Main factors influencing the satisfaction and loyalty of ski resort customers

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Abstract
The paper explores the relative importance of main factors that would influence a customer’s choice of a ski destination. Customer satisfaction and loyalty is a key driver of performance, making its measurement and management crucial. In this paper, the authors report on customer satisfaction and loyalty with ski resorts and using data collected from ski resorts located in all over the world. Several studies have examined the factors that influence ski destination choice such as snow condition, snowmaking capacity, hill and trails, crowding, lodging, age of ski area, lift capacity, entertainment options, average driving time from population centres to each ski resort, closeness to home, number of ski instructors etc. The product related factors can moderate the relationship between satisfaction dimensions and overall customer satisfaction and loyalty. It is hypothesized that satisfaction will have a positive effect on consumers attitudinal loyalty toward the resort.

Key Words
Customer satisfaction, loyalty, ski resorts, ski destination choice, skier

Introduction
Ski resorts differ widely in their characteristics, such as the quality of skiing, average snowfall, average slope altitude, mountain scenery, distance of the resort from the nearest population centre, and number and quality of accommodations, amenities, and promotional activities. Many ski resorts have invested heavily in new high-speed lifts and gondola lifts that are often installed at higher altitudes and have a greater lift capacity. Others have better snow cover due to their excellent artificial snowmaking facilities (Ormiston et al., 1998).

In this competitive market environment, destination success depends strongly on a thorough analysis of tourist motivation, customer satisfaction and loyalty (Yoon and Uysal, 2005). The measurement and management of customer satisfaction is crucial. Tourism
managers need to identify the drivers of customer satisfaction, measure satisfaction levels, and derive the right strategies to increase satisfaction (Fuchs, 2004).

**Objectives and methodology**

The methods in this paper were used primarily analysis, comparison and synthesis. We compare and analyse the results of studies of authors who have dealt with the issue all over the world. Most of the studies measure customer satisfaction on various aspects of the ski area and test the effects of the moderator variables through questionnaire. Questions used were developed in cooperation with tourism experts from the different regions and tested in workshops and interviews by different marketing scholars. The standardized questionnaire measured satisfaction with the single items on a scale from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). The self-administered questionnaire was distributed to skiers who agreed to participate in the study at the entrance of the ski lift. Questions on the survey included likert and semantic differential scales, as well as several categorical demographic and relevant behavioral measures.

**Results**

Overall satisfaction is a consumer evaluation based on the entire consumptive experience with a product or service over time (Anderson et al., 1994) and as a result contributes to consumers attitudinal loyalty. A ski resort requires an approach that allows the measurement of overall customer satisfaction with the experience of visiting the resort (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999).

Findings by the Utah Ski and Snowboard Association indicated that snow quality, proximity and accessibility to the ski site, lift ticket specials, lodging and nightlife influence a return to Utah’s ski resorts. Morey (1984) suggested that skiers choose a destination where they can maximize utilities (e.g. type and difficulty of terrain, number of ski runs) and minimize opportunity costs (lift ticket price, equipment rental fee and transportation time).

Riddington et al.’s (2000) study of 670 Scottish skiers found that skier’s choice of a destination is influenced by ski destination characteristics (e.g. snow cover, type of ski slopes, and availability of accommodation) and skier’s characteristics (e.g. travel distance, expenditure per day).
In a study conducted with 499 skiers at 11 ski resorts in Greece, Siomkos et al. (2006) found that the desirability of ski destinations is determined by accessibility to the ski site, the price of lifts and food, facilities and accommodation and snow quality.

Echelberger and Shafer (1970) consider a number of factors that might explain the level of ski days: age of ski area, lift capacity, slope exposure, snowmaking capacity, days of operation, advertising budget, average driving time from population centres to each ski resort, number of ski instructors, and percent of groomed slopes.

Using data from 25 US ski resorts, Johnston and Elsner (1972) find that the number of ski days is significantly and positively related to the uphill lift capacity, length of the season, and nearness to other ski areas. These supply-related factors are also likely to affect ski lift ticket prices. The literature about the factors explaining ski destination choice also provides insights into the relevant ski resort characteristics.

For instance, Klenovsky et al. (1993) suggest that challenging terrain and ski variety play an important role for American skiers regarding their destination choice. Furthermore, crowding and snow conditions also play a role, while ski-slope grooming and proximity to one’s home play a minor role.

Richards (1996) investigates the pattern and destination determinants of UK skiers, and finds that snow conditions are ranked as the number one factor in skiers’ destination choice. The range of difficult runs, variety of terrain and piste grooming are also important. However, peripheral facilities (i.e. leisure facilities and sightseeing attractions) appear to be relatively insignificant in the actual selection of ski destinations.

One important characteristic of a ski resort is the total length of ski runs, including ski-routes. The variety and the length of slopes may also increase the willingness to pay. The availability of a free shuttle service to the lifts from one’s accommodation location increases convenience and thereby the willingness to pay for ski lift tickets (Martin Folk, 2008).

Some of the central characteristics are the landscape, the altitude and the steepness of the mountainside. These characteristics directly influence the product characteristic in terms of slope difficulty. Some ski areas are characterized by either very steep or rather flat slopes. Slopes can also differ significantly in their length. As these characteristics require different skiing skills, we assume that “easy-level” ski areas attract other skiers than “difficult-level” ski areas. Indeed, previous studies have shown that destination choice appears to be linked to skill level and the need to develop and expand skiing skills and that advanced skiers select their ski area more on the basis of skiing-related factors (Richards, 1996).
Furthermore, visitors of difficult ski areas are likely to be experts and heavy users, as these ski areas require a certain level of skiing skill. The skill level could also be regarded as a personal factor. In this case, however, it is the level of difficulty of a ski resort that attracts skiers with different skill levels and therefore is regarded as a product factor. Expert users have more knowledge of the product category and of alternative and might therefore rely on and respond to other attributes than light users choice (Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006).

A higher lift capacity obviously is more valuable for skiers because it reduces the time spent in the queue waiting for the ski lift and makes the resort more attractive. Therefore, we expect lift ticket prices to have a significantly positive correlation with lift capacity, denotes the ski lift, regardless of type (this includes surface lifts, fixed and detachable chairlifts, areal tramways, gondola ropeways. Ski lift technology should be convenient and fast in order to transport a large number of skiers while avoiding queues (Martin Folk, 2008).

Snow is the most essential input factor for skiing. Richards (1996) suggests that 60% of all skiers rank snow conditions as the number one factor in selecting a ski destination. Natural snowfall is only one of the several factors that contribute to snow conditions. Furthermore, the average slope height is important for snow conditions because snow is less affected by high temperatures and the snow lasts longer at high altitudes. Snowmaking can also be an effective means to compensate for a poor natural snow record. The use of snowmaking is measured by the percentage of ski runs with artificial snow. The installation of artificial snowmaking equipment enables skiing with less natural snow, increases the length of the ski season and leads to even snow coverage throughout the season.

Hudson et al. (2004) emphasise the role of attractions, such as special winter events, in determining ski destination competitiveness. Indeed, most large ski resorts start the ski season with winter opening festivals. A brief look at the several piste maps indicates that ski resorts often have natural features that facilitate peripheral activities such as mountains especially for hiking, sports, music festivals, and tobogganing. Some resorts have natural ice rinks and thermal spas. However, Richards (1996) suggests that peripheral activities are relatively unimportant in the actual selection of a destination.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of this paper suggest that by fostering deeper commitment from customers toward the resort, the management may realize more positive attitudes of loyalty from its customers. To accomplish this, resort management should investigate a cause marketing initiative. A
cause chosen for its ability to resonate with a large portion of the customer base may result in greater commitment from customers who find themselves aligned with the resort’s beliefs. Focusing on the value proposition and ensuring visitors to the resort are satisfied with their experiences are also important predictors of the attitudinal loyalty from the resort customers. A quality assurance program and an advertising campaign featuring cost benefits and attributes important to the majority of the customer base would be logical initiatives. Consumers have a plethora of alternatives to choose how they spend their leisure time and disposable income. Like marketers in other industries, the focus has shifted to loyalty building by developing relationships with consumers. In return, the firm receives greater loyalty from the customers, the customers themselves are less likely to switch service providers, the customers are more willing to pay a premium price for the relationship, and they generate positive word-of-mouth advertising.

References


