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THE ETHICS OF MARKETING PUBLIC LEISURE SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

While public leisure services have begun to adopt a "marketing approach," the theoretical and ethical implications of such methods have been largely ignored. This paper briefly examines such implications, specifically in regard to promoting services to the public, promoting services to targeted groups, shaping service characteristics to client desires, studying non-participation, and adopting a "user pays" philosophy.

THE ETHICS OF MARKETING PUBLIC LEISURE SERVICES

Marketing, in the public sector, may involve "the development of services which are consistent with client needs, then pricing, promoting, and distributing those services effectively". (3) In terms of public leisure services, a "marketing" approach has a number of specific implications. Some of these implications concern changes in promoting services to the public, promoting services to target groups, shaping services to meet the desires of participants, understanding non-participation to better minimize it, and moving toward a "user pays" philosophy.

Before accepting a marketing approach to public recreation, park and leisure services, these implied changes in operation must be examined from an ethical and theoretical standpoint as well as from an applied one.

Promoting Services to the Public. One important component or conceptualization of marketing is advertising or promoting to the public. Public sector leisure service agencies have historically done their advertising in limited ways and have sought to inform rather than persuade. Even the extent to which citizens have been informed of services has often been minimal. Two recent studies of recreation and park agencies in an urban east coast county and an eastern city found that from twenty to sixty percent of citizens sampled were unaware of

major facilities or programs offered by the agencies.(1,4) Certainly, it can be argued that public leisure service agencies must seek to more effectively inform the public and in the future this is likely to involve more radio and television. Some of this usage will have to be paid usage, not just "free" public service announcements made at 6:00 in the morning. Democracies require an informed public, and television has become the most pervasive medium by which we get our information.

A related but more complex question is whether public leisure service agencies should "promote" their services through advertising. Certainly promotional advertising has begun with many departments, which have developed logos, sought to project an image, and have tried to entice people into participating in their programs. To the extent that a "user pays" philosophy is adopted by the agency, it may be said that such persuasive advertising is expected. Consumers expect to be appealed to in persuasive ways. Whether the "user pays" philosophy is accepted or not, the information-giving process of public leisure service agencies must come into the twentieth century. It must also be aesthetically pleasing since the qualitative aspects of leisure experience are critical to satisfaction and the quality of the information-giving mechanism will be linked, in the mind of the citizen, with the quality of the services being advertised.

Promoting Services to Targeted Groups. Another important aspect of marketing is to promote a given product or service to a subset of the population whose social, economic, and psychological profiles are such that individuals in that subset are statistically more likely to participate than others. At first glance this would seem to make both economic and intellectual sense for a public leisure service agency. By targeting publicity to sub-groups in the population, the agency can save the expense of advertising to everyone as well as provide more detailed information about a specific program or facility. It can also gain a better understanding from representatives of that sub-group as to what kinds of information are desired.

Several ethical reasons mitigate against this approach in the public sector. First, such information is "in the public domain" and public servants should not choose who will or will not have it. Second, this selective promotion minimizes opportunities for personal growth or upward mobility in regard to leisure. If camping or tennis or a course dealing with state history is promoted only to those who have a history of such participation or are statistically highly likely to participate, the individual who might change, grow, or benefit from such participation is often denied the opportunity. If our goal is financial profit, we can ignore such considerations. If our goal is human growth, we cannot.

Targeting our promotion efforts to subsets of the population ignores the fact that people have felt leisure needs which go unmet. One reason for unmet leisure needs is lack of information about what exists and, as survey after survey shows, those with low information levels concerning public leisure services are the poor.

In summary, while targeting promotion to subsets of the population may seem efficient, it is not effective since it minimizes the opportunity for growth in leisure behavior.

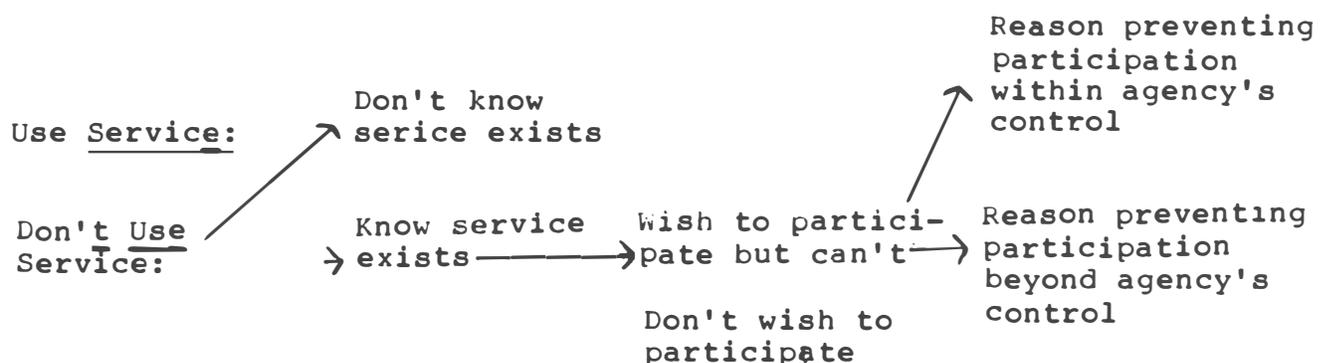
Shaping Characteristics of the Service to More Closely Meet Desire of Participants. Another characteristic of a marketing approach to leisure services involves the "tailoring" of a given service to participants' desires and style of participation. What does the participant value about the experience? A wide range of behavioral research tells us that: 1) a given leisure activity may provide a broad range of satisfactions; 2) at different stages of participation in a given leisure activity, from "beginner" through "expert," the desired style of participation, as well as definitions of success, change and 3) evaluations of recreation facilities often vary systematically by socio-economic status and lifestyle.

Because of these findings, it is no wonder that many successful commercial leisure services are continuously shaped to reflect the style of participation of their clientele. Lack of concern for style may be said to be a primary reason for the nonuse of public leisure services and this lack of concern will be an increasingly large problem as leisure activity broadens in function and diversifies in style.

Shaping the characteristics of a service to meet the desires of clients is a way of decentralizing an agency's operations. It means that there should be no standard definition of a park, tennis court complex, or summer playground program. Each of these must be individualized based upon the preferences of participants.

This individualizing process has implication for evaluation. While early attempts at evaluation of public leisure services assumed that the ideals for leisure services could be specified in advance, more recent evaluation methods, such as Importance-Performance Analysis, (2) assume that only participants can identify what attributes of a leisure experience are important and how well they are provided.

Understanding Non-Participation to Better Plan Strategies to Minimize It. Those interested in marketing public recreation and park services increasingly try to understand reasons for non-participation in services just as many do in commercial leisure services and this effort seems ethically appropriate. Basically, we can divide a population into the following categories with regard to use of a given public leisure service:



In other words, non-participation occurs because the citizen either doesn't know the service exists, is aware of it but chooses not to participate, is aware of it and wants to participate but is hindered for reasons which are potentially within the agency's control, or is aware of it and wants to participate but is hindered for reasons which are outside of the agency's control. A better understanding of the dynamics of non-participation is critical to both the public and commercial leisure service organization. In both cases, a better understanding can be gained of how much non-participation may potentially be affected by department actions.

Moving Toward a "User Pays" Philosophy and Establishing a Pricing Policy. While it is much too simplistic a statement, our assumption is that, in commercial recreation and leisure services, the direct participant pays the costs of his or her participation at a level which will not only cover the actual cost of participation but also produce a "profit." Public recreation and park departments, conversely, have operated from a revenue base which came primarily from taxes on real estate and on personal income which various levels of government collected.

The ethical bases of tax support of public park and recreation services were numerous but included: concern over safety opportunities for play for urban youth, preservation of the natural environment in urban areas, provision of recreation and leisure opportunities to meet the needs of special populations, such as the mentally retarded or physically handicapped, and the desire to improve the physical fitness of the population. An assumption was made that the well-being (welfare) of the public would be improved by collective action on these issues. All of these ethical bases assumed societal change was desirable and that leisure services could serve as a means to help produce such changes. Because it has been assumed that there is a direct link between supplying public leisure services and the attainment of these goals, a clear case could be made for public support. Public (collective) support rather than a user pays approach was justified because many of these goals involved the poor and also because some of those for whom such changes were desired were assumed not to have the judgment, taste, experience, or wisdom to take advantage of such opportunities if they had to pay for all costs of their participation. It was further assumed that the community at large would benefit from the changes that would be brought about by participation in leisure services.

The user pays approach does not assume that desirable societal change will come from participation, only that those who "use" a service should pay for it. Under the user pays model, there is no need to document social benefits. Recreation and parks become, in effect, a proprietary function of government. That is, government undertakes a task, much like a business, which is desired but not necessary to the social welfare of the citizenry. In a period of huge government deficits, a tax revolt, and the rise of the commercial leisure services, the question may be raised, on ethical grounds, whether government belongs in the parks and recreation business. The widespread use of fees and charges, in fact, signals the transition of parks and recreation to the commercial section and the decline of the public sector. The fees and charge approach is narrowing the basis of a leisure service's worth

to what users will directly pay for, flies in the face of procedures established in public education, transportation, welfare, and other government functions where a common good is assumed and a common financial obligation incurred. When fees and charges become a major part of public leisure services, it means that this function of government has flunked the test in terms of importance. We have little evidence that government can serve as a "proprietor" of leisure services more effectively than the private sector.

Another aspect of the increased prevalence of fees and charges is the extent to which public leisure services now operate without a theory, ideal, or vision concerning their role. Naturally, when no theory or ideal forms the basis of operation, it is easier to merely provide what people will pay for. Merely providing what people will pay for is and should be the role of the commercial sector. Public recreation and parks must reformulate a vision or cease to exist.

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