

PREDICTORS OF CUSTOMER LOYALTY FOR AQUATIC AND FITNESS CENTRES

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INTRODUCTION

Competition for customers has been increasing due to the number of new or refurbished public and commercial aquatic and fitness centres in many Australian cities (Benton, 2003). Consequently, retention of customers and measuring customer loyalty are increasingly important issues for facility managers. This study focuses on the relationships between a range of loyalty measures (attitudinal and behavioral), service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction at an Australian public aquatic and fitness centre. Retention of loyal customers and word of mouth advocacy and ultimately organisational profitability are important consequences of customer service quality as well as customer satisfaction (Bernhardt et al., 2000; Brady & Robertson, 2001; Murray & Howat 2002; Voss et al., 2004).

Customer loyalty is the level of continuity in the customer's relationship with a brand or service provider (Soderlund, 2006). The behavioral view of loyalty includes repeat purchasing or frequency of attendance (Pritchard et al., 1992), and the duration of the customer-service provider relationship (Soderlund, 2006). The attitudinal view of loyalty includes two major indicators of customer retention – customers' intention to repurchase (or revisit), and their willingness to recommend the service to other prospective customers (word-of-mouth advocacy) (Rundle-Thiele, 2005; Voss et al., 2004). Additional to the traditional measures of loyalty, this research includes a loyalty measure that acknowledges the influence of access to alternative facilities.

Service quality as an antecedent to overall satisfaction appears to be mainly a customer's cognitive evaluation of a service provider's performance (Cronin, 2003). The relative importance of the physical attributes of the service (clean, comfortable and modern facilities), and staffing attributes were identified in studies of sports and fitness centres (Afthinos et al., 2005; Papadimitriou & Karteroliotis, 2000).

Overall satisfaction appears to be a combination of emotional and cognitive responses (Cronin, 2003; Oliver, 1997; Wong, 2004). As a global measure, overall satisfaction can be considered as a post-service evaluative judgment that is reflected in the customer's overall feelings toward that service (Choi & Chu, 2001) which have built up over time (Gustafsson et al., 2005; Homburg et al., 2005; Seiders et al., 2005; Skogland & Siguaw, 2004).

METHODS

The sample

A data collection schedule was the centre programs and timetables representative sample of customers over a during the 14-day data A sample of the 187 respondents from a central city Australian aquatic and fitness centre included a majority that were females (62%). The main activities represented were fitness gym (31%), lap swimming (29%) and group fitness classes (19%). Whereas a majority of respondents (72%) were centre members, most only had monthly memberships (64% of the members) while 12-month memberships were relatively less popular (24% of members).

QUESTIONNAIRE AND MEASURES

Sections of the questionnaire included customer service quality, customer demographics, customer use characteristics, overall satisfaction, a measure of the overall experience, intention to revisit the centre, and willingness to recommend the centre to others.

Customer service quality

Using the disconfirmation approach to measure service quality, customers' expectations (E) were compared with how they perceived (P) each attribute of the service performed (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Loyalty

Three attitudinal measures included "To what extent would you recommend this centre to others", "Do you intend visiting this centre again in the near future?", and "If there was another centre available to you, would you be likely to use it instead of this centre?" Behavioral loyalty measures included the number of visits per week and how long the respondent had been a customer of the centre.

Overall satisfaction

A global measure of overall satisfaction was anchored by very dissatisfied and very satisfied (Murray & Howat, 2002; Skogland & Sigauw, 2004; Voss et al., 2004). The customers' 'overall experience' was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*displeased*) to 7 (*pleased*) (Jones & Suh, 2000). Overall satisfaction and overall experience were aggregated into a single 'total satisfaction' scale (Cronbach's alpha = .808).

RESULTS

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the service quality attributes (expectations) yielded a four-factor solution that explained 66.01% of the variance. The four factors were: *staffing*, *parking*, *facility maintenance* and *pool water* with respective Cronbach's alphas of .882, .935, .913, and .785.

Regression analysis yielded mostly significant relationships ($p < .001$) between the four service quality factors, total satisfaction, and the three attitudinal loyalty measures (as dependent variables). The strongest relationships were between total satisfaction and the attitudinal loyalty measures. Positive and significant relationships were also recorded for the four service quality factors and total satisfaction. In contrast, the relationships between the four service quality factors and the three attitudinal loyalty measures were more variable. Regression analysis yielded positive relationships between intention to revisit and the behavioral loyalty variables.

DISCUSSION

It is important to measure several attitudinal loyalty constructs. In comparison to recommending a service to others, repatronage intentions generally infer future behaviour, which may be constrained by such factors as cost and physical access to the service. For example, a respondent living some distance from a service may indicate their strong willingness to recommend that service to other prospective customers, even if they were unlikely to use the service again themselves (Howat et al., 2006). In contrast, access to an alternative centre may influence responses to the loyalty measure *likelihood of attending another centre*.

The links from total satisfaction to both willingness to recommend and intention to revisit were far stronger than the direct links between the four service quality factors and the two attitudinal loyalty variables. This indicates a mediating role of total satisfaction on the link between service quality and the repatronage intentions as well as the word-of-mouth intentions of customers.

An examination of the relationships between the four service quality factors and the various loyalty measures allows facility managers to identify specific service quality factors that require their attention. For example, *staffing* and *pool water* appear to be relative strengths of this centre. In contrast, *facility maintenance* and *parking* appear to be service quality issues that most negatively influence customer loyalty. Linking specific service quality dimensions with loyalty measures allows facility managers to identify strengths and areas for improvement in attributes of the service to help increase their competitive advantage.

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