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AN OVERVIEW OF THE LEISURE EXPERIENCE AS PRODUCT

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ABSTRACT

As a product, according to some definitions, the leisure experience is intangible. However, there are systematic steps which can be followed to develop this "intangible" element as a non-abstract product to be purchased and used by consumers. The following article provides an overview of this process.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the literature of our field, leisure has been defined as time, activity, and a state of mind. The context of the recreational activities is probably the most practical or concrete way of conceiving leisure. Accordingly, most leisure programs and service providers in both the public and private sectors have relied upon the activities definition of leisure to explain themselves to their current and/or potential clientele. However, when we empirically examine what leisure is, we find that the "state of mind" definition of leisure most accurately expresses the phenomenon. Essentially, leisure is an intrinsically motivated subjective experience from which we derive optimal enjoyment in individual and/or group situations. So, leisure is an intangible--it is an experience.

FROM AN INTANGIBLE TO A PRODUCT

How then can we turn an intangible or a subjective experience into some "real thing" that we can market; that is something to be purchased and used by consumers? Let us first consider the systematic steps to product development.

The first step to product development is to generate an idea. What is the product that we want to create? In our case we must consider what factors we want to address that people derive from their leisure engagement. The literature shows that those include novelty, pleasure, challenge, relaxation, mastery, and so on. Let's assume that through some kind of needs assessment procedure we find that our clientele expressly desires enjoyment, social interaction, vigorous physical challenge and novelty from their leisure engagements. In order to meet these needs, we must consider what specific area of leisure experiences we should develop. Based upon some focus groups, brainstorming and problem solving exercises, we come up with the area of dance classes. We know from our education and experience that dance is novel, challenging, social and fun. We also know that there are numerous types of dance classes. So, the next step is to deliberate among alternatives.

By this we mean to screen and analyze the idea (various types of dance classes that may be offered) by using criteria related to feasibility. Our classes may range from classical ballet to break dancing. Feasibility criteria (beyond our initial factors) could include the following: intensity of potential participant interest; cost of instruction; availability of space; need for equipment and supplies (music, accompaniment, mirrors, a large ventilated area with suitable flooring, etc.); and availability of qualified instructors.

Based upon the criteria, the types of dance classes would be prioritized. Then a prototype of the product (a sample high ranking dance class) would be formed. Continuing with our example, a prototype dance class in break dancing would be prepared. The prototype class might be developed in consideration of the following: enrollment eligibility, fees, site, instructor qualifications, level or class objectives related to skill development and performance and last, music to be used.

This is followed by subjecting the prototype of the product to a business analysis. In this situation, during this step virtually everything relevant to the planning, implementation and delivery of the break dancing class would be thoroughly explored. This includes break dancing's capability as a leisure experience to satisfy the previously mentioned needs for novelty, vigorous physical activity, etc. and its efficiency. Some revision or adjustments may occur here.

If indeed it appears likely that the revised product will be effective and profitable, then the next step is to give the product a market test. This is a preliminary exposure of selected portions of the targeted clientele to a sample of the product in order to systematically gauge their reactions to it. This is the opportunity for the test group to evaluate or judge the merit or worth of a sample of the product. Following our example, a test group of our clientele would be given some exposure to the prototype break dancing class on a trial basis. Evaluative feedback would be solicited from the test group to further modify the product.

Typically, the next phase in product development is to make some market forecast by using consumer research techniques to try to anticipate the general demand for the product and the specific nature of

the demand. Oftentimes, consumer psychographic and demographic data are collected and then compared and contrasted with self reported needs, interests and likelihood to buy. This information serves to give us some indication of the demand for the product that we have developed.

If it is determined that there is a demand for the product such that its introduction is likely to be successful, then the development of a full marketing plan is the next phase of the product development process. The marketing plan usually includes the strategy for introducing the product, the means for promoting the product, the ways in which the product is going to be distributed and the setting of the product's price. For our example this would translate into the following plan. Some vehicle(s) for introducing break dancing classes to our target market would be decided upon. Then, a continuing promotion plan would be initiated in order to raise consumer awareness about the classes. Further, the times, site and other scheduling concerns relevant to the dance classes would be finalized. Finally, the determination of fee or program charge would be made.

The final step in product development is to actually introduce the product. This means that the break dancing classes would be initiated. The leisure experience would actually occur and be "consumed" by the participants.

At this point, the process as it has been described appears to be very rational, linear and sequential. But in reality that is not always the case. Some of the steps may occur concurrently and modifications of the product may take place at any point in time. Therefore, the process in reality may be somewhat intuitive and cyclical with several feedback loops, modifications and adjustments, and concurrent events. What this discussion does indicate is that it is possible to "transform" an intangible or a subjective experience into a concrete product that can be marketed. Experiences can be developed, produced and sold. There is absolutely no reason for persons trained in the park, recreation and leisure field not to be involved in this.

#### CONCLUSION

What we have done here is taken a look at the leisure experience as a product and how to go about developing it as such. This is a needs based, systematic procedure for the planning and delivery of leisure experiences. Both efficiency (profitability) and effectiveness (needs satisfying capacity) are given consideration in this approach. Thus, this is suitable for use by persons in both the public and private sectors.