Visions in Leisure and Business

Volume 11 | Number 3 Article 2

1992

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the interval vacation industry and to identify the key soft amenity factors that impact the vacation enjoyment of the owners. The methodology used in this study provides a unique perspective on key interval vacation attributes. The open-ended format used to generate the key vacation attributes identified several unique dimensions, especially for the interval vacationer. Interval vacation owners rated clean, functioning recreation areas most important to their vacation satisfaction--but 4 of the top 5 attributes focused on interactions between owners and staff. Results showed that communication, a vital link in any management equation, made the top 10 list of services important to a quality interval vacation experience. While the findings of this study provide a clear understanding of those soft amenities most important to interval owner vacation enjoyment, additional research is needed to fully explain these attributes.

INTRODUCTION

The interval vacation industry is perhaps the largest purveyor of resort vacations in the world. Vacation ownership is best described as the ownership or use of a vacation accommodation in a planned, medium to high density recreation development, where ownership may be exclusive or shared with others. An ownership vacation purchase entitles the owner to one or more weeks of resort use for at least twenty years. To date, Americans have purchased over one million units of ownership vacations, at over 2000 vacation resorts (1). Growth within the industry has been impressive, with purchases doubling about every three years. The average price for a timeshare unit in 1990 was $7,500, almost double the cost in 1980 of $3,900. In 1989, $1. billion was spent for ownership vacations in the United States.

From an economic perspective, recreation and related commodities are both income elastic and price elastic. These factor make the understanding of purchase behavior and product satisfaction critical for effective resort vacation management. According to a study by June and Smith, buyer response to "soft amenities" is sensitive to changes in

perceived cost but hold strong aesthetic or symbolic content which keeps demand constant (5). Data on the factors that constitute the aesthetic or symbolic content of recreation related soft amenities is empirically weak. Even tourism, the leading revenue industry in 37 states, has a much less developed consumer based research core when compared to other consumer goods and food products (18).

Much of vacation research has been descriptive in nature (16, 15, 13). As such, findings have identified vacationer descriptors or as van Raaij (18) found, most research first identified vacation market segments and then attempted to describe segments with behavioral data. In addition to the limited nature of descriptive vacation research, many researchers, in trying to explain consumer perception and preference, control the preference variables, thereby restricting the ability to assess the entire range of possible consumer perceptions and preferences. The methodology used in this study attempted to avoid those limitations by using a variety of qualitative, interactive techniques that enabled interval owners and the author to explore the broadest possible context of interval vacation attribute variables.

Another difficulty in compartmentalizing and thus predicting vacation behavior lies in the fact that the components that make up the vacation experience differ in a number of areas. Oppedijk van Veen and Verhallen identified two important issues in explaining vacation behavior: 1) vacationer variables that determine the decision set or that make up the attractive choice alternatives and; 2) those variables, associated with vacation patterns that reflect the actual choice of a vacation experience. They concluded that in studying the relationships between vacationer type and patterns of vacation behavior, problems arise in trying to segment the construct vacation behavior. The diversity in consumer demand for vacation experiences is exponentially compounded by the large number of potential variables on which vacation segmentation can be based (destination, means of transportation, season, type of region, composition of traveling party, type of reservations and so on). To minimize the compounding effect of potential vacation variables, this study focused on one specific vacation pattern, the interval or ownership vacation.

In many studies, personal characteristics (i.e. vacationer type) are taken as dependent variables rather than independent variables. Oppedijk van Veen and Verhallen feel the reason for most non-correlations between specific explanatory variables and the behavior to be explained is that variables measuring general consumer characteristics are independent of any product or situation regarding consumer consumption or purchase. Such variables will more likely show relationships with an extensive pattern of behavioral responses (such as general leisure activities) than with specific ones (such as a vacation). (1986:56). June and Smith (5), in looking at service attributes and situational effects on customer preferences, found that a more explicit consideration of the situation or context surrounding the choice of a commercial recreation product is necessary if consumer behavior is to be better understood. In market or behavioral segmentation research, variables are related to person-product interaction. This study was designed to explore one such person (vacationer type) - product (vacation pattern) interaction, the resort vacationer on an interval vacation.

The purpose of this study was to identify the key soft amenity factors that impact the

vacation enjoyment of interval vacation owners. This particular vacation pattern was selected because of the control factors possible in terms of vacation format similarity. Mannell and Iso-Ahola (11) stress that to succeed in structuring the leisure environment by creating or encouraging a predictably satisfying experience calls for systematic examination of the antecedents and consequences of leisure and tourist experiences. Gottleieb states that "few authors attempt to explore the vacationers own perspectives on the nature of a vacation" (4). In identifying resort vacation soft amenity attributes, the relationship between the participant and the vacation experience needed to be structured to insure as much commonality of experience as possible. June and Smith (5) discovered that an explicit consideration of the situation or context surrounding the choice of a commercial recreation product is necessary if consumer behavior is to be fully understood. For this study the population of interval vacation owners was selected to assure: l) commonality in the ownership vacation experience, 2) vested interest in soft amenity attribute satisfaction through the financial purchase of one or more weeks of an ownership vacation and 3) the repetition of a common vacation experience over time, a factor inherent in the interval vacation product. Each of these factors strengthens the situational context of the vacation experience thereby assuring similarity between the study sample and the interval resort vacationing population in defining the concept vacation soft amenity preference.

The term Soft Amenity Attributes refers to those experiential components of a vacation not directly related to accommodations or food and beverage (hard amenities). The term has been operationalized to include services, activities or programs which enhance the enjoyment of a resort vacation through either increased participation or improved relaxation.

METHODOLOGY

Members of an interval vacation exchange company made up the research sample group. Participants were selected from a population of over 330,000 interval owners, representing over 1,000 interval resorts worldwide. A random sample of 1200 members who had taken at least on interval vacation within the last twelve months was selected as the study Delphi group. Of the techniques available for defining construct parameters, the qualitative method "focus group" was used initially to explore key soft amenity attributes. Both the purpose and the population of this study supported this technique since the empirical orientation of a focus group is to explore topics and generate hypotheses (14). Critical to the empirical rigor of this study was the exploration, in an open-ended structure, of the following issues: 1. What question format generated the greatest usable responses for information about key factors important to vacation enjoyment? 2. What question format best encouraged owners to explore services not currently offered at their resorts, that might improve the enjoyment of their vacation experience?

While focus groups can assist in item and scale construction by providing evidence of how respondents typically talk about the topic in question, for this study, a more important benefit was assuring a clear understanding of the participant's thinking on the topic of vacation enjoyment. Knodel and Pramualratalla (8) found one advantage in using focus groups was the ease of detecting whether participants understand a question as the researcher intended. By pretesting with

focus groups, those problems were located and immediate adjustments were possible.

In the second stage of the study, the process of identifying key soft amenity attributes was completed using the Delphi technique. By using the Delphi technique in generating the soft amenity attributes, this study answered a question posed by Mannell and Iso-Ahola regarding the psychological nature of leisure and tourism experiences: "are there other meaningful dimensions by which tourists [vacationers] label and define their [vacation] experiences?" (11) The delphi technique permitted access to the expert judgement of interval vacation owners in identifying the range of attributes that impact the enjoyment of a resort vacation experience (wants and expectations). This data also provided a framework to structure future consumer based research on interval resort satisfaction. This technique was also selected from the various qualitative research methods available because it permitted the greatest opportunity for pooled intelligence in defining construct parameters.

For these reasons, a three part Delphi methodology was designed. Round One generated responses to the open ended questions developed as a result of the Focus Group. In Delphi Round Two, ownership vacation members rated the attributes generated by Round One and elicited additional attributes not identified in the first round. Delphi Round Three, which would have been a further clarification of the key soft amenity attributes important to ownership vacation members was found to be unnecessary as no new attributes were generated.

The Round one instrument was designed to elicit input from interval owners on what soft amenity attributes most impact their enjoyment during a resort vacation. The five questions included:

1. When on an ownership vacation, how would you describe your activity involvement? The choices consisted of
   A. A doer
   B. Mostly doing, some relaxing
   C. A relaxer
   D. Mostly relaxing, some doing
   E. It varies

2. What sorts of things do you like to DO best on an ownership vacation?

3. How do you best RELAX on an ownership vacation?

4. What could management do to assist you in increasing your ownership vacation enjoyment?

5. What are three (3) key factors (within managements control) that most impact your family's vacation enjoyment?

Additional information (i.e. age, employment, sex, number and frequency of ownership vacation use) was collected. Postcards were printed with a business mail code so return postage was not required. A chance to win a free week at an ownership resort was offered as an incentive to increase response rates.

In Round Two of the Delphi, an instrument package (cover letter, directions, questionnaire and stamped, self-addressed envelope) was mailed to the same stratified random sample of 1200 II members identified in Round One. They were asked to rate each of the 99 attributes on a Likert scale to indicate the importance of each attribute to their family's vacation enjoyment. The scale

dimensions ranged from 1 - NOT IMPORTANT to 5 - EXTREMELY IMPORTANT.

Coding and Analysis of Delphi Round One Data

A data base was developed from the 413 valid responses returned. Questions two, three, four and five generated similar responses so were grouped together to create the master soft amenity attribute list. Data were coded by geographic region and frequency tables were created by amenity attribute and demographic information.

Coding and Analyzing Round Two Data

The unidimensional scaling theory and techniques used in Round Two of the Delphi "aimed at selecting a set of data items that could be empirically demonstrated to correspond to a single social-psychological dimension" (3). The use of the Likert Scale was selected for this study based on the following underlying logic. Soft Amenity Attribute identification is "subject centered" in that it generates a respondent scale, not an attitude item. In Likert scaling all systematic variations in the responses to the stimuli are attributed to differences among the respondents (12). Differences in subgroup cell size as well as different distributions of responses by subgroups were possible by creating an individual item critical ratio. The critical ratio evaluates subgroup mean differences relative to item score variances providing a more accurate indication of the degree to which an item differentiates (12). These scores were regarded however, with some caution. One reason Likert identifies for a statement failing to perform according to original expectations is that "the statement may be responded to in the same way by practically the entire group" (10). Obviously when this agreement favored the "not important" side of the attribute scale, the item was dropped. However, when all interval owners felt an item was very important or essential, a low criterion of internal consistency or critical ratio supported its inclusion in the final instrument.

The final question answered in the item analysis of Round Two of the Delphi was whether a distinct clustering of items was present. To that end, a rotational factor analysis of the interim correlation matrix was performed. The SPSS-X program package was used to perform these analyses.

RESULTS

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS: The following observations were made during the focus group format and individual telephone interviews.

1. It was determined that timeshare owners responded best when asked to first identify a reference point when describing their vacation enjoyment. The two key reference points identified by the focus group and supported in the vacation research, were the bimodal goals of relaxation and stimulation.

2. Attribute responses tended to be broader in scope and more specific in terms of attribute identification when participants were first questioned about the methods or activities they used to meet their vacation goals of stimulus (doing) or escape (relaxing).

3. Lifecycle constraints as well as familial harmony were mentioned as factors that had the most significant impact on vacation enjoyment. The greatest difficulty was found in determining which factors or

attributes would improve vacation satisfaction.

4. After much discussion, it was determined that asking "what else management could do to improve your vacation enjoyment" generated the most specific responses.

DELPHI ROUND ONE ANALYSIS

Rate of Return

A total of 1200 postcards were mailed to a random sample of members of the exchange company Interval International. Of these, 413 or 34%, were returned. The response rate, while lower than personal interview or repeat mailing techniques, was well within the sample size of 384 needed for a population of 100,000 to assure representativeness at the .05 level of accuracy (9).

Delphi Round One's 413 response cards generated a total of 4,348 soft amenity attributes. Response analysis found similarities in each of the four key questions on the questionnaire: What sorts of things do you like to DO best on an ownership vacation?, How do you best RELAX on an ownership vacation?, What could management do to assist you in increasing your ownership vacation enjoyment? and What are three (3) key factors (within managements control) that most impact your family's vacation enjoyment?

Respondents used a variety of phrases to describe similar vacation amenities (i.e. sunbathing, laying by the pool, getting a tan, etc.). To accommodate this divergence, a coding system was developed to organize the attributes for data analysis. The researcher initially reviewed the 413 questionnaires, separating attributes by common vacation factors such as "sports, recreation, sightseeing, etc". Attributes were then grouped according to constructual similarities. Eight broad attribute categories were identified and given a one digit code number. Individual attributes within each category were then given a two digit number resulting in a final numerical code that was applied to all responses and then used to generate the Round One data base. Table 1 identifies the initial attribute categories generated in Delphi Round One with the total number of attributes identified, the grouped attribute frequencies and the total percentage of attribute responses by category.

In defining the construct key soft amenity attributes, one future research objective was to use these attributes to measure owner satisfaction with the delivery of resort soft amenities. For this reason, some responses generated in Round One of the Delphi were deleted. The criteria used for attribute inclusion in the next level of the Delphi process consisted of the following:

1. Attribute quality was within the control of resort management,

2. Attribute delivery was possible by a majority of interval resorts or could be combined to reflect a generic amenity (i.e. skiing opportunities for both downhill and water skiing),

3. Attribute contributed specifically to vacation enjoyment as opposed to vacation exchange.

By applying the above criteria, the one hundred and twenty five attributes generated in Delphi Round One were reduced to ninety nine for inclusion in the Delphi Round Two questionnaire.

DELPHI ROUND TWO ANALYSIS

Rate of Return

Twelve hundred questionnaires were mailed to the same stratified random sample drawn for Delphi Round One. A total of 387 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 34. Data generated in Delphi Round Two was developed from the Likert scale importance scores for each of the ninety nine interval vacation attributes identified in Delphi Round One. Mean and standard deviation scores were computed for each attribute, as well as attribute frequency profiles and histograms. Mean scores were ranked for analysis of individual attribute importance.

Factor Analysis

In an effort to reduce the number of attributes and identify key underlying soft amenity attribute constructs, a factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed. Using the SPSS statistical package, principal factors extraction with varimax rotation was performed on 99 items from the Soft Amenity Attribute questionnaire. Initial efforts generated an ill-conditioned matrix which failed to converge after multiple (22) iterations. Several steps were taken to explore options for reducing the number of variables. Step One simply examined the mean scores of each attribute. Two criteria were used for determining attribute inclusion or deletion. First, those attributes with mean scores of 2.25 or less on a 5 point scale were identified for possible deletion. Subsequently, using the frequency table, the percentage of respondents that gave the attribute a 4 (very important) or 5 (extremely important) score was identified. If twenty percent of the total sample gave the attribute a high score, it was retained. Six attributes were deleted through this step. Step Two explored the "factorability" of the remaining attributes by examining the correlation matrix to determine if any attribute had excessive correlations of .3 or higher across multiple attributes indicating no measure of unique underlying constructs. Fourteen attributes produced high numbers of correlation. Seven were dropped and four variables were combined with other attributes. A third step looked at the common factor variance or the proportion of total variance that was common factor variance and produced simultaneous linear equations. Communality scores of .75 or higher were reviewed with those attributes either being eliminated or collapsed with other similar attributes. Four attributes that related specifically to children's activities were found to have high communality scores. Because of the limited special interest nature of these attributes, they were dropped from subsequent factor analysis but retained in the final instrument. A Fourth step was to review the squared multiple correlations (SMC) to determine those with a high degree of multicolinearity. An SMC of .90 or higher would have automatically eliminated an attribute but no scores were that high. The SMC was then dropped to .80 and three attributes were thus eliminated. Seventy five attributes were retained for a second factor analysis. Principal components extraction was used prior to principal factors extraction to estimate the number of factors, absence of multicolinearity and factorability of the correlation matrices. Eighteen factors were extracted and statistically, the variables were well-defined by this factor solution. Communality values were acceptable with all variable values at or above .53, well beyond the cut of .45 for deletion of a variable in interpretation of a factor.

Amenity Attribute Scales derived from the factor he amended Delphi Round Two items are summarized in table.

The analysis suggested eighteen underlying dimensions, or Soft Amenity Scales, which accounted for 65.4 percent of the variance explained, which was considered excellent for the factor analytic procedure. For the sake of parsimony and Soft Amenity Attribute theory building, some attributes were assigned to their second highest loading factor. Of the seventy five attributes entered in the factor equation, forty attributes had factor loadings in the 0.60 to .80 range which were considered strong evidence for placement of a variable. As a rule of thumb, only variables with loadings of .30 and above are interpreted. In this study's factor analysis, all attributes loaded on a factor with at least a .30 loading. Comrey (1973) suggested that loadings in excess of .71 (50% overlapping variance) are considered excellent; .63 (40% overlapping variance) very good; .55 (30% overlapping variance) good; .45 (20% overlapping variance) fair; and .32 (10% overlapping variance) poor. Only ten attributes loaded below the .45 level. Lower factor loadings are permissible when it appears that the attribute in question adds heuristic sense or theoretical meaning to the construct represented by the factor. That is, if the placement of a given attribute in a factor helps explain the meaning of the construct being described, the attribute is said to make heuristic sense. Thus, the final determination of scale content was based upon mathematical as well as theoretical and heuristic criteria. Having all attributes load at the .30 level is unusual for a factor analysis of this size. Reasons for the high loadings could be explained by the methodology used to identify the attributes and the sample group used as well at the screening procedures applied prior to the final factor extraction. Several statistical methods are available to test the degree of empirical confirmation or internal consistency for the factor analytic model. Since principal components extraction was used, the significance test for factors was the Bartlett's test of sphericity.

Bartlett's test of sphericity 11558.08*

*significant at the .001 level (17).

A second measure is the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy. The KMO is an index for comparing the magnitudes of the observed correlation coefficients to the magnitudes of the partial correlation coefficients. Small values for the K10 measure indicates that a factor analysis of the variables is not a good idea, since correlations between pairs of variables cannot be explained by the other variables. Kaiser (1974) characterized measures in the O.90's as marvelous, in the 0.80's as meritorious. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of this factor analysis was .873, indicative of a meritorious factor analytic solution. The eighteen factors identified by the factor analysis give both direction and structural content to the construct "Interval Vacation Key Soft Amenity Attributes".

To understand the mean importance of the generated factors, and while not related, the importance scores by factor were analyzed. Factors were ranked according to their mean importance score with corresponding standard deviations. Table 3 outlines those findings. As would be expected, there is little relationship between total factor variance and factor importance, but both data sets needed to be examined in exploring the constructual

intricacies of Interval Vacation Soft Amenity Attributes.

DISCUSSION

The methodology used in this study provides a unique perspective on key interval vacation attributes. The open-end format used to generate the key vacation attributes, identified several unique dimensions, especially for the interval vacationer. The use of a specific vacation pattern "interval resort vacation" permitted a more focused investigation of vacation attribute importance than previous research which traditionally discriminate vacation structure by such characteristics as: short vacations/ beach vacations, one to two person vacations and lengthy camping vacations (15). By limiting the vacation construct investigated, a more distinct understanding of the specific person-product interaction was possible. This created an environment better situated to assess the range of possible consumer perceptions and preferences. June and Smith (5) found that a more explicit consideration of the situation or context surrounding attribute choice is necessary if consumer behavior is to be better understood. For these reasons the findings generated by this research have significant implications for resort management, especially interval resort management.

This study provided a greater understanding of the soft amenities most important to owner vacation enjoyment. Interval vacation owners rated clean, functioning recreation areas most important to their vacation satisfaction - but four of the top five attributes focused on interactions between owners and staff. This clearly illustrates the need to focus not only on facility maintenance but to address on-going staff development and training needs as well. Information on area attractions which reflected the highest level of factor variance, included such items as brochures on area attractions, a driving map of the area, shopping locations and staff assistance in finding areas of interest. Many interval resorts do not currently offered these amenities but their addition would add to vacation enjoyment. Interestingly/ many of the amenities owners felt were most important to their vacation enjoyment could be implemented by properties with little or no additional expense or personnel.

Results showed that communication, a vital link in any management equation, made the top ten list of services important to a quality interval vacation experience. Interval owners wanted to receive pre-travel information about the resort, area attractions, local transportation information, climate information and details on what owners needed to furnish. While this information would be of special importance to interval owners who exchange to new, unfamiliar resorts, the same information could be valuable to vacationers at any resort property. It was interesting to note that three separate interval vacation factors were generated. These included 1) Not being "sold to" while on vacation, 2) Having facilities restricted to owners only and 3) Owner/Manager Meetings. Each of these issues is unique to the interval vacation. The fact that they factored out as single item factors gives strength to the overall structure of the factor solution. Another surprising result was the low importance score for golf and tennis facilities. Historically the design and construction of interval vacation resorts has been done with an eye to effective marketing. The findings of this study suggest that golf and tennis are not that important to the vacation enjoyment of the majority of the sample group.

While the findings of this study provide a clearer understanding of those soft amenities most important to interval owners vacation enjoyment, additional research is needed to fully explain these attributes. Data on the relationship between vacation attribute importance and demographic and psychographic variables would be helpful in understanding different resort vacation market segments. An instrument that measures how well a resort property meets owner expectations could also provide valuable data on soft amenity satisfaction for managers and recreation providers. Such an instrument could also provide valuable feedback to managers on the results of any improvement efforts.

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TABLE 1

ROUND ONE SOFT AMENITY ATTRIBUTE (SAA)
CATEGORIES AND FREQUENCIES

SAA Category	Number of Attributes	Frequency of Response	Percentage of Responses
Recreation	32	838	19.2
Area Attractions	14	837	19.2
Entertainment	10	176	3.9
Socializing	6	135	3.1
Relaxing	12	922	21.3
Management & Staff	25	790	18.2
Information	8	186	4.4
Other	17	464	10.7
Total	125	4348	100.0

TABLE 2

KEY SOFT AMENITY ATTRIBUTE SCALES

Factor One: Information on Area Attractions	Variance 21.3
Factor Two: Guest Service Amenities	Variance 6.0
Factor Three: Planned Activities	Variance 4.8
Factor Four: Hospitality and Operating Effectiveness	Variance 4.3
Factor Five: Audio Visual Amenities	Variance 3.5
Factor Six: Sports & Sports Equipment	Variance 3.1
Factor Seven: Transportation Amenities	Variance 2.8
Factor Eight: Scope of Recreation Amenities	Variance 2.4
Factor Nine: Outdoor Aquatic Amenities	Variance 2.2
Factor Ten: Tranquil Amenities	Variance 2.2
Factor Eleven: Area Attractions	Variance 1.9
Factor Twelve: Culinary Amenities	Variance 1.8
Factor Thirteen: Indoor Aquatic Amenities	Variance 1.7
Factor Fourteen: Interval Ownership	Variance 1.6
Factor Fifteen: Golf and Tennis Amenities	Variance 1.6
Factor Sixteen: Omit*	Variance 1.5
Factor Seventeen: Interval Ownership	Variance 1.4
Factor Eighteen: Interval Ownership	Variance 1.4

* Note: Factor Sixteen violated the postulate of simple structure which states that a variable has factor loadings on as few common factors as possible, and that each common factor has significant loadings on some variables and no loadings on others and so was dropped from the scale.

TABLE 3

FACTOR RANK, MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

Factor	Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
4. Hospitality and Operating Effectiveness	1st	4.5	.5
9. Outdoor Aquatic Amenities	2nd (t)	4.0	.9
17. Interval Owner Issue	2nd (t)	4.0	1.3
1. Information on Area Attractions	4th (t)	3.6	.7
7. Transportation Amenities	4th (t)	3.6	.8
11. Discounts on Attractions	4th (t)	3.6	.9
14. Interval Owner Issue	7th	3.5	1.3
13. Indoor Aquatic Amenities	8th	3.3	1.1
10. Tranquil Amenities	9th (t)	3.1	.8
8. Scope of Recreation Amenities	9th (t)	3.1	.8
5. Audio Visual Amenities	9th (t)	3.1	1.0
2. Guest Service Amenities	12th (t)	2.9	.8
3. Planned Activities	12th (t)	2.9	.8
12. Culinary Amenities	14th	2.8	.9
6. Sports & Sports Equipment Amenities	15th	2.7	.9
18. Interval Owner Issue	16th	2.5	1.2
15. Golf and Tennis Amenities	17th	2.4	1.1
** Special Interest Attributes (Youth and Teen Activities)		2.8	