

Factors Affecting Importance Ratings for Private Campground Amenities

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Abstract

Ownership campgrounds are a little studied segment of outdoor recreation. This paper investigates the variations in relative importance campsite owners have of selected amenities at a large midwestern campground. Further questions asked respondents why they purchased their campsite and why they selected the particular campground.

1.0 Introduction

Ownership campgrounds provide developed camping facilities for people preferring different levels of security, amenities and services than those offered by public campgrounds. The ownership campground is organized similarly to a condominium association with individual owners owning their campsite and having a shared interest in the common areas of the resort campground and its amenities. In order to meet the needs of their market, ownership campgrounds must regularly evaluate their facilities and services.

2.0 Purpose

Though the overall study was intended to evaluate owners' campground usage patterns and attitudes and toward a variety of campground issues, the portion of the study reported in this article focuses on the amenities offered at the campground. This paper first looks at a variety of amenities offered at the facility to determine the owners' perceived level of importance for each. Additionally, the paper compares selected owner attitudes by various descriptive characteristics (user age, gender, years as an owner, etc.) to investigate possible relationships.

The campground in this study, located near Sublette, Illinois, is one of the largest private ownership campgrounds in the U.S. with 6,140 hardened campsites designed to accommodate "park model" campers. Contained within the 1,756 acres of the campground are: 70 acres of lakes, 40 miles of paved roads and 15 miles of recreational trails. Amenities include: pools/beach, recreation/activity centers, fishing/boating, planned recreational activities, sports courts, natural areas, comfort stations, and commercial amenities such as snack bars, laundries and small shops. Most of the campsite owners come from the Midwest, particularly from the major urban areas surrounding Chicago. Comprehensive evaluations of the campground operation are completed by the campground owner's association every five years in order to learn how the campsite owners feel about the management of the campground. Previous surveys were completed in 1992 and 1997.

3.0 Methods

Data was collected as part of a 5-year review process for the campground resort. Four page questionnaires were mailed to all 6,140 campground owners, with 2,012 usable surveys returned yielding a 30% response rate. Due to administrative decisions by the homeowner's association, no attempts to contact owners to determine nonrespondent bias were made. However, the general demographics were very similar to the previous studies and the known membership base.

Most questions were repeated from previous surveys though some new sections were added by the resort management team and the researcher. Before the questionnaire was mailed to campsite owners, it was first pre-tested and reviewed by the board of directors of the campground association. Most demographic and descriptive questions were forced choice. Attitude and importance questions used 5-point Lykert scales. Respondents were also asked to complete several open-end questions discussing some of their feeling about the management of the campgrounds, suggestions for the future etc. The analysis and discussion of these questions was not part of this paper.

Table 1.—Description of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Valid Percent
25 or younger	8	0.40%
26-25	91	4.50%
36-45	364	18.10%
46-55	558	27.80%
56-65	505	25.20%
66 or older	476	23.70%
Education level	Frequency	Valid Percent
Less Than High School Graduate	130	6.60%
High School Diploma or G.E.D	535	27.20%
Some College	572	29.10%
Associate/Technical/ Degree	216	11.00%
Bachelor's Degree	286	14.60%
Graduate Degree	225	11.50%
Income Level	Frequency	Percent
\$19,000 or less	88	5.50%
\$20,000 - \$34,999	253	15.80%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	333	20.80%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	443	27.70%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	280	17.50%
\$100,000 - \$149,000	155	9.70%
\$150,000 and up	50	3.10%
Years of Ownership at Campground	Frequency	Valid Percent
Less Than One	92	4.60%
1-4 years	482	24.20%
5-9 years	361	18.10%
10-14 years	239	12.00%
15-20 years	241	12.10%
More Than 20 years	575	28.90%

4.0 Description of the Respondents

As seen in Table 1, only about 23 % of the respondents were under the age of 46 while nearly 24% were 66 years of age or older. The largest group of respondents (27.8%) was in the 46-55 age with another large group (25.2%) aged 56-65. Overall, about 49% of the respondents were above the age of 55.

The level of education was relatively low with only about 37% reporting having any degree above a high school diploma. About 30 % reported some college while about 15% reported having a bachelor's degree and 12% reported having a graduate degree. The most commonly reported family income was \$50,000 – \$74,999 with about 28% of the respondents in this group. About 42%

of the respondents reported family incomes less than \$50,000 while about 40% reported having incomes above \$75,000.

The management of the campground confirmed that these findings were similar to their known owner base. They describe their purchasers as primarily Midwestern, blue collar, industrial workers and their families. Many of the respondents owned their campsites for a long period of time. Overall about 52% of the owners reported owning their campsite for 10 or more years. The largest group reporting (nearly 29%) had owned their site more than twenty years while a total of about 29% had owned their sites for 4 years or less.

Table 2.—Importance Ratings for Campground Amenities

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
Camping	59.7%	22.6%	9.9%	5.3%	2.1%
Fishing/Boating	35.2%	35.5%	18.5%	7.7%	3.0%
Pools/Beach	57.2%	28.3%	11.1%	2.2%	1.2%
Sports Courts	20.5%	30.3%	33.7%	11.6%	3.6%
Recreation Centers & Facilities	37.0%	35.6%	21.2%	4.4%	1.8%
Comfort Stations	47.7%	32.7%	13.8%	4.1%	1.7%
21 and Older Buildings	23.6%	31.1%	33.0%	8.4%	3.9%
Planned Recreational Activities	26.7%	35.3%	27.6%	7.9%	2.5%
Commercial Amenities	22.0%	42.1%	25.2%	8.5%	2.2%
Woodhaven's Natural Areas	47.8%	32.9%	15.3%	2.8%	1.2%
Other	65.2%	34.8%			

Table 3.—Purposes for Purchasing a Campsite.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Escape From the City	367	18.9%
Quality Family Time	364	18.7%
Activities	61	3.1%
Relax	780	40.1%
Experience Nature	113	5.8%
Other	32	1.6%
Multiple responses	229	11.8%
Total	1946	100.0%

Table 4.—Motivations for Choosing to Purchase at this Place

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Price/Value	296	15.5%
Location	263	13.8%
Family/Friends Here	501	26.2%
Amenities	189	9.9%
Other	267	14.0%
Multiple responses	396	20.7%
Total	1912	100.0%

5.0 Results

Table 2 shows that, in every case, the respondents indicated that each amenity was either "Very Important" or "Important" more than 50% of the time. There was variation in this however. Overall, Pools and Beach (86%), Camping (82%), Natural Areas (81%) and Comfort Stations (80%) had the highest totals of "Very Important" and "Important" percentages. Those amenities with the lowest combined importance rating

were Sports Courts (51%) and the 21 and Older Building (55%)

A further analysis compared importance ratings by selected demographic variables. Overall, there were significant differences by age. Older respondents rated things less importantly. There were also differences in importance ranking by years of ownership. (Interestingly, those who purchase lots 10 to 14 years ago reported lower importance ranking than the other groups.) An additional analysis asked respondents why they purchased their campsite then compared the responses given by the previously mentioned demographic groups. As seen in Table 3, the most common reason for purchasing a campsite was "relaxation" (40%) followed by "escape from the city" (19%) and "quality family time" 19%.

A further analysis of the reason to purchase was conducted. When the purpose was compared by age, younger purchasers were more likely to purchase to "escape from the city" or for "quality family time" while older respondents more likely to purchase to "relax." The same pattern also followed when reason to purchase was compared by years of ownership. Newer owners were more likely to purchase to "escape from the city" or for "quality family time" while others were more likely to purchase to "relax."

Respondents were then asked what motivated them to purchase at this particular campground. As seen in Table 4, about 26% of the respondents reported purchasing because of "friends and family" while about 16% purchased because of "price and value."

When the motivation to purchase at this particular campground was compared by age group, some differences became apparent: “price/value” was more important for younger respondents while “location” more important for older ones. Also, “family & friends” was more important for younger groups. When the motivation to purchase at this campground was compared by the years of ownership, “family & friends” was most important for all but most senior owners. “Price/value” was important for the newer purchasers.

6.0 Conclusions

The initial analysis shows that importance levels for the various amenities was high but that the relative levels of importance attached to the amenities varied by age and the length of ownership at the campground. Generally, the more senior owners ranked the amenities less importantly than younger, newer members

Most respondents purchased for “relaxation” or “to escape the city” though the reasons to purchase varied by age and length of lot ownership. Being with “friends and family” and “price/value” were the two most common reasons reported for purchasing at this campground. Similar to the previous questions, the motivations for purchasing at this campground were also seen to vary by age and length of ownership. Overall, it is apparent that the campground owners are a diverse group with a variety of attitudes toward amenities and why they purchased at the campground.

7.0 Discussion

Campground managers must be aware of the different groups coexisting on their property. Since there are differences between the older more seasoned owners and the newer, younger owners, managers must constantly weigh their decisions. Focusing on older member might make the property less attractive to newer purchasers while focusing on the newer group could antagonize the older, loyal members. It is difficult to tell whether the differences shown by the older group come from changes in family lifecycle that have occurred over time, or whether they purchased with different motivation and perspectives. Interestingly, the campground is experiencing some multi-generational usage – where parents once took their children to play, they now take their grandchildren. This campground might make a good location for further family lifecycle studies.

Apparently, as the property has gone through its lifecycle, it has offered different benefits to potential purchasers. Sales and marketing staff need to understand that different age groups may be looking for different things from the campground. Specific marketing campaigns can be developed addressing the benefits required for each different age groups.

An unaddressed issue was ethnicity. Over the years, the ethnicity of the owners of the campsites has changed. (This became apparent as a theme in the open-ended comments.) Unfortunately, the association management group chose not to include the ethnicity variable in the survey.