

Developing an Understanding of the League Sport Participation Experience utilizing the Critical Incident Technique

Brody J. Ruibley, *University of Tennessee*

T. Christopher Greenwell, *University of Louisville*

**Marketing
Abstract 2009-256**

**May 30, 2009
5:00 PM**

**25 minute oral
(Lexington A)**

In the participant sport industry, a regular patron tends to be the most important customer. Whether the patron is a season ticket holder, a club or league member, or just a continually returning customer, that person is important as ongoing participation generates much of the revenue for clubs, sport centers, and other membership-based organizations (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004). Satisfaction is especially important in developing and retaining these customers as leisure satisfaction has been found to be a factor in continuing participation in leisure activities (Crawford & Greenwell, 2007; Howat & Murray, 2002; Searle, Mactavish, & Brayley, 1993). While much of the literature has focused on the relationships between leisure satisfaction and repeat intentions, there is still much to be learned about the different aspects of quality that may generate satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

A better understating of these aspects may add insight into reasons why customers continue to participate in the sport, switch providers, or discontinue their participation in the sport altogether. Therefore, this study employs the Critical Incidents Technique (CIT) to examine aspects of the sport participant's experience. CIT is often utilized in service research as it allows researchers to understand aspects of the service encounter critical in generating consumer perceptions and is more methodologically rigorous than many other qualitative methods (Howat & Murray, 2002; Gremler, 2004). Researchers using CIT solicit and analyze qualitative input from customers in the form of comments and criticisms regarding the service experience. These comments and criticisms represent extreme aspects of their service encounter (good and bad), and the information provides insight into areas of the activity likely to generate strongly positive or negative reactions which may influence customers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Johnston, 2004).

Data were collected from 396 participants competing in league bowling at one of two bowling centers. League bowling provides a good setting for the study as it represents an activity dependent on ongoing participation. Further, league bowling participants are likely to experience multiple positive and negative aspects during their tenure with the sport and the sport provider. In this setting, participants do not only take part in the activity, but interact with the staff, facility, other participants and atmosphere in which the participation takes place. Each participant in the study received a questionnaire consisting of four open-ended questions soliciting their opinions regarding the positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Rather than asking global questions about the best and worst aspects of their experience, questions were designed to separate the activity (league bowling) and the facility (the bowling center) to account for the fact that league bowlers have two post-purchase decisions: whether to continue their participation in the activity and whether to continue participating with that service provider. Content analysis was used to examine participants' responses as it has been found to deliver valid and reliable results in CIT studies (Kassarjian, 1977; Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). A total of 1,010 responses were received across the four questions. After a review the comments, a list of eight distinct categories (Sport, Policy, Convenience, Personnel, Other Participants, Physical Facility, Amenities, and Other) was developed from the literature (e.g. Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Crawford & Greenwell, 2007) and recurring themes in the responses. Each response was sorted into the appropriate category by a team of three raters. Raters agreed on over 90 percent of the items, indicating a high level of inter-rater reliability. Where raters disagreed on categories, differences were resolved through discussion.

By far, the most important positive aspects of participating in league bowling were Other Participants (216 comments) and Sport (65 comments). As to what participants liked least, aspects related to Policy (62 comments) and Physical Facility (44 comments) received the most responses. Regarding the positive aspects of the bowling center, Convenience (96 comments) and Personnel (92 comments) received the most comments. The negative aspects of the bowling center most often concerned issues surrounding the Physical Facility (120 comments). Policy (42 comments) and Amenities (42 comments) also received a sizeable number of comments.

Results of this study identify positive aspects of the participant's experience that can be enhanced to create a competitive advantage and negative aspects that may be important barriers to future participation if not rectified. Similar to findings from Ravenscroft and Rogers (2003), positive aspects were often associated with interpersonal or social factors, while negative aspects often stemmed from structural or organizational issues. When asked what they like most about participating in their league, the majority of participants' responses focused on other participants indicating the social nature of league play, being with friends and teammates, and socializing with other members of the league are all critical aspects of participation in this type of activity.

2009 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2009)

Aspects related to the sport itself, such as fun and competition, were a distant second, indicating the sport itself was important, but not nearly as important as the social experience. Regarding the bowling center, participants indicated aspects relating to convenience, specifically the location, were the most important in their evaluation of the center. Personnel (staff, management, owners, and other employees) also received a sizeable number of positive comments. This finding is interesting due to the fact that when asked what the participants liked about the bowling center, a many of the responses indicated that the people inside the facility were what they liked most. Taken together, these findings illustrate that interpersonal interactions between participants and personnel or other participants are essential to bowling participants. Negative responses for both the activity and the bowling center tended to focus on structural issues surrounding league or center policies (price, number of teams, and league rules) and issues surrounding the facility (equipment, cleanliness). These aspects should receive increased attention from managers as negative incidents may have a much greater effect on customers' post hoc evaluations (Giese & Cote, 2000; Petrick, Tonner, & Quinn, 2006).

As for theoretical implications, findings illustrate the complexities of the leisure satisfaction process. Specifically, positive and negative aspects were different, supporting Cadotte and Turgeon's (1988) assertion that some aspects, such as the sport and social interactions, may increase satisfaction when present (satisfiers) but may not have an impact on dissatisfaction. Similarly, some aspects, such as policies and the physical facility, may be related to dissatisfaction if they do not meet participants needs (dissatisfiers), but may not influence satisfaction. Further, results illustrate the importance of aspects beyond the core product. While many comments were related to the sport, even more comments were related to other participants, the facility, and personnel, indicating sport participant satisfaction is a complex multi-dimensional evaluation.