Using Psychographic Profiles in Outdoor Programs: An Applied Example From Summer Camps

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Research surrounding motivations in outdoor and experiential education is plentiful (e.g., Buckley, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Ewert et al., 2013; Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989); however, there is limited understanding of how participant motivations and demographic variables interact to influence a decision to enroll in outdoor programming. It is important to consider multiple factors (attitudes, interests, needs, motivations, and barriers) for various participants depending on the type of program they enroll in (e.g. adventure-based, environmental education, day or overnight). Outdoor organizations would benefit from a deeper understanding of their types of participants, what prompts and prevents them from participating, and how best to connect with each type of participant through specific programming and marketing efforts.

Psychographic profiles are created from a combination of demographic variables and information about consumers’ attitudes, interests, and motivations behind a purchase decision (Giddings, 2010). In a systematic review of the literature on psychographic profiles, Wells (1975) explained that this approach to categorizing customers offers new insights that may be not made from demographic information alone. A profile developed from a deep understanding of customers allows an organization to shift marketing and programming strategies, resulting in more uniquely targeted positioning and messaging, and services offered based on customers’ needs (Giddings, 2010).

One context in which psychographic user profiles can be explored is summer camp, as parent demographics and barriers, motivations for their children, and child interest are important factors to be considered. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify key consumer psychographic profiles via a case study approach. Outdoor programmers can consider using similar typologies or developing their own that are suited to their participants and program.

Method

Participants in this study were part of a national longitudinal study (the American Camp Association [ACA] Impact Study) examining youth outcomes for children who attend camp
and the family decision-making process regarding summertime activities. Families \((n = 449)\) enrolled in Spring 2018 and completed baseline and demographic data, including parent history with camp at that time. All of these families enrolled a child (aged 9 to 10) in either day or overnight camp during summer 2018. Further data points included Fall 2018 surveys \((n = 404)\), Fall 2018 parent–child interviews \((n = 234)\), Spring 2019 surveys \((n = 382)\), and Spring 2019 parent–child interviews \((n = 113)\). Fewer families were intentionally interviewed during Spring 2019, which allowed for more in-depth interviews. During interviews, families discussed how summer camp fit into their overall planning for the summer and perceived outcomes of this experience for their child.

Data from families were analyzed by a group of researchers. Victoria Povilaitis, Jessie Dickerson, and Mary Godwin independently reviewed and triangulated data across timepoints. Various aspects were considered including child and parent history with camp, types of camps attended, socioeconomic status, and identification of values and outcomes from the camp experience. Upon review, Povilaitis, Dickerson, and Godwin classified families into primary and secondary psychographic profiles. When there was disagreement among coders, Daniel Richmond was consulted and discussion allowed for agreement. Although not every family had data for each timepoint, 122 families were identified as exemplars for the psychographic profiles.

**Results**

Results showed four emergent psychographic profiles: Enthusiast (33.6% of exemplar participants), Ecologist (35.2%), Dabbler (13.9%), and Constrainer (17.2%). Preliminary analyses using two-step cluster analysis were completed and the four groups varied along some important variables.

The Enthusiast family is more likely to be a two-adult household; to have income over $100,000; to have a parent with a master’s degree; and to spend upwards of $6,000 on extracurriculars annually. Camp tradition is important to them, and they are more likely to say camp is an essential childhood experience and is a high priority. They are also more likely to send their child to 4 or more weeks of overnight camp.

Ecologists are more likely to prioritize a range of activities and are more likely to send their child to multiple weeks of day camp. They articulate value in the camp experience, but they also do so for other activities. Camp may be a priority but is not always the top priority.

Dabbler families tend to have lower household incomes and are likely to spend less than $2,000 on extracurricular activities annually. Although they are likely to say camp is a medium priority, they are less likely to say camp is essential. In terms of their camp enrollment, children of Dabbler families are more likely to spend 1 week or less at overnight camp. Dabblers offer the most opportunity for movement among the typologies, as their children may attend camp for only one season and discover it is not for them, or they may be able to identify the benefits in a camp experience and begin to prioritize it over other activities.

Constrainer families face challenging limitations in terms of sending their child to camp and other activities, as they are more likely to be living in single-parent households with income under $60,000. In addition, they are more likely to spend less than $1,000/year on extracurricular activities and note cost as an important factor in making summertime decisions. They are less likely to be White and more likely to have less than a 4-year college or university degree. These families value the camp experience, as they are more likely to say camp is essential; however, they are less likely to say it is a high priority during summer activity planning. For families with Constrainer elements, often summer activities serve primarily as child care.
Future Directions

By creating psychographic profiles for different sectors of outdoor recreation and education, practitioners can more effectively market to and provide services for specific groups. Inevitably, users engage in outdoor recreation for a variety of interconnected reasons and also do not engage for many reasons. Psychographic profiling allows practitioners to understand their primary users in a more holistic way.

Although these psychographic profiles are emerging and currently centered around families who send children to camp, they may be transferrable to other types of outdoor programming. It may be valuable for organizations to consider similar typologies or to engage in a similar process to develop their own. An understanding of current clientele will allow practitioners to focus marketing on individuals who may be irregular participants and have potential to become returning users. Organizations may also consider the potential barriers for participants and consider how they can reduce these challenges to provide more accessible programs for all. Some participants understand the value of programs and want to participate but face logistical constraints. Anything that organizations can do to create greater access for individuals who encounter barriers to participation is beneficial and will reflect well on the organization.

Conclusion

Outdoor organizations can use findings from this study to inform programming considerations and marketing efforts to showcase participant outcomes and benefits, recruit new participants, and potentially encourage them to return to programming.

References


