Run Again another Day: The Role of Satisfaction on Repeat Marathon Participation

Bradley Baker, Temple University
Daniel Funk (Advisor), Temple University

Student Research Competition Winner
Abstract 2016-159
Friday, June 3, 2016
President's Luncheon

In the U.S., over 28,000 running events generated nearly 19 million event finishers in 2014 and participation in road running has increased by 300% since 1990 (Running USA, 2015). Unlike professional team sport events which rely on spectator appeal, the economic success of running events is driven by participant consumption (Wicker, Hallmann, & Zhang, 2012). Yet, the explosive growth within the road race industry has led to a crowded field and competition between races to attract runners. Given growth in the number of long-distance running events and competitive pressure on race organizers in a saturated marketplace, it is important for race organizers to understand why runners return to the same event.

Satisfaction, defined as the degree to which a product or service provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment (Oliver, 2010), has played a crucial role in research related to understanding consumer loyalty and is a key factor in customer retention. Previous research has shown consumer satisfaction leads to improved retention, increased patronage behavior, increased positive and decreased negative word-of-mouth, and higher consumer loyalty (Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005; Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002; Yoshida & James, 2010). Further, the cost of retaining an existing customer is less than the cost of acquiring a new customer and existing customers are less expensive to service than new customers (Reichheld, 1996). At the same time, the precise links between satisfaction and repeat patronage decisions are poorly understood and likely customer- and context-dependent (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001). In a recent review of the consumer satisfaction research, Kim, Magnusen, and Kim (2014) concluded that sport marketing will greatly benefit from further context-specific study. The current study investigated the influence of consumer characteristics (prior race experience, gender, age, education, family structure, and area of residence) on event satisfaction and the satisfaction-repeat patronage link. Specifically, this research addressed the following four research questions:

RQ1: How does satisfaction among sport participants vary based on consumer demographics?

RQ2: How does the satisfaction-repeat patronage relationship among sport participants vary on the basis of consumer demographics?

RQ3: What is the shape of the satisfaction-repeat patronage relationship for sport event participants?

RQ4: What is the impact of relying on behavioral intention as a proxy for behavior in participant sport research?

The current study used data generated from the registration databases of the 2014 and 2015 versions of a large-scale annual road race held in the southeast United States, along with data from a post-event survey of participants in the 2014 race. The race included events at both half (13.1 miles) and full marathon (26.2 miles) distances. In the week following the race, all 23,695 registered participants who had a valid email address in an internal race registration database were invited to complete an online survey. In total, 3,295 participants completed the survey, a 13.9% response rate. Previous long-distance racing experience (completion of a previous half or full marathon) was collected from respondents by race organizers as part of the normal race registration process, preceding the race.

Repeat purchase behavior (registering for the following year’s race) was based on the 2015 race registration database, also provided by the race organizers. Data from three sources (2014 race registration database, post-event survey, and 2015 race registration database) were merged for the purpose of the current study.

Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess the influence of consumer characteristics on reported satisfaction (RQ1). Binary logistic regression was used to assess the influence of consumer characteristics and satisfaction on repeat patronage behavior and the functional form (or shape) of the satisfaction-repeat patronage relationship (RQ2 and RQ3). Logistic regression was necessary due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent
variable, wherein a runner either did or did not register for the following year’s race. A similar model was used to assess the impact of using behavioral intention as a proxy for behavior (RQ4).

Satisfaction ratings were higher for first-time runners, male runners, and those with less than a four-year college degree (all $p < .001$). Area of residence, age, presence of children in the household, and marital status were not associated with significant differences in satisfaction ratings. Satisfaction levels of experienced runners with or without previous participation in the focal race were not significantly different ($p = .354$). Comparison of rival models based on the Akaike information criterion indicated a model incorporating a linear relationship between event satisfaction and repeat patronage behaviors and only main effects of event satisfaction and consumer characteristics offered the best fit for the data. Event satisfaction was positively associated with repeat patronage behavior ($p < .001$), as were prior experience in the focal race, local residence, and age over 35 years old. Experienced runners who had previously participated in the race were substantially more likely to participate again the following year than either first-time runners or experienced runners who were participating in the event for the first time ($p < .001$). Compared to experienced runners with previous event participation, the odds a first-time runner returned to the event in the following year was 44% lower. A first-time event participant who had previous experience in other half or full marathon races had odds of repeat patronage 66% lower than an experienced runner who had previously participated in the race. Finally, a one-point increase in event satisfaction (on a seven-point scale) was associated with a 30% increase in odds of repeat patronage behavior.

The observed relationships between consumer characteristics and behavioral intention were substantially different than the equivalent relationships between consumer characteristics and behavior. Gender, children in the household, and marital status, which each had non-significant relationships with behavior, were all statistically significantly related to behavioral intention. Treating behavioral intention as equivalent to behavior would lead to erroneous assumptions about the network of antecedents. Additionally, the magnitude of the coefficient for event satisfaction was substantially greater for behavioral intention than for behavior (.882 versus .266, $p < .001$). This indicates a stronger relationship between event satisfaction and behavioral intention than between event satisfaction and actual behavior.

Results provide evidence that first-time marathon participation and variety-seeking behavior specific to sport represent meaningful predictors of decreased future race registration behavior. Evidence is provided of a linear satisfaction-behavior relationship implying gains can be obtained from improvement along the full satisfaction continuum. Finally, behavioral intention’s utility as a proxy for behavior appears questionable as the two constructs display different antecedents. Thus providing additional evidence sport management researchers would do well to focus on behavior, rather than behavioral intention, as an outcome variable (Bodet, 2012; Yoshida et al., 2015).