Creating Personas to Differentiate Road Race Participants

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Marketing - Motivation (Community Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2019-119

Thursday, May 30, 2019
3:30 PM
Room: Maurepas

Road running races grew by 300% from 1990 to 2013, however, there has been a drop off since (19 million finishers in US races in 2013; 17 million in 2016) (Miller, 2017). The boom in running from 1990 to 2013 saw vast growth in competition for those runners. Now, many of the companies hosting these events are facing significant challenges as supply has outgrown demand (Miller, 2017). Therefore, in order to stay solvent, companies reliant on road race participants must adapt in order to meet the needs and wants of their current customer base while attracting new participants. To do this, many companies associated with road racing have been forced to take a more marketing driven approach to their business.

The current study took both an inductive and deductive, three phase approach to identify runners’ motives and constraints, create personas, and determine differences in behaviors based on the personas created. Five research questions were utilized to guide the examination. The current study began with an analysis of the consumer relationship management (CRM) system of the sports commission (the focal organization within this study) to identify demographic differences within past 10k race participants. From there, a systematic sample of 12 participants were selected for interviews: sampling was derived from gender, ethnicity, running speed, and total number of 10k’s run.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to uncover the motivations, constraints, and psychographic variables associated with each interviewee. Findings from the interviews were paired with perceived participant motives and constraints provided by the administrators of the sports commission. In total, 40 motives were created. The second stage of persona creation followed the work of Janssen, Scheerder, Thibaut, Brombacher, & Vos (2017) where the items created during the qualitative phase were presented to a large sample of previous 10k participants. A sample of 2,567 previous 10k respondents indicated their level of agreement with each of the 40 motives being important in their decision to participate in the 10k. Each item was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). A principle component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation revealed that 33 of the 40 items loaded on 11 factors.

Once the factors were created, factor means were used to run a hierarchal cluster analysis. The analysis resulted in nine personas: advocates, intangibles, team SWAG, solo-philanthropists, community philanthropists, wristband warriors, loners, training teamers, wellness-only. Each persona has a unique combination of motive responses and range in size from 7% of the sample to 15%. Demographic information and event specifics such as constraints for future participation and initial awareness were tabulated for each persona. Additional information in the form of media consumption, physical activity, and lifestyle questions were also analyzed for each persona. Phase three found significant differences in 10k registration, 10k participation, participation in other (running and cycling) events, and charitable giving between the different personas. Different motivational factors were also found to predict 10k registration, 10k participation, participation in other (running and cycling) events.