

WHAT MAKES DISSATISFIED STATE PARK CAMPERS?

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This paper reports the findings of a joint project of the University of Vermont and the Vermont Department of Forests and Parks. The goal of the project was to develop a reliable system for monitoring camper satisfaction. Camper complaints were translated into demerits based upon the rated importance of the complaint. The summation of demerits was correlated with the camper exit grade and written comments to determine the threshold of major dissatisfaction.

Introduction

LaPage and Cormier (1977) found that the public's image of an activity like camping explains to a major extent participation in that activity. In like manner, the public's image of a specific campground or park is closely associated with likely future visits to that area.

Marketing research suggests that while positive images are important to the future purchase of a product, negative images are more influential in final product choice (Echelberger and McEwen 1986). Image analysis is further complicated by the fact that the image created in the mind of a camper or park visitor may differ significantly from the image of a park manager (Clark et al. 1971).

This paper is based on the 1990 survey of Vermont state park campers. On two Wednesdays and two Saturdays in July and August 1990, all campers in all Vermont state parks were given an opportunity to fill out a "report card". This paper is based on the tabulation and analysis of these report cards. The focus of this report is on the dissatisfied camper rather than the camper who has had a satisfying experience.

Methods

LaPage and Bevins (1981) developed a "report card" for campers to register their degree of satisfaction with 12 park amenities (ease of check-in, cleanliness of restrooms, control of pets, control of noise, cost of the site, availability of firewood and supplies, recreational opportunities, rules and regulations and their enforcement, safety/security, and helpfulness of staff).

A Likert scale was used to translate report card alpha grades to a more useable numeric measurement (a = 95, b = 85, c = 75, d = 65, e = 55). The LaPage/Bevins report card has been used for the last 6 years to measure camper attitudes in Vermont State Parks. A space at the bottom of the card (2" by 4") was reserved for camper written comments.

Additionally, campers were asked to grade their first impression and their final recommendation of the park. This was, essentially, an entry/exit rating. Theoretically, if the camper had a good experience, there should be no drop in grade between entry and exit.

Campers were asked to place a check mark next to the five items on the report card which were most important to them when camping. This feature of the report card was considered critical in the separation of important from unimportant items.

Report cards were printed on 6" by 4.25" stock and were pre-addressed (postage paid) to the University of Vermont. Campers were urged to mail them in any U.S. post office, rather than returning them to the ranger station.

Results

Average grades and the importance of park amenities in the minds of 1,760 Vermont State Park campers in 1990 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Satisfaction grades reported by 1,760 campers, 34 Vermont State Parks, 1990 (individual park means weighted by number of cards returned from campers at that park).

Item	Average Grade	Standard Deviation	Importance Votes (%)
First impression	91.05	1.57	2.18
Ease of check-in	92.02	1.44	4.70
Cleanliness of restrooms	88.11	3.76	17.99
Pet control	90.55	1.94	3.98
Noise control	89.42	2.29	12.91
Site cost	86.99	2.48	9.08
Availability of firewood	89.94	2.65	4.57
Availability of supplies	83.83	3.06	2.76
Recreation opportunities	87.04	2.76	8.80
Good rules and regulations	89.92	1.61	5.63
Enforcement of rules	89.73	2.19	6.15
Safety and security	90.66	1.72	10.62
Helpfulness of staff	92.10	1.74	10.64
Your recommendation of us	87.85	1.65	-----

On the average state park campers appeared to be quite satisfied with their camping experience in 1990. However, averages can be deceiving and lead to a sense of complacency on the part of management unless exceptions to the average are carefully evaluated. One unhappy camper will discuss his/her experience with at least 9 to 10 other campers (TARP 1976). This can potentially lead to a rightly or wrongly imposed blotch on the park image. Park management should attempt to identify the most unhappy campers, listen to their problems, and attempt to devise a method of solving complaints as quickly as possible.

Using the average of all grades on a single report card disguises an unhappy camper. There are usually enough good grades to offset a few poor grades. So the research question becomes one of developing a statistically sound procedure for identifying truly unhappy campers. A system of "demerits" was tested using only the scores assigned to the five most important elements checked on report cards (Table 2).

Table 2. Demerits assigned for report card grades of C, D, or E.

Report Card Item	Importance Vote %	Demerits Grade C Times 1	Demerits Grade D Times 2	Demerits Grade E Times 3
Clean restrooms	17.99	17.99	35.98	53.97
Noise control	12.91	12.91	25.82	38.73
Staff helpfulness	10.64	10.64	21.28	31.92
Safety/security	10.62	10.62	21.24	31.86
Site cost	9.08	9.08	18.16	27.24

Total demerits were calculated for each of the 1,760 campers in the study. The next step was to identify the threshold in total demerits where a camper was really dissatisfied with the camping experience. Two methods were employed to identify this threshold: (1) Determination of the point where exit grade (your recommendation of us) appeared to be influenced by demerits. (2) Determination of the point where strongly worded negative written comments were triggered by demerits. It seemed wise to use two methods at this point as regression analysis didn't indicate a strong relationship between total demerits and exit grade (correlation coefficient = .52, r-squared = .28).

From Table 3 it appears that where 80 or more demerits have accrued, the exit grade drops quite substantially. The exit grade does not appear to be influenced by demerits ranging between 50 and 79.

Table 3. Relationship between total demerits and exit grade.

Total Demerits	Observations	Mean Exit Grade
100 or more	12	70
80 to 99	16	75
70 to 79	8	82
60 to 69	20	84
50 to 59	22	82

The second method for determining the threshold of real dissatisfaction related to a quantification of written comments on the report card. Very detailed negative written comments were reported on 28% of the report cards that had 80 or more demerits. Similar written comments were found on only 7% of the cards with 50 to 79 demerits. This finding corroborates the relationship shown in Table 3 and indicates that the dissatisfaction threshold lies somewhere around the 80 demerit level.

The specific content of the written comments was analyzed in detail and classified. One-fourth of the comments related to cleanliness--either of restrooms, campsites, or general public areas like the beach. Another 22% of the comments related to dissatisfaction with the physical facility, either buildings or grounds. Sixteen percent of the negative comments related to the actions of fellow campers--noise, drinking, inconsiderate actions etc. Twelve percent of the negative comments concerned dissatisfaction with the on-site staff. Only 7% of the comments were directed at the cost of the camping experience. The remainder of the comments represented unique situations not easily classified.

At the onset of this project, it was hypothesized that the greatest degree of dissatisfaction would be prevalent among non-residents, and especially among campers from the more urban northeastern states. The assumption was that residents of the more urban states would be accustomed to a higher service level and want more conveniences (like hook-ups which are not available in any Vermont State Park). Data analysis found the reverse to be the case. The greatest dissatisfaction was found among the Vermont resident campers. While Vermont residents represented 26% of all campers returning report cards, they represented 63% of those who gave 50 or more demerits to the parks.

As was mentioned earlier in this paper, report cards were given to all campers on two Wednesdays and two Saturdays in July and

August. Camper volume is significantly higher on weekends than on weekdays. In like manner dissatisfaction was much greater on Saturday than it was on Wednesday. More than three out of four (76%) campers giving 50 or more demerits were Saturday campers. Only 24% of the campers assigning 50 or more demerits were Wednesday campers. This finding substantiates the general feeling that degree of dissatisfaction is somewhat related to park congestion and associated problems.

Implications

Marketing surveys indicate that businesses have more dissatisfied customers than they realize (DSEF 1982). U.S. Department of Commerce data indicate that for every complaint received by management, there are an additional 26 persons who have problems, but haven't complained. Complaints will not be heard from most people unless some formal mechanism is in place through which the customer can register a complaint.

The report card mechanism serves this purpose well. However, park managers must carefully evaluate report card results. Averages can be misleading. Most campers are highly satisfied with their camping experience. This high degree of satisfaction more than offsets the low degree of satisfaction experienced by a few campers.

The demerit system employed in this research showed that a minor degree of dissatisfaction was experienced by 50 campers out of 1,760 (demerits ranging from 50 to 79). A major degree of dissatisfaction was experienced by 28 campers (80 demerits or more). This latter group represented only 2% of the respondents. On the surface this would seem to be relatively unimportant; however, if the unhappy 2% discuss this with 10 other campers, there may be as many as 20% of the public that has a rightfully or wrongfully tarnished image of a park. In the long run this could be serious.

Most of the issues cited by dissatisfied campers are controllable by management. Two thirds of the complaints related to cleanliness, facility maintenance, or the actions of other campers. Most of these issues could have been solved with very little additional expenditure.

Most of the dissatisfaction (76%) occurred on weekends. This would indicate that dissatisfaction is congestion related. Efforts by management to relieve congestion by greater dispersion or other techniques may significantly reduce the dissatisfaction level.

Management should (1) put in place a system which makes it easy for campers to register complaints, (2) develop a system of prioritizing complaints to identify critical issues, (3) attempt to solve camper complaints as quickly as possible, (4) keep a record of all complaints and the follow-up action taken by management, and (5) evaluate the long-run effectiveness of the system.

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