

# **AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FACTORS INFLUENCING CAMPERS LEVEL OF LOYALTY TO CAMPING SITES IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although according to the literature being able to build loyalty in consumers is a key factor in acquiring market share and sustaining a competitive advantage, very little is known about the factors affecting loyalty to a camping site. This study was designed to identify if campers demographic variables and their level of satisfaction with a camping site may be related to their loyalty to the camping site.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Creating and sustaining customer loyalty especially in the retail industry and also in hotel and restaurant services, is recognised as an essential strategy for increasing the profitability of an organisation(e.g. Chen & Gursoy 2001; Oppermann 2000; Petrick & Morais 2001; Tiefenbacher, Day & Walton 2000). However, this strategy has not been extensively examined in terms of improving visitation levels and repeat visitation to a tourist destination (Mattila 2001; Reichheld & Sasser 1990). According to Pritchard, Havitz and Howard (1999) being able to build loyalty in consumers is a key factor in acquiring market share and sustaining a competitive advantage. Customers loyalty often leads to higher profitability and a more stable customer base; therefore, having loyal

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customers is considered a significant asset to an organisation (Tsaour, Chiu & Chung-Huei 2002).

Although a number of studies have examined loyalty in the hospitality, leisure and tourism industries, they have been mainly in the context of loyalty to service providers, in particular hotels and restaurants (Bowen & Shiang-Lih 2001; Mattila 2001; Tsaour, Chiu & Chung-Huei 2002), recreation agencies (Iwasaki & Havitz 2004), sporting and entertainment destinations (Park & Kim 2000; Petrick & Morais 2001) and overseas travellers' choice of destination, (Chen & Gursoy 2001; Oppermann 2000), very little is known about the factors affecting loyalty to a camping site. This study was designed to identify if campers demographic variables and their level of satisfaction with a camping site may be related to their loyalty to the camping site.

## **METHODOLOGY**

On-site survey was used for this study because on-site survey is considered to be the most frequently used and accepted form of surveying in the tourism industry (Veal 1997). Going to the site where it is known that the respondents are likely to have characteristics similar to the population of interest provides ready access to specific groups and users of the product or service. This method has been used to investigate tourist behaviour and attitudes in areas of destination loyalty, loyalty to a tourism service provider, recreational patterns, repeat visitation, recreation specialisation and involvement (Beal 1994; Bryan 1977; Buerger et al. 2003; Kuentzel & McDonald 1992; Kyle, Graefe & Manning 2004; McFarlane 2004; Meis, Joyal & Trites 1995; Oppermann 2000). Dilman (2000) also believes that on-site questionnaires at the location of interest eliminates coverage error and is useful for surveys of hunter, anglers, boaters or other interest groups who use certain wilderness areas for whom no sampling list is available.

Moreover, having the survey personally distributed to respondents and then collected increases the response rate due to personal contact between the researcher and the respondent (Jennings 2001). An acknowledged disadvantage of mail out and other self-

completion surveys is that the researcher can never be certain that the intended respondent actually completed the survey (Jennings 2001). By personally handing the survey to the intended person, and making personal contact, rapport can be developed which is an advantage of the personal interview technique, and results in the respondent being more likely to complete the survey. Veal (1997) also asserts that the site survey is more controlled as the researcher is seen as part of the facility management. Wearing a name badge that identifies the researcher and acknowledges the sponsor, increases the credibility of the researcher and therefore is likely to also increase response rate. Several studies in outdoor recreation have noted good response rates when utilising a personal delivery mode (eg. Kyle, Graefe & Manning 2004; McFarlane 2004; Winter 2004)

Onsite survey has many of the advantages of mail surveys such as cost effectiveness and efficiency, and requires minimal administration. Participants are able to complete the questionnaire when convenient to them, at their own pace, and without pressure or influence from an interviewer (Jennings 2001). Fourthly, targeting the respondents can be more beneficial than increasing the sample size (Churchill & Iacobucci 2002), and directing the survey to campers about camping, ensures that these respondents are more likely to have an interest in the topic, and are therefore more likely to respond. Finally, through searches of other tourism studies, specifically those studying outdoor recreation and camping, use of on-site surveys is prevalent and has proved to be an effective way to collect data (eg. Beal 1994; Kyle, Graefe & Manning 2004; McFarlane 2004).

To help in developing the questionnaire for this study a series of preliminary informal personal interviews were first conducted with campers and facility managers of a couple of camping ground sites. This was used in addition to the literature for designing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was also pre-tested and revised prior to administering the final structured questionnaire.

The layout and design of the final questionnaire followed many of the guidelines recommended by the Dillman Tailored Design Method (2000). The design for the questionnaire was in a booklet form, consisting of a blue card cover printed in black with a simple camping graphic and clear title of the survey and project sponsor on the front. It contained eight booklet styles, white, inside pages printed in black ink, with 12 point Times New Roman font. This layout was considered the most appropriate for delivering a survey outdoors. It provided a firm cover for writing on and a secure format to avoid damage to the questionnaire. It also assisted in maximising the response by having a well presented and professional looking survey. A blank space was left on the back inside cover for comments, with the respondents also thanked for their time. Details of researcher, supervisor and the ethics officer were also placed on the back inside cover in order for authentication of the survey to be established.

A cover letter accompanied the questionnaire and detailed the reasons for conducting the survey, as well as the researcher and supervisors contact details and the email address of the ethics officer should the respondents have any questions or any concerns with the research. A pen was included for ease of response and an envelope was left with the respondent in which they were to place the completed questionnaire and return to researcher to ensure privacy of responses. No ability for reply paid envelopes was made as all questionnaires were personally collected by the researcher on the same day of administration. As there is no list or database available to draw a sample from, all individuals who were camping at the Lake Somerset Holiday Park campgrounds during the time of the survey were considered as part of the frame.

According to Leedy & Ormond (2001), to enhance the reliability of the measurement instrument an instrument should always be administered in a consistent fashion and standardised in its administration. Therefore, to have a consistent and reliable manner of selecting participants for this study, each camper selected for participating in the study must meet the following criteria:

- The camper must have previously camped at the ground,

- The camper must agree to complete only one questionnaire per family/couple over the period of data collection in order to avoid duplicate surveys,
- Only those persons camping in tents, swags or other means other than caravans or cabins at either of the two locations will be asked to complete a questionnaire,
- The camper must be over the age of eighteen

The final structured questionnaire was distributed to campers at the Lake Somerset Holiday Park, at Somerset Dam. This camping ground is located approximately 220km upstream from the mouth of the Brisbane River, roughly a 1 and a half-hours drive from Brisbane the capital city of Queensland, Australia

The final structured questionnaire was used to collect data at the Lake Somerset Holiday Park, at Somerset Dam upstream in Queensland during late February –March 2005 during randomly selected weekends and weekdays. This location has been selected owing to its proximity to Brisbane and the costal areas but also for its amenities such as the numerous water recreation points, boat launching facilities, toilets, showers, laundry, BBQ areas and kiosk. All available campers (N=175) on the site during the data collection days were approached to complete the questionnaires as long as they met the criteria for completing the questionnaire. Of the 175 campers approached for this study only 103 completed the questionnaires thus resulting in 58.8 response rate. Approaching all available campers on the days of data collecting is the same as the method used in McFarlane (2004), Kuentzel (2001) and Galloway (2002) studies.

### Classification of respondents into campers with a high level of loyalty and a low level of loyalty

Although loyalty in the literature has been measured mainly on behavioural and attitudinal dimensions (Bowen & Chen 2001; Chen & Gursory 2001; George & George 2004; Mahony, Madrigal & Howard 2000; Oppermann 2000; Pritchard & Howard 1997). behavioural measures seem to be the most commonly used method. Behavioural

measures of loyalty are operationalized through consumption based measures such as frequency and intensity of purchase, and repetitious purchase behaviour (Bowen & Chen 2001; George & George 2004; Mahony, Madrigal & Howard 2000) In tourism research; intention to continue buy, intention to buy more, respondent intent to return, repeat visitation, willingness to perform marketing activities in terms of making positive recommendation of the site/destination or product/service to others are indicators of loyalty (Bowen & Chen 2001; Chen & Gursory 2001; Oppermann 2000; Pritchard & Howard 1997)

The following 7 indicators of loyalty were used in classifying respondents into campers with a high level of loyalty and campers with a low level of loyalty. The requirements are that the respondent must claim that he or she:

1. Has camped at the ground at least 5 times in the past ten years. This equates to at least one camping trip each two years. Using this as a measurement for loyalty accounts for those individuals with one annual leave, and allows for constraints upon travel.
2. Hopes to return to the camping ground in the next 12 months.
3. Has stayed only at this camping ground (where this survey is conducted) in the past twelve months.
4. Would be willing to recommend the camping ground to other campers.
5. Prefers camping at this camping site more than at any other camping grounds'
6. Camps at this particular camping site nearly every year'
7. Interested in making camping at this particular camping ground a regular activity'

If a respondent fulfils a requirement the respondent will have a score of 1, while a score of zero is awarded if a requirement is not fulfilled. This means that the maximum that a respondent can score is 7 and a minimum score is zero. For a respondent to be classified as a camper with a high level of loyalty, the respondent must score more than the median score of 4 while the rest are classified as respondents with a low level of loyalty. This resulted in 52 (50.5%) of campers classed as campers with a high level of loyalty and 51 (49.5 %) of campers classed as campers with a low level of loyalty.

The majority (63.1%) of the respondents who completed the questionnaire for this study were male and the rest (36.9%) were female. This gender ratio is inconsistent with other tourism surveys as there is a tendency for more females to complete surveys and is also supported by other research (McKercher & Davidson 1994; Wieiler & Richins 1995). However, because the camping site used for this study has fishing and water skiing activities, which is perhaps more male dominated, it is not surprising to have more male participants, a proposition supported by other outdoor recreation studies (Canberra Tourism & Events Corporation 2001; Queensland Tourism Industry Council 2004).

About half (56.36 percent) of the respondents were married, 22.3 percent were single, while 10.7% were in de facto relationships. The remaining comprised of people who were separated from their partners, divorced or widowed. About a third (35%) of the respondents were less than 35 years old and another one third (35%) of the respondents were between 35-44 years old while the rest were between 45-64 years old. About (53.4%) of the respondents had secondary school education and the rest (46.4%), had more than secondary school education including TAFE and university degree qualifications.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **Demographic variables of Campers**

There was no significant difference (at 0.10 chi-square significant level) between campers with a high level of loyalty to the camping cite regarding gender, marital status, age, household situation, education levels or income levels occupation (see table 1).

### **Campers' satisfaction**

Respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction level with respect to their visit to the camping site, (where 1 = very dissatisfied, and 5 = 'very dissatisfied). The data as shown in table 2 shows that campers level of satisfaction is related to their level of loyalty to the camping site. The majority (86.5%)of the respondents who were classified as campers with a high level of loyalty were satisfied with the camping site.

**Table1: Demographic variables of Campers**

Demographics	Low Camping Ground Loyalty		High Camping Ground Loyalty		Chi-square test Sig. Level
	N=51		N=52		
	N	%	N	%	
<b>Gender</b> (N=103)					
Male	33	64.7	32	61.5	N.S.
Female	18	35.3	20	38.5	
<b>Marital status</b> (N= 103)					
Never married	13	25.5	10	19.2	N.S.
Married/De facto	30	58.8	39	75.0	
Separated/Divorced/	8	15.7	3	5.8	
Widowed					
<b>Age</b> (N=103)					
18-34	17	33.3	19	36.5	N.S.
35-44	17	33.3	19	36.5	
45-54	14	27.5	11	21.2	
55-64	3	5.9	3	5.8	
65 or older	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>Household Situation</b> (N=102)					
Young Single	7	14.0	5	9.6	N.S.
Young couple – no children	6	12.0	7	13.5	
Young family	10	20.0	11	21.2	
Middle family	8	16.0	7	13.5	
Older Family	3	6.0	7	13.5	
Mature couple- no children	2	4.0	2	3.8	
Mature couple- older children	4	8.0	4	7.7	
Mature couple-children no longer living at home	5	10.0	7	13.5	
Mature single	5	10.0	2	3.8	
<b>Level of education</b> (N=103)					
Primary/Secondary Education	34	66.6	25	48.0	N.S.
Technical/TAFE/Trade qualification	11	21.6	17	32.7	
University bachelor Degree/Masters Degree/PhD	6	11.8	10	19.2	
<b>Combined annual income</b> (N=93)					
Less than 39 999	10	20.4	9	20.5	N.S.
40 000-59 999	17	34.7	14	31.8	
60 000-79 999	6	12.2	5	11.4	
80 000-99 999	10	20.4	6	13.6	
100 00 or more	6	12.2	10	22.7	
<b>Present occupation</b> (N=103)					
Manager/Professional/ Proprietor	19	37.3	19	36.5	N.S.
Tradesperson/Labourer	19	37.3	21	40.4	
Clerical/Sales	5	9.8	6	11.5	
Student/Unemployed/ Retired/Homemaker	8	15.8	6	11.5	

**Table 2: Satisfaction levels**

Satisfaction Levels	Low Camping Ground Loyalty N=51		High Camping Ground Loyalty N=52		Chi-square test Sig. Level
	N	%	N	%	
Not satisfied	14	27.5	7	13.5	0.07
Satisfied	37	72.5	45	86.5	
Totals	51	100.0	52	100.0	

## CONCLUSION

The result of this study that found that the level of satisfaction with a camping site is related to high level of loyalty to a camping site is in line with the marketing literature (e.g. Kotler, Brown, Adam and Armstrong, 2004) that claims that, as satisfaction increases, so does loyalty. This shows that camping sites that want to increase the level of customer loyalty must provide a high level of customer satisfaction. However, because of the small sample size used for this study (N=103), a similar study on a much larger scale should be conducted to investigate further the validity of this findings. This study can also be extended to other camping sites in Queensland and outside Queensland.

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