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PROPOSITIONS FOR USE IN COMPARING CONSUMER IMAGES
OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC RECREATION FACILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Increasing competition between private sector and public sector recreation facilities dictates that managers must be more sensitive to the needs and wants of their patrons. There appears to be evidence that the image of a recreation facility may be at least partially determined by its private or public sector status. Eight researchable propositions are developed to guide further research in this area.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent changes in the political and economic climate of the country have contributed to an increasingly blurred distinction as to the role of the public and the private sector as providers of recreation services. The public sector has been required to generate money to supplement tax funds. This has led to its involvement in revenue producing activities which used to be the exclusive preserve of the private sector. The public sector now charges higher prices for some of its traditional offerings, which allows private sector operators to compete on a more favorable basis than in the past. A gradual public acceptance of user fees has also enabled public sector agencies to expand operations into areas traditionally considered to be in the domain of the private sector.

In his opening address at the Recreation Symposium of the 1985 National Recreation and Parks Association Congress in Dallas, Dr. William Burch (7) argued that this question of public versus private provision of recreation services will become increasingly critical in the future, because of this increasingly blurred role. Several practitioners (4, 27) have suggested that the images of private and public sector recreation facilities are different among patrons. Research has shown that the

image held by an individual toward an object will affect behavior toward the object. This paper attempts to develop a set of researchable propositions related to the image of public and private sector recreation facilities. It is arranged so that each proposition (or set of propositions) is preceded by a discussion of relevant literature.

ASSUMPTIONS

Several assumptions are made in this paper. The first is that image can be defined and quantified. The considerable body of image research, which was developed in psychology and subsequently spread to applied areas such as consumer behavior, lends insight into the definition, types and effect of image with regard to human behavior. Kotler (19, p. 62) states that "[u]nfortunately the connection between image and behavior is not as close as many organizations believe. Images are only one component of attitudes." While the effect of image in determining behavior may not be as influential as some may think, evidence does suggest that image influences behavior. (18, p. 3)

A second assumption is that individuals will be able to differentiate between services provided by the public sector and those provided by the private sector. Spotts and Stynes (25) report that awareness levels of the general population (including both users and non-users) of local parks are often very low, with some residents not knowing where parks are located, or even that they exist. However Bird (4) has suggested that patrons of Metropolitan Dade County (Florida) facilities do make distinctions between public and private suppliers of recreation services.

A third assumption is that individuals are willing to substitute one recreation experience for another. The concept of substitutability as it relates to leisure activities has been studied by many authors. (26) A common technique used within this body of research has been to use factor analysis to group activities based upon shared characteristics or attributes for the purpose of making inferences as to which activity types could logically be substituted for others. (8, 13)

Iso-Ahola (16, p. 145) argues that substitution may occur not only between activity types (i.e., an individual may switch from tennis to bicycling), but also within activity types (i.e., playing tennis with a new partner or at a new location). Few studies have attempted to examine within activity type substitution. The propositions discussed here regarding public sector image and private sector image, fall into this latter category.

Slovic (24) reported that when confronted with two equally valued alternatives, people systematically select the one that is superior in terms of the more important dimension. This paper suggests researchable propositions related to the following question: Will individuals confronted with a choice between two recreation facilities similar on all dimensions except that one is operated by a public supplier while the other is operated by a private supplier, consistently favor one over the

other?

EFFECTS OF IMAGE ON BEHAVIOR

Image has long been a topic of considerable interest among psychologists and other scholars. (5, 6, 18) Richardson (23, p. 3) states that when psychologists first became interested in the study of consciously experienced events, they were obligated to distinguish between the contents of experiences that originated in the immediate stimulation of a sensory surface (precepts) and the contents of experiences that, although similar in many ways, occurred in the absence of such stimulation (images).

Klinger (18, p. 3) asserts that there are three propositions which highlight the importance of the concept of imagery. First, imagery partakes of processes central to human functioning. Second, control over imagery constitutes control over a large part of a person's total psychic apparatus. Third, intervention methods based on imagery therefore have great power.

Image became a major research focus within the areas of retailing and consumer behavior in the 1950's. (9) Levy (21, p. 25) stated that,

[a]ny public object - product, person, institution - has an image for the publics, audiences, or consumers who know of it. Since knowledge always falls short, and is always filtered through the capacities and special circumstances of the people who experience an institution, what they know of it is always an abstraction to some degree. But this does not mean that an image is false, invented projection on a screen - although some images may be less accurate than others.

The accuracy of an image in reflecting behavior toward an institution is actually of secondary importance to the image itself in many cases, because a consumer will act based upon the perceived image. What is usually most critical to a manager is the impact of the perceived image on the firm or agency's business. Of course extreme differences between images and reality can have negative connotations, especially if the prior image is much superior to the actual experience.

PROPOSITION 1: That a patron's image of a facility will affect the patron's behavior with respect to the facility.

VARIATIONS WITHIN "TOTAL" IMAGE

Assael (1, p. 140) states that consumers tend not only to organize

marketing information into images of brands, but that they also form images of products, stores, and companies. Further, Assael argues that "An image is a total perception of the object that is formed by processing information from various sources over time." Thus the image of a recreation program or facility is at least partially determined by the image of its parent agency or corporation. Hawkins, Albaum and Best (12, p. 92) make the point that a common measurement problem in image studies is that much of the variability of individual responses is attributable to an organization's total image often not being well defined. For example, in a department store, service may be fast in one department and slow in another. Prices may be high in one area and low in another. This same phenomenon is often found in recreation departments, and it makes the measurement of accurate images difficult.

Berry (3) asserts that one of the key areas for future research in the area of services marketing (which includes the delivery of recreation services) is the concept of institutional image. A future study would likely prove to be most beneficial if it was to examine specific components of an institution, while also attempting to measure a "total image". Any approach which ignores differences between divisions would lose some potentially valuable information, and may present a misleading message as to the true public image of the institution. This should not be taken to mean that there are no common components of image which are consistent throughout an agency; rather it is included to point out that while commonalities are likely to exist, significant differences will be found in some areas.

PROPOSITION 2: That a patron's image toward the parent agency will affect behavior with respect to a selected public recreation facility.

PROPOSITION 3: That a patron's image toward the parent company (if one exists) will affect behavior with respect to a selected private recreation facility.

PROPOSITION 4: That a patron's image of various subcomponents of a facility, (i.e., price, helpfulness of staff, accessibility) will differ significantly from the patron's "total image" of the facility.

PUBLIC SECTOR IMAGE COMPARED TO PRIVATE SECTOR IMAGE

A substantial body of research has reported with regard to public image of government agencies. (2, 11, 20, 22) Generally this research has pointed to increasingly skeptical public attitudes with regard to the ability of public employees to satisfactorily deliver services, even though Americans have traditionally received a substantial amount of benefits from the public sector. (15) Bird (4) reported that patrons of some services offered by the Metropolitan Dade County (Florida) Park and Recreation Department appear to have more favorable attitudes toward the level of service being provided when they are under the impression that the services are being offered by a private operator, rather than by public employees.

Private sector operators have not escaped criticism. Howard and Crompton (14, p. 111) point out that private businessmen within the recreation and parks fields have had to deal with negative public images at times, primarily because they are in business to make a profit, while public sector personnel may be viewed in more altruistic terms. A recent study by the Jackson County (Missouri) Parks and Recreation Department (27) supports this contention. Specifically Leon Younger, Director of the Department reports that the study found an overwhelming majority (98%) of respondents would rather deal with a public agency than with a private company.

PROPOSITION 5: That the image of a recreation facility held by people who have had no direct experience with the facility will differ significantly depending upon whether or not the facility is operated by a public agency or a private business.

PROPOSITION 6: That the image held by an individual toward a recreation facility run by a public agency will be significantly affected by the individual's attitude toward government agencies in general.

PROPOSITION 7: That an individual's previous experience with public service agencies and private sector recreation businesses will have a major impact on the individual's image held toward a specific recreation facility.

INFLUENCE OF "SIGNIFICANT OTHERS" ON IMAGE

The leisure socialization concept is based on the premise that leisure habits and interests are in a constant state of change throughout the life cycle. An individual is expected to continually build upon existing skills and also develop new skills and interests as time passes. Kelly (17) provides a synopsis of the concept along with a review of significant contributors. Specifically, Kelly (17, p. 172) states, "[t]he theory suggests that in our earlier years we are taught a number of skills by parents, by peers, and in educational programs. In later years we are more likely to build on and extend those skills than to start over with new ones."

In their outline of a conceptual framework for predicting intentions and behaviors, Fishbein and Ajzen (10, p. 16) note the importance of normative beliefs and subjective norms concerning behavior. These terms refer to the power of important referents or "significant others" in decision making, that is, people who are influential with regard to the individual in question. In summary, the image of specific public sector and private sector recreation providers in the mind of an individual is likely to be influenced throughout his or her life by the opinions of other people.

PROPOSITION 8: That the opinions of "significant others" will have

a major impact upon the image of a recreation facility held by an individual.

CONCLUSION

This paper has not attempted to champion the cause of one sector (public or private) over the other. Rather it has attempted to identify some areas of future research which could prove to be beneficial to managers in both sectors. Eight propositions relevant to the topic of public compared to private sector recreation service provision have been formulated. Each of these propositions addresses a distinct idea with regard to the image of recreation facilities. This should aid managers by identifying and enabling them to exploit positive aspects of their image, as well as in identifying and successfully addressing negative aspects of their public image. The desired result should be an increase in managers' abilities to accurately target promotional materials and to provide a higher quality of service for their patrons.

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