

Visitor Market Structure Analysis: A Benefit-Oriented Approach

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INTRODUCTION

The production of opportunities for high-quality recreation experiences is a basic goal and growing responsibility of all recreation managers (Driver, 1972). Management of recreation resources for the purpose of maximizing user satisfaction requires that knowledge of user attitudes and perceptions be considered in decision-making. Unfortunately, the people that managers are trying to satisfy often have diverse and conflicting desires and wants. The so-called average user seldom exists in the real world (Shafer, 1969). To identify the nature of visitor market structure in outdoor recreation, market segmentation processes have been utilized to determine the demand priorities for visitor groups.

Although various descriptors have been employed in market segmentation, not all of them have resulted in segments useful for developing marketing strategies (Weinstein, 1987). Determining the value of psychological products of a recreation activity and the classification of possible benefits of recreation experiences have been the focus of many outdoor recreation studies. Also, benefits have long been recognized as a desirable measure in market segmentation (Haley, 1968). Benefit segmentation involves finding relatively homogeneous visitor groups based upon the benefits or psychological outcomes which they seek from recreation experiences.

This study was conducted to assess the utility of benefit dimensions to accomplish management objectives in better and meaningful ways. The specific objectives of the study were:

1. to identify the relative importance of benefit dimensions to the overall recreation experience, and
2. to develop benefit market segments based on identified benefit dimensions.

METHOD

The study population were visitors to Hodges Gardens, Louisiana, during 1987. Hodges Gardens is a privately owned development of formal gardens, lakes, and natural areas totalling nearly 4,000 acres. A two-stage stratified sampling approach by month and day of week was used to obtain a probability sample of visitors for the study. One hundred sixty-seven usable mail surveys were returned and analyzed for study objectives. Using basic information on the nature of their visit, a recreation experience preference scale was constructed to measure the relative contribution of each type of experience to the respondent's satisfaction.

Responses were subjected to principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation to identify preference dimensions along which the benefits could be defined. Since it was reasoned that overall satisfaction would be a function of satisfaction within specific experience components, regression analysis was employed to determine the relationship between overall satisfaction and benefit dimensions. Through hierarchical cluster analysis, the groups of visitors were described by the patterns of benefits they experienced.

RESULTS

Six conceptually coherent dimensions emerged including natural beauty awareness (BA), stimulation seeking (SS), outdoor learning (OL), social bonding including family solidarity (SB), aesthetic enhancement (AE), and commodity-related (CR) dimensions. A quantified relationship between overall experience satisfaction(S) and benefit dimensions was:

$$S = 0.31 + 0.20(BA) + 0.09(SS) + 0.12(OL) + 0.14(SB) + 0.19(AE) + 0.12(CR).$$

The satisfaction equation is a production function in that it gives output (overall experience satisfaction) for specified inputs (specific benefit factor). From the pattern of these dimensions, six visitor groups were identified. These groups were thought of as empirically determined market segments based on the kinds of benefits they sought.

DISCUSSION

Factor analysis revealed six benefit dimensions of the recreation experience at Hodges Gardens. Their order of importance in contributing to total satisfaction was (in parentheses are average benefit scores):

1. natural beauty awareness (4.00)
2. aesthetic enhancement (3.64)
3. social bonding (3.61)
4. commodity-related (3.36)
5. outdoor learning (3.20)
6. stimulation seeking (1.91)

The identified dimensions were used to create six empirical market segments. Discriminant analysis revealed that about 88% of users were correctly classified in the study. Since segments should be sizable enough to justify marketing efforts, large market segments have a greater possibility of being chosen as target markets. Segments 1 and 2 had the largest share of the visitor market (about 41% and 28%, respectively).

Visitors in Segment 1 were highly satisfied with the benefit dimensions of natural beauty awareness, social bonding, and aesthetic enhancement, but had low satisfaction scores on the commodity-related dimension. To improve the satisfaction of Segment 1 visitors, efforts to increase the quality of the giftshop and other commodity sales areas should be undertaken. Members of Segment 2 were satisfied with benefit dimensions of natural beauty awareness and opportunities for social bonding, however, scores for aesthetic enhancement and outdoor learning were low. Based on these findings, resources related to aesthetic enhancement and outdoor learning dimensions should have high priority in decision-making concerning this segment.

In general, the stimulation seeking dimension was lowest in satisfaction scores. However, since Hodges Gardens' policies dictate a passive recreational environment, stimulation oriented managerial activities are not recommended. For developing marketing strategies to improve or maximize visitor satisfaction, an effort was made to enhance the meaning of the segments by analyzing other behavioural patterns, such as attitudes toward entrance fees.

This information about the kind of benefits sought and received by visitors should contribute to management decision-making. Benefit segmentation showed clearly the relationships between specific experience opportunities, visitor satisfaction, and resource management alternatives.

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