
Why do club golfers renew or not renew their club membership?

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Abstract

AIM

The aim of this research is to investigate why club golfers renew or do not renew their club membership. Membership is important given growth in casual participation. The shift to casual participation is threatening the financial viability of sport clubs. This research specifically addresses the issue of how membership clubs can retain existing members. To develop retention strategies, it is important to understand players who cease club membership: whether they leave to play as casual participants, join another club or whether they leave the game altogether. Factors related to attraction have been the focus of much of the existing membership research. Retention has until recently been overlooked. Sportwise (2013) demonstrates through a comprehensive survey of clubs in the United Kingdom that more clubs still prioritize attraction of new members ahead of retention of existing members. This emphasis is evident in New Zealand as well. However, there is growing recognition that, without retention strategies, attraction efforts can be wasted.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Shank (2004) presents a model for sport participant consumption behaviour. It has been adapted from a “stage model” of the buying process that is included in almost every basic textbook on marketing and consumer behaviour. The most commonly-included steps in the model equate to problem or need recognition, search for information or alternatives, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Originally the stages were shown with progression through the steps in a linear way. More recently there is a tendency to recognise that consumers may move backwards and forwards between the steps.

The potential sport participant moves backwards and forwards through a process of identifying that they have a need (for example, would like to play sport), looks for information that identifies options, evaluates these

options (including deciding where to play), participates and then evaluates their experience. This could involve evaluating different clubs or evaluating clubs compared with some other way of participating. In Shank's (2004) model, the decision-making process is influenced by a number of internal, external and situational factors. The club member would seem to be undertaking the evaluation part of the process when deciding whether or not to continue their membership. This may also lead them back into an earlier stage of the seeking and evaluating options. The past experience with the club is likely to be one of the situational factors influencing the decision.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study uses a case study approach, with qualitative in-depth interviews in conjunction with statistical analysis significant use of secondary data from a membership database. This mixed-methods exploration of membership retention is investigated in the context of golf. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore attitudes towards club membership and reasons for participation both within and outside traditional club structures. Purposive or judgemental sampling has been used, which is appropriate to identify particular cases for in-depth investigation (Bryman, 2012). The sample was selected to give maximum variation of players in terms of the demographic spread of gender, age, socio-economic level and ethnicity. There is also a range of experience (length of time played the sport) and playing level (competitive and social players, differing grades or handicaps). In-depth interviews allowed participants to express their views without being concerned about the opinions of other people. Through an in-depth individual interview it was also possible to follow a thought process to gain a better understanding of a person's views (Bryman, 2012). The topic guide for the interviews (Bryman, 2012) was based on the issues raised by the literature review and secondary research. Seven in-depth interviews of approximately 30 – 40 minutes have been undertaken with regular golf players and administrators. There are interviews with players in each of the following categories: lapsed members (previously belonged to a sport club), current members, and administrators from clubs and regional or national associations.

Statistical analysis of a significant source of golf club membership data complements the qualitative analysis. Membership data of 4,895 golf club members was collected longitudinally over a three year period and analysed using descriptive statistics and logistic regression. The dataset includes demographic variables, as well as playing behaviour such as frequency of playing and scores. This analysis identified the indicators or combination of indicators that predict whether a member is at risk of discontinuing membership. Logistic regression is used when the dependent variable has two mutually exclusive categories, in this case continuing or discontinuing membership. The technique uses several independent variables to predict the probability that a person will belong to one of the two categories (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010).

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The qualitative surveys show the decision-making process that results in a golf player being a club member or playing in some other way. The process differs depending on whether the new player knows someone who already plays that sport. The decision process for continuing or discontinuing golf club membership is also identified. The results of the logistic regression show the demographic variables and playing behaviour that are associated with lapsed membership. This, in conjunction with the qualitative data about decision-making, The results indicate key decision-making points at which interventions can be developed to encourage continued club membership. In addition, the study indicates the internal, external and situational factors that have the greatest influence on the decision about whether or not to continue membership.

References

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