in the recreation/tourism industry are playing a new ball game based on current economic information. If your customer is affected by present economic conditions, your enterprise is affected. An enterprise may need to develop a new look if the cost of doing business is changing significantly. It is essential that each recreation enterprise know what attracts the customer to their particular enterprise by taking a careful look at exactly what commodity or service is being sold. Each business is unique and its particular combination of services, activities and related environment make up the unique package that the enterprise offers to the recreation customer.

If the recreation package being sold is clearly understood, it makes the marketing of that enterprise (product) much easier. Too many recreation enterprises do not understand the recreation market but each recreation enterprise could, as a start, take a careful, thorough look at its present customers. It may be that because recreation businesses have been operating in a shifting, dynamic market that the market currently being served needs to be reanalyzed and a higher income segment of the market determined. You may need to look for the family with a slightly higher income if you are going to attract someone who is seeking a vacation in your price range. It may be you will attract an even higher income segment who are looking for ways of cutting cost and spending less. (2)

Although many enterprises have pulled their horns in and are doing less marketing and advertising, perhaps now is the time to begin to sell more aggressively. As some former customers are being lost to your enterprise, there are new families and new people who could become a part of your market. You must begin to tell people what you have to offer in an attractive manner and invite them to visit you. The sophisticated, discerning recreation customer cannot be hoodwinked with flashy advertisements and other shady methods previously used, but will be interested in the quality of your enterprise and the experience offered. In order to maximize the dollars allocated to advertising and promotion you must begin to "target your market" by appealing to those potential customers who will most likely want to buy your particular product--the recreation opportunities and experience you are selling. Enterprises need to begin to take aim with a rifle rather than taking the shotgun approach so that the advertising dollars will be most effectively spent directly on the people who are in the target market.

Recreation will continue to grow and compete for dollars in other segments of the economy if the experience offered is good. The customer must believe that for the price they pay they receive an excellent value. It must be recognized that recreation is a service business and secondarily a product business. Consumers will increasingly look at the quality level that they think they should receive for their dollar. This perception of value will be enhanced or diminished by the consumers contact with enterprise employees, the surrounding community, the experience itself, the trip to and from and the whole spectrum of what is being offered.

The recreation business appears to be maturing and as it moves into the future we should be reminded of what happened to the automobile industry. We cannot tell customers what is best for them and then try to convince them of it. We must listen to the customer, be sensitive to his desires and needs, and recognize that in a service business the consumer is the basis for survival. If we take the approach of the automobile industry, doing everything for the convenience of management, then perhaps we will also find that our market will start to disappear (3).

The recreation/tourism industry will grow in the future and will be more attractive to all segments of our society but the enterprises that will succeed during this period will be the ones who use better professional and managerial skills and are sensitive to the sophisticated, discerning recreation customers who will be paying the bill.

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COMMENTS

Decentralized structures are now replacing centralized organizational processes. Planning is taking place, more often, from the bottom up.