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If you have their minds, will their bodies follow? Factors effecting customer loyalty in a ski resort setting

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: *commitment, customer loyalty, consumer trust, relationship marketing, value*

In many business situations, the primary focus of marketing activities can be viewed as developing and maintaining repeat patronage or loyalty from the firm's customer base. Due to many alternatives for consumers, vacation marketers are building loyalty by developing relationships with consu-

mers. While organizations may conceptualize and even implement relationship marketing practices into their consumer loyalty strategies, it is necessary to examine the variables contributing to a more loyal consumer base. This paper explores the relationship between organizationally related factors and consumer attitudinal loyalty in the resort industry using data collected from a ski resort. All factors in the study have been linked to loyalty, but have not previously been examined in one study. Regression results indicate that trust, commitment, satisfaction, past behavior, and value predict 60 percent of the variance in attitudinal loyalty. Implications suggest resort marketers need to segment customers based on number of visits, creating strategies to manipulate factors that are most important to each segment.



INTRODUCTION

In most business situations, the primary focus of marketing activities can be viewed as developing and maintaining repeat patronage from the firm's customer base. Anecdotal evidence abounds; from supermarket loyalty cards to the Starbucks 'buy ten, get one free' coffee cards. These marketing programs reflect the competitive nature of the respective industries, in terms of alternatives for consumers. Not only do supermarkets, coffee chains, and other businesses in the service industry have to ensure a certain

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level of product/service quality to maintain a customer base, but these businesses also must actively create and maintain customer loyalty. In the case of Starbucks, this is done by re-creating an idea or feel, whereby the customers are not just buying a café au lait; they are buying the concept of the Starbucks brand. Loyalty and brand-building efforts similar to Starbucks, albeit not as successful, can be found across any industry segment where competition for consumers' disposable income is heated. The leisure, recreation, and tourism industry is not different, as consumers have a plethora of alternatives to choose how they spend their leisure time and disposable income. Like marketers in other industries, the focus has shifted to loyalty building by developing relationships with consumers. Relationship marketing in practice, concentrates on enhancing long-term exchanges between the firm and customer in the service industry¹ and by creating new value with individual customers.² In return, the firm receives greater loyalty from the customers, the customers themselves are less likely to switch service providers, the customers are more willing to pay a premium price for the relationship, and they generate positive word-of-mouth advertising.³⁻⁴ While organizations may conceptualize and even implement relationship marketing practices into their consumer strategies, it seems necessary to examine the impact these strategies have on creating a more loyal consumer base. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that before practitioners design a relationship marketing program and implement strategies, they must first be convinced that there is a relationship between certain constructs that are within the practitioners' control and consumer loyalty.

Academic literature has examined many different relationships involving the construct of loyalty or factors comprising a more loyal customer base across a wide variety of industries (e.g. Garbarino and Johnson⁵; Sirdeshmukh et al.⁶; Morgan and Hunt⁷). While some of these studies have contained a similar focus in the recreation/leisure/vacation industry (e.g. Iwasaki and Havitz⁸;

Woodside and Jacobs⁹; Pritchard and Howard¹⁰), the diverse nature of this industry has precluded researchers from reaching a conclusive model that explains consumer loyalty. However, the traditional marketing literature and recreation/leisure industry literature have provided insight into the loyal consumer relationship, including factors that can be controlled by the organization and factors that are beyond the marketer's control. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between organizationally related factors (e.g. trust and satisfaction) and consumer loyalty, using data collected from a ski resort located in the northeastern United States. This examination combines factors academicians have found to be linked to consumer loyalty, but have not been examined in one study in hope of providing a parsimonious model that will aid vacation marketers in attracting and developing loyal customers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Loyalty

It has been advocated by researchers¹¹⁻¹² that the benefits of a loyal customer base provide an organization with a competitive advantage and necessitate a service organization's strategic focus. While researchers have investigated a loyal customer base in terms of frequent usage,¹³⁻¹⁶ recent explorations surrounding the loyalty construct have adopted the more holistic approach advocated by Day¹⁷ and Jacoby and Chestnut,¹⁸ which include both behavioral and attitudinal components of loyalty.¹⁹⁻²⁰ (For a more complete review of the loyalty literature in a leisure context, see Pritchard and Howard).²¹ According to Oliver,²² loyalty is 'a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, thereby causing same-brand or same-brand set purchasing despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior' (p. 34). Central to Oliver's definition of loyalty is the consumer's ability to tune out competitor's efforts to lure the consumer into

switching products or services. Of course, inducing switching behavior in consumers is much easier in product/service categories where a larger number of acceptable and viable alternatives are present.²³ The ski resort in the present study is interesting in that a major competitor is situated within a ten mile radius, presenting a viable alternative for consumers and making customer loyalty building efforts much more difficult. Therefore, managerial efforts to increase the attitudinal loyalty of the customer base for this particular ski resort should be encouraged to promote repeat business.

Academic researchers have debated the merits of using past behavior or repeat purchases to measure the concept of loyalty (e.g. Riley et al.).²⁴ Kokkinaki²⁵ examined the role of past behavior on future purchase intentions and found that past behavior did not significantly improve predictability of future intentions. Ewing²⁶ examined the influence of repeat purchase behavior on the expectation to purchase in the automotive industry, finding that repeat purchase behavior did indeed positively influence the expectation to purchase a particular brand of automobile.

In the tourism/leisure industry, academicians have also incorporated past behavior measures in various models involving loyalty. For instance, Niininen et al.²⁷ incorporated optimum stimulation level (OSL) and measures to predict future holiday destination selections – a precept moderately supported by their analyses. While the researchers did not operationalize the concept of loyalty, their study attempted to further the literature by examining psychological measures involving holiday selection choice. Furthermore, McKercher and Wong²⁸ divided tourists into four basic types: first-time main destination visitors; repeat-main destination visitors; first-time secondary-destination travelers; and, repeat secondary-destination travellers, to examine the moderating effects between groups in order to best develop specific profiles of tourists using both psychographic and demographic information. Finally, more closely related to the current study, Petrick et

al.²⁹ investigated entertainment vacationers' intentions to revisit, using past behavior, satisfaction, and perceived value as predictors. In this study, the trio of researchers found all three factors were positively related to vacationers' intent to revisit the destination; however, the three factors were poor predictors of vacationers' specific intent to purchase live entertainment packages in future visits. In all, past behavior appears to be an important factor in determining loyal vacation consumers; therefore, the authors employ this variable in the current study.

Trust

The foundation of any positive consumer/firm relationship is the construct of trust.^{30–31} While the first-time consumer may not have preconceived attitudes toward the service or service provider, these attitudes can be formed by the consumer after a number of consumptive episodes. As a result, the consumer develops an attitude demanding the provider meet his/her expectations in the service delivery process. This is the essence of Morgan and Hunt's³² definition of trust: 'confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity' (p. 23). Repeated consumer experiences with a provider that delivers the service with reliability and integrity may lead to a customer base that is more loyal in both an attitudinal and behavioral sense. Garbarino and Johnson³³ explored the relationship between satisfaction, trust, and commitment as they related to high and low relational customers in an off-Broadway theater setting. The researchers found that for low-relational customers, satisfaction was the primary mediating variable between theater attributes and future intentions, while commitment and trust were the mediating constructs between the theater attributes and future intentions for high relational customers, despite the absence of relationship building strategies advocated by Berry³⁴ and Crosby et al.³⁵ Garbarino and Johnson³⁶ posit that the development of trust and commitment for the high relational customers may be a result of intrinsic rewards or self-gratifi-

ation received by these high relational consumers by patronizing the theater.

Sirdeshmukh et al.³⁷ contend that consumer trust toward a service organization takes on two forms: trust in management policies and practices (MPPs), and trust in frontline employee behaviors (FLEs). The researchers explored a model in which these two trust dimensions mediated between dimensions of trustworthiness: value and loyalty and finding empirical support for their model across different sectors of the service industry. Both of the above studies are applicable to the current research setting of a ski resort. Because of the nature of the ski resort industry and the volume of customer traffic passing through the resort on an annual basis, management may view it difficult or cost-prohibitive to implement relationship-building strategies across the consumer base, instead relying on the consumers' affinity for skiing to create high relational customers. In light of any relationship-building strategies that may exist in a particular resort, consumer judgments must be made based on evaluations of slope conditions, resort policies (MPPs) and interaction with resort staff (FLEs). Therefore, it is expected that favorable consumer evaluations of ski resort MPPs and FLEs will have a positive effect on the attitudinal loyalty of ski resort customers.

Commitment

From a relationship marketing perspective, the presence of commitment is necessary for developing a successful relationship.³⁸⁻⁹ According to Moorman et al.,⁴⁰ commitment is the 'enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship' with a service provider (p. 316). The underlying premise is that highly committed customers work harder to maintain a relationship with a service provider than customers who have low levels of commitment. In addition, consumers highly committed to a relationship are likely to encounter higher switching costs if the relationship with a service provider is dissolved; consequently, these consumers will work harder at maintaining the relationship.⁴¹ As such, it is posited that high levels of commitment in ski resort

consumers will have a positive impact on their attitudinal loyalty to the resort.

Value

Value, or the consumer's perceptions based on experiences with the service, is a predictor of service choice, which in turn leads to loyalty.⁴² Consumer value judgments are based on the perceived benefits minus the perceived costs of maintaining the service relationship.⁴³ Therefore, providing value to customers is an integral relationship marketing strategy for increasing customer satisfaction, thereby increasing customer loyalty.⁴⁴ Since price is a component in a consumer's determination of value,⁴⁵⁻⁷ a positive perception of value may make customers less resistant to increased prices.⁴⁸ Consumer value judgments are not only based on individual customer perceptions, but are also effected by episodic encounters with the service provider. Consumers who perceive repetitive encounters of poor value provision by the service organization will likely develop negative attitudes toward the value of the service offering, which will, in turn, have a negative influence on the consumer's attitudinal loyalty. Similarly, by consistently providing perceived high value to the customers, a service provider will likely realize a positive influence on consumers' attitudinal loyalty to the firm. The researchers hypothesize that a positive relationship will exist between consumers' perceived value of the ski resort and attitudinal loyalty.

Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction is a consumer evaluation based on the entire consumptive experience with a product or service over time,⁴⁹ and as a result contributes to consumers' attitudinal loyalty. Similar to a theater, a ski resort requires an approach that allows the measurement of overall customer satisfaction with the experience of visiting the resort.⁵⁰ Conditions of the slopes, accessibility to the lifts, cleanliness of the restrooms, hotel accommodation, and so forth, all contribute to a customer's general level of satisfaction. This

evaluation is cumulative, taking into account both intangible elements of the service encounter, as well as the tangible elements.⁵¹ It is hypothesized that satisfaction will have a positive effect on consumers' attitudinal loyalty toward the resort.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

The survey included approximately 35 well established measures. Some of the independent constructs in the study were expected to be closely related. Thus, the authors addressed the possible multicollinearity problem in instrument design. For instance, several different scales were used to measure the constructs, measurements of similar constructs were grouped together, and the measures of different constructs were grouped away from each other with the use of text boxes and greater spacing. Questions on the survey included likert and semantic differential scales, as well as several categorical demographic and relevant behavioral measures.

Independent variables

Trust

Sirdeshmukh et al.'s⁵² multi-dimensional measurement of trust in the retail and airline service industries was included in the model. Frontline employee (FLE) trust and trust of management (MPP) are both measured using ten-point, four-item semantic differential scales. The items are the level of dependability, competency, integrity, and responsiveness of frontline employees and management policies and procedures. The MPP trust scale achieved a reliability of 0.90 in the present study, while the reliability of the FLE scale was 0.92.

Commitment

As used by Garbino and Johnson⁵³, commitment was measured with a seven-point, four item scale that captured participants' pride in the resort, sense of belonging to the resort,

caring of the long-term success of the resort, and finally patrons' loyalty to the resort. Garbino and Johnson state that these items concentrate on a consumer's identification with the service provider, and his/her psychological attachment with the provider, as well as his/her concern for the provider's success and loyalty to the provider. Participants reported their level of agreement with each statement from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree (commit $\alpha = 0.86$).

Satisfaction

Satisfaction was measured using an adaptation of the tool used in Spreng et al.'s⁵⁴ research and as used by Sirdeshmukh et al.⁵⁵ The ten-point, three-item scale measured participants' level of satisfaction with their last experience at the resort. Specifically, participants were asked to rate their last experience with the resort using a set of three bi-polar adjectives: highly satisfactory/highly unsatisfactory, very unpleasant/very pleasant, and terrible/delightful (satis $\alpha = 0.92$).

Value

Using a ten-point, four-item scale, respondents were asked to rate the benefits obtained from their experience with the resort.⁵⁶⁻⁸ Items included, 'For the prices you pay at this resort, would you say the experience at this resort is (very poor deal/very good deal)'; 'For the time you spent in order to ski at this resort, would you say skiing at this resort is (highly reasonable/highly unreasonable-reverse scored)'; 'For the effort involved in skiing at this resort, would you say skiing at this resort is (not worthwhile/very worthwhile)'; and 'How would you rate your overall experience at this resort (extremely poor value/extremely good value'. Reliability analysis for value produced a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.71.

Past behavior

The number of times patrons visited the ski resort during the ski season when the study

was conducted was used to operationalize past behavior, an expected predictor of attitudinal loyalty. Participants were asked to indicate how many times they had visited the ski resort during the current ski season. Categories included: 1 = once; 2 = 2–5 times; 3 = 6–10 times; 4 = 11–15 times; and 5 = more than 15 times. In the regression model, dummy variables were used as replacement predictor variables for the categories. Hair et al.⁵⁹ state that any nonmetric variable with k categories can be represented as $k - 1$ dummy variables. Thus, the variables of times2, times3, times4, and times5 were computed to represent these dummy codings.

Dependent variable

The present study utilizes resort patrons' attitudinal loyalty as the model's dependent variable in place of actual behavior. Intuitively, one could expect a resort patron with multiple visits over the course of a season to have high degrees of attitudinal loyalty. However, the authors believe this may be faulty logic as some consumers that are heavily involved with the sport of skiing (in terms of skiing multiple times a season at different resorts) may not necessarily have high attitudinal loyalty toward a particular resort. This perspective is similar to Petrick's⁶⁰ research among golf travelers, where the findings suggested golfers with fewer experiences had more positive appraisals of their experience to a particular resort than those golfers with frequent and varied travel experiences. Additionally, Petrick's results suggested that visitors of varying frequencies had different repurchase intentions. Therefore, the authors of the current study posit that the combination of resort attendees' past behaviors and the other variables under examination will allow a ski resort marketing manager to develop customer segments of differing levels of attitudinal loyalty that, when combined with other factors, should allow the marketing manager to develop strategies to increase loyalty in the customer base.

Four items were used to measure attitudinal loyalty. Two of these items were those used by Selin et al.⁶¹ and two were from Muncy's⁶² attitudinal loyalty research. The survey included all four items ('I consider myself to be a loyal patron of this resort'; 'If I had to do it over again, I would rather ski at another resort'; 'I try to ski at this resort because it is the best choice for me'; and 'To me, this resort is the same as other resorts') to fully capture patrons' loyal attitude (attloyal). Respondents were asked to provide their level of agreement with each statement (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The second item and fourth items were reverse scored. The four items were summed and produced a reliability of 0.63. While this reliability is slightly lower than that recommended by Hair et al.,⁶³ it was deemed adequate for the purpose of this exploratory investigation.

Data collection and sample

The research setting was a ski resort in the northeastern United States. The resort is located in a small mountain town of approximately 1300 people. The ski resort itself is a full service family vacation resort offering a wide array of amenities (i.e. those found at any family vacation destination). Some of these amenities are fine and casual dining, exercise facilities, indoor/outdoor pools, spa and spa services, a game room and shopping. Sports offered at the resort in addition to skiing are snow tubing, miniature golf, bowling, horseback riding, 18 hole championship golf course, biking, hiking, fly fishing, archery, tennis, paintballing, and rock climbing. For young families staying at the resort, kids clubs and babysitting are also available. The various types of lodging include chalets/cabins, condos, townhouses, villas, and hotel rooms. At most times during the year, there is a several night (i.e. 2–3 nights) minimum for lodging. Special services available at a price are hayrides, mountain-top campfires, and picnics. The resort offers

conference facilities as well. It is a large ski resort, boasting 14 slopes (largest vertical drop is 750 feet) and 17 ski trails (longest is over one and a half miles). Thus, the resort offers a wide variety of amenities and facilities to suit any guest, not simply skiers.

Guests come from all over the world and ski at this resort. However, most vacationers come from several nearby states. The largest metropolitan city is just over 60 miles away with a population of 2.4 million (US Census, 2005).⁶⁴ Because vacationers come from several different states, many vacationers take advantage of the resort's weekend and weekday lodging packages.

During a two week period in February 2004, adult visitors of the resort were randomly asked to participate in the study. Data collection was conducted on weekdays as well as weekends to reduce potential bias. Participants were skiers who were approached while they sat in the ski lodge and asked if they would be willing to complete the survey. Thus, a convenience sample was utilized. The respondents were told that in exchange for their time, they would be entered into a contest to win an all-expense paid weekend at the resort. If the respondents agreed, they were given a survey, pencil, and contest entry form. Non-response bias was considered to be minimal due to very few nonrespondents/participants, with the final sample reaching 187 participants (out of 200 distributed surveys). Participants were provided with brief written instructions before completing the self-administered survey.

Male participants represented 47 percent of the sample, with the remaining 53 percent female. Fifty percent of the participants were between 26 and 45 years of age, and 70 percent were employed full-time. Sixty-three percent were married and 68 percent reported annual household incomes between US\$40,000–US\$125,000. Thirty-four percent were college graduates and 29 percent possessed a Masters degree or higher. A detailed sample description can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample description (N = 187)

<i>Sample characteristic</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Valid proportion of total (%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	87	46.5
Female	100	53.5
<i>Age</i>		
18–25	17	9.1
26–35	40	21.4
36–45	53	28.3
46–55	45	24.1
Over 55	32	17.1
<i>Employment status</i>		
Unemployed	23	13.0
Part-time	30	16.9
Full-time	124	70.1
<i>Household income</i>		
Under \$25,000	10	5.7
\$25,001–40,000	16	9.1
\$40,001–65,000	42	24.0
\$65,001–90,000	38	21.7
\$90,001–125,000	39	22.3
Over \$125,000	30	17.1
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	51	28.3
Married	114	63.3
Divorced	10	5.6
Separated	4	2.2
Widowed	1	0.6

RESULTS

Model results

Results were analyzed using regression in order to estimate the relationship between the predictor variables and attitudinal loyalty. Model means, standard deviations, and reliability estimates for the scaled items appear in Table 2.

Attitudinal loyalty was regressed on the linear combination of MPP trust, FLE trust, satisfaction, commitment, value, the number of times the patron visited the resort this ski season (times2–times5). The equation containing these nine variables accounted for 60 percent of the variance in attitudinal loyalty, $F = 29.03$, $p < 0.001$.

Beta weights were then reviewed to assess the relative importance of the nine variables in the prediction of attitudinal loyalty. See Table 3 for the standardized regression coef-

Table 2: Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's Alpha reliability estimates for scaled items

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>
1. AttLoyal	21.24	4.72	0.63
2. MPP Trust	8.34	1.28	0.90
3. FLE Trust	8.06	1.52	0.92
4. Commitment	5.53	1.16	0.86
5. Satisfaction	8.22	1.47	0.92
6. Value	8.22	1.47	0.71

ficients (beta weights), the standard error, and the corresponding regression equation characteristic, as well as the Variance Inflation Factors for each variable. Table 3 shows that all predictor variables displayed significant beta weights. All variables were in the expected direction except the FLE trust variable.

One problem that can occur with this type of data is multicollinearity – where two of more of the predictor variables are highly related or intercorrelated. Multicollinearity diagnostics measured the degree and impact of multicollinearity among the variables in the model. Specifically, tolerance and vari-

ance inflation factor values were computed. Tolerance values were all greater than 0.10 and VIF values exceeded one. Both of these diagnostics indicate acceptable levels of collinearity.

DISCUSSION

A model of the factors that influence attitudinal loyalty in the ski resort industry is developed and tested. This particular model examines variables that have been utilized in various streams of research and demonstrates that they are indeed useful for predicting ski resort consumers' attitudinal loyalty. The results may allow ski resort managers to institute programs designed to manipulate the factors that have an impact on their customers' attitudinal loyalty toward the resort.

In terms of relative predictive importance, the commitment variable had the largest influence on consumers' attitudinal loyalty toward the ski resort, consistent with the hypothesized relationship discussed above. Similar to Garbarino and Johnson's⁶⁵ study in the arts sector, the ski resort in this study did not implement any strategic relationship-building initiative to foster positive attitudinal loyalty with their consumer base; yet, this

Table 3: Regression model – unstandardized coefficients, standard error, standardized coefficients, t-values

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Unstandardized coefficients</i>		<i>Standardized coefficients</i>			<i>VIF</i>
	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig</i>	
MPP Trust	0.581	0.311	0.157	1.866	0.064***	2.982
FLE Trust	-0.522	0.213	-0.168	-2.451	0.015**	1.963
Commitment	1.569	0.274	0.385	5.719	0.000*	1.764
Satisfaction	0.613	0.268	0.191	2.283	0.024**	1.873
Value	0.640	0.222	0.189	2.885	0.004**	2.817
Times2	3.076	0.606	0.282	5.073	0.000*	1.301
Times3	2.653	0.704	0.206	3.770	0.000*	1.259
Times4	3.262	0.867	0.203	3.764	0.000*	1.219
Times5	3.065	0.756	0.223	4.053	0.000*	1.274

* $p < 0.001$

** $p < 0.05$

*** $p < 0.10$

high level of commitment has formed with the resort's consumers. This may be the result of a consumer's affinity for the activity of skiing, or with some unknown benefits the customers derive from visiting the ski resort. This question, while beyond the scope of the current study, is an important question for future research.

The categorical variables indicating the number of times a consumer visited the resort also showed statistical significance. The coefficients designating customer visits to the resort between 2–5 times (times2); 6–10 times (times3); 10–15 times (times4); and more than 15 times (times5), each had relatively high predictive importance for the dependent variable of attitudinal loyalty. Additional regression models were run to test the difference between the five categories of the variable. In all cases, the only statistically significant difference was between those customers who visited the resort once and the other four categories. Visiting the resort once also had a positive relationship with attitudinal loyalty of the ski resort patrons, although not with the same magnitude as respondents in the other categories. This may indicate that for those customers visiting the ski resort more than once a year the relational bonds are developing at a quicker pace than those customers who visit only once. For customers who make more than one visit annually to the resort, their level of attitudinal loyalty does not increase at the same rate. If the resort can increase customer annual visits beyond once, the likelihood that those consumers will develop greater attitudinal loyalty toward the resort is greater. The implications for these results lies in a segmented marketing strategy designed to first increase skiing visits up from once annually, to the 2–5 visit range, with a differentiated strategy aimed at increasing those skiers making between 6–15 visits annually to increase their level of attitudinal loyalty, and more importantly, to capture ancillary revenue through consumer spending on food, lodging and entertainment. Package deals involving discounted hotel rooms, special lift ticket prices and perhaps meals may aid in this endeavor. For those consumers

already visiting the resort more than once, managerial efforts should also focus on increasing their level of satisfaction with each visit and offering value-added services to maintain or grow this level of usage.

Both the value and satisfaction factors displayed statistical significance, indicating that consumers of the ski resort perceive a skiing visit as a worthwhile, affordable activity, supporting results of other studies conducted in the service industry. The results support the hypothesized relationships that consumer perceived evaluations of both the value of the service offering and the satisfaction with the service delivery system would lead to increased customer attitudinal loyalty. Managerial efforts centering on the value factor should increase the perceived value-added component of visiting the resort for segments of visitors. Specifically, discount food/beverage coupons, reduced lodging for future visits, or automatic lodging upgrades may be some strategies that increase the positive value attitudes without the resort incurring much additional cost. Ensuring that visitor satisfaction levels improve would require the resort to focus on customer service training for the staff, so that each interaction a visitor has with the resort will be positive.

The results were mixed for the two trust factors. MPP trust displayed statistical significance and a positive beta weight, while FLE trust was statistically significant with a negative beta weight, contradicting FLEs hypothesized relationship with attitudinal loyalty. One explanation for this result may be that with each trip to the resort, consumers encounter many frontline employees, as nearly every employee of the resort is visible carrying out portions of the resort's operations on a daily basis. Therefore, resort policies and procedures, while set by an invisible (to consumers) upper management, are enforced by the employees. A consequence may be that the consumers feel negatively toward the frontline employees. Ironically, Sirdeshmukh et al.⁶⁶ found a strong influence of FLE trust on MPP trust in each service segment they investigated, while there was only a weak influence of MPP trust on FLE trust. Perhaps consumers

in the ski resort industry have a harder time differentiating between FLE and MPP behavior. Nevertheless, the question should be re-examined in future research in other areas of the leisure /recreation industry.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of the current study shed light on the attitudinal loyalty of consumers to a ski resort. Since data was only captured from one specific resort, the results cannot be generalized to other skiers, other ski resorts or other leisure activities. Additionally, the results for MPP and FLE trust were not as expected. This may be due to the particular operational procedures of this resort that make it difficult for consumers to differentiate between 'management' and 'front line employees'.

While attitude research suggests that a measurement of consumers' behavioral intentions is more appropriate than trying to predict actual behavior due to the many situational factors that cause consumers to act inconsistently (e.g. time constraints), the present research captured patrons' future intentions as a means for investigating the relationship between attitudinal loyalty and future intentions. Using Garbarino and Johnson's⁶⁷ measure of future intentions for support of a New York, off-Broadway reparatory theatre company, the present research modified this scale for the context of a ski resort and measured future intentions of ski resort patrons. The correlation between this future intentions measure and attitudinal loyalty is 0.58 ($p < 0.01$). Thus, while the purpose of the present research is to investigate factors that predict attitudinal loyalty, one may posit that these variables also may help to estimate consumers' future intentions. Future research should further investigate this relationship.

Researchers examining a similar topic in the future may also wish to capture data about distance consumers traveled to the resort and length of stay at the resort. It may be the case that consumers seeking a skiing

vacation are willing to travel further for an extended ski vacation, and elect to ski at a local resort for one or two days. Determining the attitudinal loyalty of these two different types of resort patrons would be important to marketing managers.

Finally, the current study examined factors that have been used in various relationships with trust, loyalty, satisfaction and commitment in other industries. While the current study used them in a ski resort setting, future research on the topic of consumer loyalty in a similar setting should examine the underlying relationships between the various factors using more advanced statistical analyses.

CONCLUSION

Anecdotal and empirical evidence have demonstrated that creating a loyal customer base is important to an organization. The current study examined one facet of the customer loyalty relationship by investigating factors influencing attitudinal loyalty for customers of a ski resort. Since competition for consumers' disposable income is so great in the vacation/recreation industry, it behoves both practitioners and academicians alike to understand with as much depth as possible factors that get a particular destination in consumers' consideration set, and factors contributing to positive attitudes toward that destination on initial and subsequent visits. Moreover, results from past academic investigations into customer loyalty across the service industry and recreation/leisure industry have not led to consistent, conclusive evidence supporting certain predictors of any type of loyalty in a customer base. As such, the pragmatic approach is to examine separate industry segments in hopes of uncovering consumer loyalty predictors in that segment.

The results of this study suggest that by fostering deeper commitment from customers toward the resort, the management may realize more positive attitudes of loyalty from its customers. To accomplish this, resort management should investigate a cause marketing initiative. A cause chosen for its ability to resonate with a large portion of the

customer base may result in greater commitment from customers who find themselves aligned with the resort's beliefs. Focusing on the value proposition and ensuring visitors to the resort are satisfied with their experiences are also important predictors of the attitudinal loyalty from the resort customers. A quality assurance program and an advertising campaign featuring cost benefits and attributes important to the majority of the customer base would be logical initiatives. Furthermore, the resort should examine the frequency of visits from its customers, as attitudinal loyalty in the customer base may not develop at the same rate for light, medium and heavy users. An incentive program should be developed to reward the heavy users and move other customers up in product usage frequency.

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