

FOR LOVE OR MONEY: A REPOSITIONING MODEL AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS TO INCREASE ATTITUDINAL AND FISCAL SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC PARK AND RECREATION SERVICES

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Despite opposition from some observers (e.g. More, 2002; Schultz, McAvoy & Dustin, 1988), marketing has been accepted into the managerial ideologies of most public recreation agencies. As McCarville (1999) suggests, this should not necessarily be a concern, as marketing simply involves an outward orientation that focuses on meeting the needs of the client and offers a set of neutral tools for achieving this goal. However, public sector managers have been slow to effectively implement marketing principles (Johnson Tew, Havitz & McCarville, 1999). Most definitions of marketing center around the notion of exchange (Bagozzi, 1975; Kotler, 2000), and conceptualize this exchange as a two-party transaction in which the parties act freely, out of self-interest, and to maintain equilibrium through the direct exchange of equivalent rewards (Kotler, 1984; Homans, 1961; Blau, 1967). This is the private-sector model upon which public leisure services marketing had been predicated (Crompton & Lamb, 1986). Levi-Strauss (1969) called this “restricted” exchange, but also proposed that “generalized” exchange could occur in which three or more actors were involved, and in which the reciprocity was indirect and more delayed. Recently, Novatorov and Crompton (2001) recognized that public exchange operates under a closed, bureaucratic system rather than an open and responsive system; that voluntary exchange between two parties is mitigated by a system of redistribution through taxation; and that citizens submit to a system of “mutually agreed upon coercion” rather than acting purely out of self-interest. Consequently, they revised the traditional definition of public leisure services marketing to read now as “the analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation of leisure programs designed *sometimes to facilitate voluntary exchange with users, but more frequently to facilitate redistributive or reciprocal arrangements within a community* that were established by a central governing body” (p. 181). This new definition emphasizes the integral role of elected officials in distributing tax dollars which are collected from all citizens. The implication of this is that public agencies are charged not only with satisfying those who use their services, but more so with demonstrating how their efforts benefit the entire citizenry. To this end, the idea of repositioning represents the key to implementing the benefits approach and to successfully embracing this new marketing paradigm. The purpose of this paper is to present a model outlining the process of repositioning public park and recreation services along with ensuing propositions for future research on this important topic.

Repositioning Model

Repositioning is the process of fostering a desired image of a public park and recreation agency in the minds of citizens and elected officials relative to

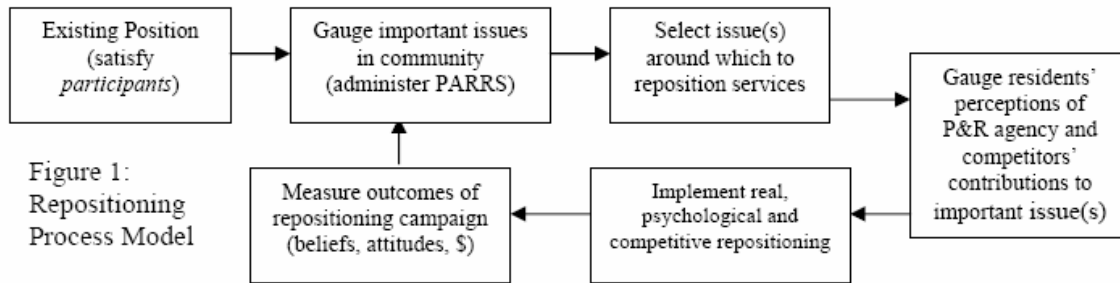


Figure 1:
Repositioning
Process Model

other public agencies that are competing for tax dollars. Figure 1 shows that agencies have generally adopted the position of satisfying existing participants as their “raison d’etre”, but must move toward understanding which *public* issues are most important in the community. This can be accomplished by administering to constituents the Park and Recreation Repositioning Scale (PARRS), which measures nine specific community issues that parks and recreation can impact (Kaczynski & Crompton, 2004). Positioning principles then suggest that the agency should identify a select set of priority issues (i.e. no more than two or three) that may form the basis of a fruitful repositioning campaign (Aaker & Shansby, 1982). Residents’ perceptions of the contributions of the agency to the selected issue(s) must then be determined, along with their perceptions of other public agencies that might be regarded as competitors for tax dollars dedicated that to alleviating that concern(s). All of this information can be mapped and interpreted using importance-performance analysis grids (Kaczynski & Crompton, 2004). Three repositioning tactics should then be employed to improve residents’ perceptions of the contributions of the park and recreation agency relative to those of its competitors (Crompton, 1999). *Real* repositioning involves actually changing what the agency does so that it is sufficiently impacting priority community issues. *Psychological* repositioning changes the focus from programs to outcomes, usually by emphasizing the public benefits of the agency’s services. Finally, *competitive* repositioning involves drawing favorable comparisons between the more effective or efficient contributions of the recreation agency relative to those of a valued competitor. The effectiveness of these efforts can be monitored by gauging residents’ beliefs in the agency’s contributions, their attitudes toward the agency, and their willingness to allocate greater amounts of tax dollars to the agency. This entire cycle may take up to 5-10 years and the salience of community issues should be reevaluated periodically.

Propositions for Future Research

Although this entire process is ripe with research ideas, the current paper describes 5 of 10 propositions which have been developed about only the latter stages of the model when repositioning actions are actually implemented and results measured.

When embarking on an ongoing repositioning campaign, consideration should be given to timing and order in applying the three repositioning strategies. Although all three approaches have been encouraged, real repositioning would seem to be a definite prerequisite to successful psychological and competitive repositioning. Once the agency has sufficient programs in place to address the priority community issue(s), psychological repositioning can be used to educate stakeholders’ on the public benefits that accrue from these services. Finally, when stakeholders are convinced of the agency’s contributions to

broader community concerns, only then should competitive repositioning be used to demonstrate how parks and recreation better accomplishes these mandates than other public departments. Hence, the three repositioning tactics are likely to be most effective when executed in this specific order – real, psychological, then competitive.

Although all of the aforementioned tactics should be used, in considering which of these three repositioning strategies to emphasize, the concept of identification may be of use to public leisure service agencies. Identification refers to an individual's perception of a positive connection between him- or herself and an organization, whereas disidentification is analogously defined as a sense of separateness (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Most people are neutral towards most organizations, including public agencies, but promoting identification among the apathetic segment of the population is key to repositioning parks and recreation. A parallel alternative is to foster disidentification between citizens and other organizations. In this way, disidentification is remarkably similar to competitive repositioning in that both will generally involve subtly pointing out weaknesses in competitors' abilities to address important community issues. Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2002) found that identifiers engage in actions in support of the organization more so than do disidentifiers act out against an organization. Accordingly, promoting identification with the recreation agency among citizens through real and psychological repositioning is likely to be more productive than fostering disidentification with competing public agencies through competitive repositioning.

One key to fortifying the benefits of parks and recreation in citizens' minds is to encourage active processing of repositioning messages (Petrinovich & O'Neill, 1996). Related to this in recreation research is the concept of "mindfulness", wherein more mindful participants are thought to engage more actively in processing information within the surrounding environment (Moscardo, 1999). In public leisure services contexts, actions that enhance mindfulness (e.g. attractive signs in parks that contain both information as well as thought-provoking questions about the community-wide benefits of recreation) may concurrently improve the efficacy of an agency's repositioning efforts amongst participants.

Consideration must also be given to the formation of repositioning messages. One issue is whether the recreation agency should expend the effort to collect and communicate quantitative evidence to convince its two primary stakeholder groups – citizens and elected officials – of the benefits of its services. It has been argued that more permanent attitude change can be achieved via the central (vs. peripheral) route to persuasion, and that both information-based arguments or emotion-based arguments can be successful for this purpose (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). However, decision-making literature also suggests that persons faced with complex decisions (e.g. budgeting) require greater information about the problem at hand (Bazerman, 1994). Accordingly, it is proposed that quantitative or economic arguments will resonate with elected officials while emotional arguments are better for the general public.

In presenting repositioning arguments, the selection of a communication medium is critical. Simple print media (e.g. posters, flyers, and seasonal program brochures) are widely recognized as the default option for public sector leisure service providers (Johnson Tew & Havitz, 2002). However, it is not unrealistic to anticipate that diverse media, including radio and television as well as newspapers, might consistently carry

repositioning-related story lines related to health, economic development, and the environment. Television has the advantages of entertainment and excitement but is subject to increasing fractionalization and clutter (Shimp, 2000). Radio is a less expensive alternative and can reach more segmented audiences (Shimp), but this latter quality can also be a deterrent to a public agency aiming to reach its entire citizenry. Newspapers, although less interesting than radio or television, also have the ability to reach a large audience (especially specific to the local level) and can provide detailed information and at a significantly lower cost (Shimp). In all cases, publicity (e.g. unpaid 'editorials' on leisure agency efforts) must be fostered because it is more credible than advertising. However, amongst these three major media alternatives, newspaper publicity is likely to be most productive for repositioning efforts given its localized focus and its ability to convey the greater amounts of information that are likely to be necessary to convince citizens of the benefits of recreation.

Practical Applications

Adopting a marketing orientation is crucial in order to be responsive to community needs and therefore merit an increased share of finite public resources. Repositioning operationalizes the new definition of public leisure services marketing by satisfying exchange relationships with both participants and the larger community. This paper has outlined a model to guide the process of repositioning by consolidating and building on recent research on this topic. The propositions presented are offered to stimulate further research (preferably joint investigations by researchers and practitioners) in order to validate or refute aspects of the model and to advance our understanding of how to most effectively implement this pragmatic idea.

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