

An Empirical Investigation of Loyalty's Antecedents in Fitness Service: Can Managers Really Make Customers Loyal?

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Keywords: Loyalty, service, satisfaction, involvement, commitment, value

Abstract

Research Question

As the core element of the relational marketing approach, customer loyalty is a crucial objective for sport organisations although its formative process is still unknown, particularly in service industry. For this reason, this paper aims to empirically investigate the antecedents of customer loyalty in health and fitness services.

Theoretical Background

In the search for the antecedents of customer loyalty in sport services, customer satisfaction has been identified as a key variable. However, even if customer satisfaction appears necessary, it does not predict customer repurchase behaviour. Then, several variables should be added to satisfaction. Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) highlighted the role played by the concepts of involvement and psychological commitment. Therefore, Cronin, Brady and Hult (2000) argued that the concept of customer value should be considered. Finally, according to Dick and Basu (1994), it seems that the concept of customer loyalty is composed of two dimensions, attitudinal and behavioural, and that the measure of the concept should reflect this bi-dimensionality. A research model including all these relevant variables was then constructed.

Methodology

The methodology presented two steps. First, a questionnaire was created and administrated and second, the researcher went back to the clubs around three months after the first step, in order to observe, thanks to named questionnaires, if the customers had renewed their membership to the club. The questionnaire measured customer satisfaction, involvement, commitment, value, behavioural intentions and socio-demographical characteristics. The population was constituted by all the sport organisations offering fitness activities in the area of Dijon (France). Finally, 5 profit health clubs accepted to participate to the survey, including 2 with named questionnaires, and 3 non for profit clubs, all with named questionnaires. The final sample gathers 252 questionnaires (184 from profit and 68 from non for profit clubs), including 110 observed behavioural loyalty.

The profile-type of the customer (woman, 25-35 years old, middle class or inactive, superior degree, living in town) is consistent with the French works on the field (i.e., Bessy, 1993, Tribou, 1994).

Results

Structural Equation Modelling was conducted to test the attitudinal model. The model presented satisfying fit indexes and a positive and significant link was found between all direct antecedents of customer attitudinal loyalty. Psychological commitment was also found to play a mediating role between customer involvement and the attitudinal dimension of customer loyalty. However, based on Logit analyses, the behavioural model was not validated because no direct antecedents were found to predict customer repurchase behaviour. Nevertheless, customer satisfaction was found to influence the behavioural dimension of loyalty with a p value of 0.07.

Conclusion

So far, customer repurchase behaviour in sport service is still unpredictable which tend to show that other factors play a significant role. Among these variables, some are not controllable by sport managers (e.g., injury, house moving, work promotion) then it would be relevant to pursue this kind of study by questioning the customers for the factors that make them quit and determining what is the part of responsibility of the managers on these factors. Nevertheless, several antecedents of attitudinal loyalty have been found and they constitute managerial levers to develop customer intentions to be loyal and a positive word-of-mouth.

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