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LEISURE SERVICES MARKETING: QUANTITY OR QUALITY?

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ABSTRACT

Marketing has, in recent years, become an integral part of the public leisure service profession, however through adapting marketing practices and techniques an emphasis on providing the most popular recreation opportunities may result. This paper reviews some recent literature on the leisure service marketing process and argues that there is a current bias toward increasing market share and patronage. This bias reduces the importance of a number of "quality" issues which are necessary functions of public leisure service agencies, these include: benefits to participants and society, environmental protection, leisure needs and satisfaction levels and diversity of recreational opportunity. A framework for the inclusion of these quality considerations in marketing models and techniques is outlined.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the public sector leisure service profession has more formally recognized marketing as an important activity. Many may argue that the

profession has always had a user orientation and has subconsciously undertaken marketing as an integral part of providing needed leisure services.

However, it is only in the past decade that the profession has explicitly utilized marketing techniques, terminology and planning to improve the facilities and services that it offers.

Authors like Crompton (8) and Howard (14) have adapted and applied private sector marketing theory and techniques to the public sector leisure service profession. Consequently terminology like "park visitors" and "the public" are being replaced by terms which have traditionally been reserved for the private sector such as "customers" and "clients". Public sector leisure services are becoming increasingly focused on "serving the needs of clients" and "positioning" facilities and services in a niche within the larger leisure service industry.

This transition to a more formalized marketing orientation has been accompanied by many other changes as many publicly funded agencies struggle to maintain

adequate amounts of general tax funds relative to the facilities and services that they provide. Public parks and recreation agencies have increasingly looked to cost recovery techniques and efficiency concerns as these budget constraints have come about (3). As a result the once relatively simple differentiation between the public and private sector in the leisure service industry is becoming less and less clear. This transition to a more economic orientation has caused concern amongst many in the profession (11, 12).

There is little doubt that improvements in efficiency and a more "client" oriented operation within the public leisure services have resulted from these changes. However it is this author's contention that the current use of marketing models, practices and techniques tends to over-emphasize the importance of the quantity of clients using leisure facilities and services at the expense of the quality of the leisure experience.

This paper will outline this current marketing bias to quantity and propose a framework for the inclusion and "weighting" of quality considerations in marketing plans and techniques. It is hoped that through doing this some of the concerns expressed by many in the profession over a market approach for public leisure service agencies may be alleviated.

WHAT IS MARKETING?

Marketing has been very broadly defined as; "human activity directed towards satisfying needs and wants through exchange processes" (18, p. 21). More specifically a marketing process involves a wide variety of activities which attempt to identify and quantify needs and wants of potential (and existing) customers and to encourage these

people to become (or remain) involved in the exchange process. This exchange process refers to the swapping of discretionary time and/or money for goods and services.

The push of modern marketing is for organizations to make a transition from an internal self serving approach to a customer orientation or focus.

Marketing is now perceived as having a customer or user orientation. With this approach the focus of marketing is shifted and the aim of marketing is to investigate and understand consumers in order to design a product, program, or service specific to their needs or wants" (22, p. 2).

In the leisure services setting marketing involves identifying and understanding people's recreation/leisure needs and desires.

Its purpose is to design and offer such programs and services that have been tailored to meet the needs of these subgroups that we wish to attract to our organization (22, p. xi).

THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF LEISURE SERVICE MARKETING

The environment in which the leisure service industry operates has changed considerably over the past two decades. Demand for, and supply of, leisure services has increased dramatically. This has resulted in greater competition for consumers time and money (24). In addition, the recent trend toward decreased leisure time from an average of 26.2 hours per week in 1987 (13) has exacerbated this competition. Toy, Rager and Guadanoto (24, p. 276) state that:

In response to these conditions, both public and private recreation providers have begun to recognize the importance of developing effective marketing strategies.

THE LEISURE SERVICE MARKETING PROCESS

Leisure service marketing is viewed as a continuous process rather than an activity carried out at a fixed point in time. Rather than being the responsibility of a specific position or department this continuous process involves a general orientation of an entire organization towards the customer. An important component of the process is the identification and selection of a "target market". This involves the identification of groups with similar interests or needs and the subsequent positioning of the organization to try and serve one of these "target markets".

A second major process component is the manipulation of "marketing mix variables". Marketing mix variables are those essential components that are involved in the planning and design of a product, program or service. Traditionally the marketing "P's" include the Product (what will be produced); Place (where it will be offered); Price (how much will be charged); and Promotion (communication with target groups). Several additional variables appearance (the impression or mood of the location); the Participants (the users of the program or service); Public Image (the perception people have of the organization, facility or service); and the Political Impact (how an organization conducts business).

Long term strategic planning and market research also form critical parts of the marketing process. In summary, the leisure service marketing process includes research

and information gathering, identification and choice of target market, manipulation of marketing mix variables to design and create programs and organization.

THE QUANTITY BIAS

The leisure service marketing process briefly outlined above strives to change an organization's world view to a customer orientation. This customer oriented approach has as its core concept the investigation of what people want and devising the best way of providing it. In addition, the expressed objective of marketing practices is to increase market share and to increase patronage of products or services. The practical implementation of this concept is the undertaking of marketing research which indicates which leisure facilities and services are numerically most popular and the design of recreation facilities and services around this "popularity poll".

This is certainly an over simplification as many agencies will factor into decisions on facilities and services provided such things as; appropriateness relative to the agencies perceived function, the presence of competition, cost and historical tradition. However, the application of marketing principles and paradigms have continued to emphasize the provision of facilities and services on the basis of popularity.

Many complex marketing models and techniques have been developed to assist practitioners in information collection and in understanding leisure wants and needs. However these models have as their objective the provision of information on what activities are most desired or most popular (24). Even models which emphasize consumer satisfaction as opposed

to simply consumer preference such as the "Humanistic Marketing Model" continue to emphasize the "understanding of the consumer in order to enhance the satisfaction potential of recreation and leisure experience and consequently the response rate and revenue."

Marketing is a management science developed in the private sector. It is therefore based on premises that may not always be appropriate in the public leisure service sector, however the trend towards increased use of marketing techniques in the leisure service industry is already well established. This use of marketing techniques and practices raises several important questions which can be grouped under the broad category of "Quality Issues".

QUALITY ISSUES IN LEISURE SERVICE MARKETING

Is The Customer Always Right?

Despite some of the marketing literature's arguments (1, 4, 10) the customer is not always right. There are numerous examples of activities which, although they may be popular, are prohibited or severely restricted due to the negative impact such recreation has on somebody or something else. For example, motorboat use in designated Manatee areas in Florida is severely restricted or banned. In addition it is common to restrict certain leisure activities which may place the participant in danger, for example, many laws banning bungy jumping are appearing. Precedent exists therefore, to not respond directly to the market's wishes when danger to safety exists, or when unacceptable negative impacts on another party are likely to occur.

The issue of serving the customer is however far more complex than simply the consideration of danger or negative impact. A critical question of "who knows best?" arises. Who should make the decision over which leisure activities are most beneficial, the leisure participant or the leisure service provider? Leisure pursuits perceived by one individual as beneficial or fun may not be seen as such by others. The very nature of leisure makes it difficult to make judgments with regard to the relative benefits of different leisure pursuits.

Leisure and recreation are, by definition, subjective experiences which vary greatly in terms of their perceived and actual benefit to an individual. Inherent in recreation is the idea that recreational activities are very personal choices (21, p. 54).

It would seem, therefore, that given constraints to protect safety and minimize detrimental impacts, that the customer is always right with regard to leisure choices. There are, however, counter arguments to this. It can be shown that certain recreational activities are more beneficial than others. For example; jogging or walking for an hour can be physically more beneficial than watching television for an hour.

To avoid going too deeply into the philosophy of the subjective nature of the benefits of leisure it is necessary to interpretation of the benefits and desirability of certain leisure activities. A leisure service organization can and should attempt to serve the customers stated recreational desires.

However, many leisure service agencies, public and private, see their role as something more than merely serving peoples

wants and desires. Many see their role as also being in environmental protection and education, and promotion of the benefits of their own recreational preferences. They, as part of the reason for their existence, rightly or wrongly, believe that what they do and provide has worth to society and improves the quality of peoples lives. This belief system may or may not be explicit but it is important. Leisure service organizations should attempt to convince the customer of the value and benefit of their own belief system with regard to recreational activities. Leisure service agencies are therefore not only servants of the public but leaders as well.

WANTS, NEEDS AND SATISFACTION

The terms leisure/recreation needs and leisure/recreation wants are widely used but seldom defined. They are commonly used interchangeably to mean the same thing. However, it is useful to differentiate between the terms to help explain the difference between a deeper seated basic desire and a more readily changeable and surface level want. The following explanation is offered: A need is an item or service essential for human survival or having a significant impact on life quality. A want is simply a desire for a particular good or service.

One of the critical problems associated with market research and marketing is the ability of people to change their minds with regard to what they want. This is of even greater relevance in the choice of leisure wants as leisure services are often intangible and shaped by complex and changing relationships between variables as diverse as; cultural background, information assimilation, stage of life, discretionary income, discretionary time, socialization,

opportunity, challenge and skill level. Include in this the common discrepancy between what people say they want to do and what they actually end up doing and you have, at best, a very inaccurate prediction of people's recreation behavior.

The research and analysis of recreation needs/wants has therefore received much attention in the literature (6, 9, 17, 20). However it is the understanding of the deeper seated driving motivational force of recreational need that has become the primary

... there is a link between needs, leisure needs assessment, organized recreation program provision or activity engagement, and leisure needs satisfaction as a program outcome. The key is to identify this connection accurately and to program accordingly (16, p. 25).

It is therefore through the understanding of deeper leisure needs of individuals that leisure motivation and eventual leisure behavior and satisfaction is understood (17). Howe and Carpenter (15, p. 78) define a needs assessment as:

... a process of identifying and discovering constituents leisure needs, attitudes, values, and behaviors, as well as areas in which clarification, improvement, or reinforcement of leisure functioning is desired.

It is this needs assessment rather than a simple survey of leisure wants that should be the cornerstone of good marketing practice. The implications for agency reputation and eventually loss of support, either through loss of customers or lack of political support in the case of public agencies are obvious. Therefore, in applying marketing principles and processes to a leisure service agency clear objectives

pertaining to, (and means of measuring) visitor satisfaction levels are essential.

DIVERSITY OF LEISURE/RECREATION OPPORTUNITY

The popularity of leisure activities change over time, additionally there are some leisure activities that will probably never be widely accepted or practiced. However, having the opportunity to experience those leisure activities, now or some time in the future, is something that the American people consider important (23). Additionally, the enthusiastic adoption of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) (25) by many parks and recreation agencies as a model for analyzing the provision of recreational opportunities illustrates the value given to diversity. (The basic concept of ROS lies in the protection of recreational diversity.) There is therefore inherent value seen by many in maintaining a diverse range of recreational and leisure pursuits, irrespective of their current popularity. This is difficult to factor into decisions based on current market analysis, nevertheless some weight needs to be given to the provision (or at the very least the non preclusion) of recreational diversity.

Marketing should focus on these needs because, first they are more accurate predictors of behavior and second because the "level of leisure need satisfaction is seen as positively related to the life satisfaction, personal growth, physical health, and mental health" (16, p. 23).

As discussed previously, due to its development sector activity marketing models and techniques are oriented to increasing patronage and market share. There has therefore been resistance to the

application of these models to the public leisure service sector when these increases are not seen as a goal of the organization (11, 12). This orientation to increasing market share is illustrated by Barber (4, p. 10) who states: "Never before has so much attention been paid to the customer. Unfortunately much of this attention is directed toward wooing new customers rather than pleasing and helping present customers."

Many agencies who emphasize the growth of the numbers in their programs and facilities and see this as a vindication of the success of their organization are ignoring the quality side of the successful business equation. Barber (4) suggests that many agencies grow beyond their ability to serve their customers and high levels of dissatisfaction result. Furthermore, a 1985 national study reported by Desatnick (10) found that 96% of dissatisfied customers never complain and that those unhappy customers will tell at least nine other people of their complaints.

INCORPORATING QUALITY CONCERNS INTO THE MARKETING PROCESS

The following suggestions address the general categories of "quality concerns" stated above. This is not a complete or comprehensive list but merely a starting point for correcting possible marketing bias towards quantity.

1) The Customer Isn't Always Right

Leisure service agencies need to define their role, mission and belief system clearly. For example; with objectives for conservation (preservation of genetic diversity, maintenance of essential ecological

processes and life support systems and use of species and ecosystems on a sustainable basis) and for recreation and leisure (nature education, physical fitness, socialization, challenge, skill learning). The agency policies need to promote and convince potential customers as to the values of this belief system. The agency should provide leadership as to what they think is right.

2) Satisfy Needs Not Wants

Marketing research should investigate customer (and potential customer) leisure needs through both qualitative techniques such as participant observation, key informant interviews and staff input and quantitative techniques such as in depth surveys, analyses of existing recreational facility use patterns, and analyses of demographic data. The results of this research should provide a prioritized list of important and popular recreational facilities and programs which would satisfy identified needs.

The agency should then attempt to "marry" both the leadership features identified in 1) above with the customer service features identified through marketing research. Additionally, practical considerations pertaining to the natural, organizational and resources available need to be factored into the calculation. Leisure service agencies are, therefore, both leaders and servants of customers.

3) Satisfaction

As an indicator of quality, agencies should closely monitor satisfaction levels of customers. Techniques for doing this include: Provision and encouragement of the use of a complaint system that provides feedback and a means of resolution for every complaint. Provide a visitor

suggestion card, especially at the end of organized programs, provide feedback and a system for assessing and taking action on worthy suggestions. Conduct periodic visitor surveys and encourage feedback from front line staff.

The quality of the service that customers receive has been identified as the single most important factor influencing customer satisfaction. Barber (4, p. 10) states that: "The key is service. Customers will measure you by the service they receive. Service is not a competitive edge, it is the competitive edge." Desatnick (10) further points out that customer relations mirror employee relations, he emphasizes the importance of the good management, training and treatment of employees with regard to customer service. The service marketing literature is particularly helpful and applicable to the leisure service sector in this area (1, 2, 5, 8, 19).

4) More Isn't Necessarily Better

The measurement of the success of a program, facility or organization should not be based only on the level of participation or use of its facilities and services. Rather the indicators of levels of satisfaction and benefits derived from participation need to also be considered along with the sustainability of the recreation resource.

5) Provide Diverse Recreation Opportunities

The provision of non-popular facilities and programs that are consistent with the organizations belief system (set out in 1) above) should be protected, or at least the preclusion of future opportunities for different recreational activities should be guarded. Creativity and diversity in leisure is often promoted by simply maintaining

sufficient open space. Agencies must be careful not to overdevelop open space or over-structure leisure programs.

BALANCED LEISURE SERVICES MARKETING MODEL

The following diagram provides a conceptual representation of the inclusion of quality issues in the marketing process. It attempts to balance traditional elements of marketing such as strategic planning, target marketing and marketing mix variables with "quality" issues such as diversity of opportunity, environmental impacts and agency beliefs and mission.

The central focus of the diagram represents the balance between what the leisure service agency wishes to provide (what it perceives its role to be) and what the leisure consumer needs. Surrounding this focal point is the service orientation that is necessary for any leisure service agency to be successful. The location and connection between additional elements of the process is deliberate, however, as it is important to emphasize the concept of a continuous process there is no starting or ending point. Additionally, information inputs which are relevant to marketing decision making are shown.

This simplistic diagram summarizes some of the issues discussed in this paper and it is hoped that it may provide stimulus for

discussion, and a starting point for those attempting to undertake a comprehensive marketing plan or another marketing exercise for a leisure service agency.

SUMMARY

This consideration of quality and quantity in leisure service marketing has been necessarily subjective and has deliberately adopted a moralistic argument as to the value of quality leisure experiences. This is due to the author's belief that leisure, recreation and play have critical roles in the development, sustenance, health and quality of life of individuals and society as a whole. The quality of recreation and leisure is therefore seen as very important.

Leisure service professionals and organizations should also be subjective and moralistic and use their professional and personal judgment as to the appropriateness of marketing models and principles for their agencies. There is much value in a customer oriented approach and the application of marketing, however we must be careful not to fall into the "numbers trap" and base programs and services entirely on what is most popular. As professionals we need to provide leadership, to encourage, educate and persuade people to make good use of their leisure time as well as to serve the leisure market.

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Diagram 1: Balanced Leisure Services Marketing Model

