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MARKETING RECREATION: UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS
OF A SERVICE MARKET ORIENTATION

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ABSTRACT

The marketing of recreation is unique and demands special consideration when compared with other products and services. Although general marketing theories and techniques seem to be appropriate, they tend to be more product oriented. Service marketing has far more relevance as a base concept to build upon to identify new marketing theories and techniques to accommodate this different subject matter area.

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What is unique about recreation that affects the application of marketing to the field? If recreational services, programs and activities are not really any different than other products and physical goods then, it would seem reasonable to accept marketing strategies and frameworks which can be easily adapted and adjusted for all types of products and services. However, this is not true.

The major distinguishing factors of marketing recreational services lie in the unique characteristics of the recreation experience and the manner in which the recreation service is produced and consumed. The significance of these characteristics is of further importance in justifying the difference between "product marketing" and "service marketing" orientations. Recreational services also need to be differentiated from other commodities such that the development of new marketing techniques and concepts suited to the field is warranted and dismisses the application of marketing techniques adopted from the manufacturing sector or the "product marketing" sector. A number of these unique characteristics and distinguishing factors are described below.

The recreation experience is intangible. Marketing breaks a commodity into its component parts. As applied to this field, the core component is "the recreation experience" and its component extensions are all the elements which surround the experience (e.g., the facility, the locker room, the support facilities, the other participants, the instructors, the program format, etc.). In each individual recreation activity, the individual participant or consumer brings with him/her a unique set of needs, attitudes, wants, and prior experience. Although experiences may be similar, it is clear that each individual defines the recreation experience in a unique, personal, and intangible way. Consequently, it is difficult for any agency to "guarantee" the same high quality experience for each individual during each and every activity contact.

The core component, the recreation experience, is inconsistent. A whole variety of circumstances and variables may impact upon the recreation experience. The exact impact of each of these is impossible to judge and determine in advance. Consider the following: the day-to-day health, the skill level, the motivational level and the will to play of the participant; add to this the same factors affecting opponents or associated participants, not to mention weather conditions, facility conditions, and many other factors and one finds a very unpredictable experience. It is easy to see why the experience is inconsistent. However, the inconsistency also serves to promote the popularity of many activities--the unknown outcome. Nevertheless, consumer satisfaction will reflect the attention the agency gives to certain controllable factors (e.g., facility maintenance, program structure, etc.) which may or may not have directly impacted upon the experience. The impact of these controllable factors upon the experience is probably greater than expected.

The agency's responsibility in delivering services should focus upon the tangible factors because the experience is intangible. The business of the recreation agency is to deliver a service which facilitates a recreation experience and customer satisfaction. Services have intangible characteristics while products have tangible characteristics. Consequently, services are more difficult and complex to judge than products. Products may be easily judged by their physical characteristics; while services are primarily composed of process attributes. Because of the intangible characteristics and the difficulty in quantifying or evaluating the service, the recreation participant bases considerable emphasis upon the component extensions of the service--the measurable or tangible items and characteristics associated with or which provide tangible evidence about the service.

Marketing recreation necessitates a focus upon the component extensions/tangible factors. Because of the intangible characteristics of the service and unique impact a variety of elements has upon the recreation experience or core component, the marketing of recreation requires a focus upon the component extensions or tangible factors. It has been found that for the marketing of services to be effective, the service image and realities of the service cannot be based on abstraction but are shaped by the judgments the consumer or participant makes through his/her senses--the tangible clues. Mullin (1) also found support of this contention in sports marketing. Although successful major college

spectator events do not ignore the core experience, strategies which have focused upon the component or product extensions have been most successful. Consequently, successful college spectator sport programs which sell out year after year have been most successful when they focus upon the extensions of the core experience--tailgating parties, beautiful fall weekends, an exciting fun place to be, campus attributes, stadium facilities, etc.

A significant proportion of marketing occurs at "point of purchase" or between the customer and customer contact personnel in service industries. Services by their very nature are intangible; therefore, service agencies must demand a full integration of a marketing orientation throughout the agency. No place is this more critical than at the "point of purchase" or at the exchange point between the customer and the agency's customer-contact personnel. Unfortunately, front desk attendants, telephone operators, and program registrars are either part-time or entry-level positions which either are characterized by high turnover, low pay and/or minimal training. In many cases, this may be the initial or only source of contact the potential customer has with the agency. A considerable amount of initial evaluation, assessment and image development takes place during this exchange process. Therefore, the real challenge for the service agency is both how they train the customer-contact personnel and whether or not these employees understand the importance of marketing and realize how their decisions and actions directly impact upon the customer's perceptions and the agency's market strategy. An important question for any service agency, especially a recreation agency is--do the customer-contact personnel understand the importance of marketing or do they simply see it as another added responsibility?

Consumer satisfaction is dependent upon social facilitation. With the exception of a few recreation activities, the majority of experiences are consumed in public in the view of others or in direct association with other participants. Few of us are willing to participate in a recreation activity alone or if so, (such as reading, listening to music, etc.) are unwilling to at least share the experience with others. Actually sharing the experience may not only be an important element in repeating the experience or deciding to repeat the purchase, but it is also an important element in promoting the experience through word-of-mouth advertising. Recreation activities and programs can and should continue to facilitate social interaction as an important marketing variable.

Public funding and financing of recreational services other than through direct revenues has led to the encouragement of mediocre marketing efforts. If all recreation agencies were to be asked to account for all profits and losses and to be self-supporting in all activity programs and services many would not last. Torkildsen (2) has indicated that although there are expectations, the marketing of recreation by the public sector has generally been unimaginative, traditional and politically centered. Mullin (1) raised a similar point when he noted that the New York Yankees of the Major League Baseball's Eastern Division, (although a private club, its stadium and operation does receive financial support from New York City) returned over 250,000 self-addressed, stamped tickets which could not be filled without even

noting the names and addresses of these potential customers. The club was obviously not concerned about promoting or marketing their sport programs and events to this highly potential target market.

Production and consumption of the recreation experience and service occur simultaneously. Unlike physical products, which are produced, transported and consumed in different locations, recreation experiences and services are produced and consumed often in the same location. In addition, the participant or consumer, is often directly involved in the production process. Certainly one cannot learn to play golf by simply watching someone else play. One must be actively involved in the learning process with another person or an instructor. Services cannot be stockpiled like products. Services are perishable commodities--they must be "pre-sold." One cannot participate in last week's aerobic program or purchase a ticket to last night's event. Recreation services have a very finite "shelf-life". Facilities, equipment, and staff can be held in readiness to produce a service or activity or program, but this just represents productive capacity not the service or experience itself. Distribution is different, also. The "production plant," the "retail outlet," and the "consumption point" are often one and the same. Therefore, the proximity of the activity or program to the target market is of critical importance as well as the scheduling and timing in the delivery of the service.

The pricing of the recreation service is different. Because recreation services are intangible and not composed of discrete physical elements, it is difficult to determine a price for each unit of service. This is complicated because it is difficult to determine the fixed and variable cost of a unit of service and each of its parts. The variable cost of one additional program participant is minimal if he/she can be easily accommodated.

It should be clear after examining some of the characteristics of the recreation experience and service elements and the differences between marketing products and services that the marketing of recreation is unique and demands consideration which few other commodities possess. Further, these particular characteristics and differences not only place a heavy burden upon the marketer of recreation services, but recreation activities, programs and services offer a unique challenge. Although general marketing theories and techniques may seem to be relevant to the marketing of recreation, the fact that the experience and services are different from "product marketing" will continue to require the cross examination of the market orientation, refinement of existing concepts and development of new theories. It seems obvious that service marketing has far more relevance than product marketing when applied to recreation when these dimensions are considered and examined.

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