



*The Role of*  
**CUSTOMER**  
**SATISFACTION**  
*in Managing Commercial*  
**CAMPGROUNDS**

**by Wilbur F. LaPage**

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**The Formula**

**T**HE FORMULA for a successful private campground is deceptively simple. It is the same as that for any other highly competitive enterprise: satisfied customers. This relationship between the satisfied customer and the successful seller is so obvious that it almost sounds like a slick phrase. But I want to show you that this is a very real relationship; and then we can go on to consider a more profitable topic: how you can find economical ways to create customer satisfaction.

## What Is Success?

First, what is commercial campground success? A few people have actually admitted to going into the campground business for the sole purpose of losing money. To succeed, they must fail. One of these owners plowed so much money into his campground that it became widely popular and was a resounding "success", in spite of his motives. So, if success has anything to do with managerial goals, he failed.

There is another kind of owner, who isn't exactly trying to lose money. To him the campground is a sort of hobby, an opportunity to manage something and to entertain people, as well as an excuse to buy expensive toys like tractors, chain saws, and public-address systems. "Success" is easily achieved for these people. For those campground owners who either want to lose money, or don't care about making money, my analysis of enterprise success is no doubt going to sound very shallow and unimaginative.

Success in the campground business involves—among other objectives—two basic goals: (1) to capture new customers, and (2) to stimulate longer and more frequent visits by old customers. These are the goals; how you achieve them is a critical element of success. You can *attract* new customers, but you cannot capture them without working through the intermediate step of creating camper satisfaction. There are many ways to *promote* longer visits, and repeat visits; but you will not *stimulate* these visits unless campers are satisfied.

Both of these goals can be measured in a number of ways that reflect the idea of camper satisfaction. For example, it is relatively easy to identify things like (1) the number of word-of-mouth contacts among new visitors, or (2) the number of new visitors who intend to return for a future visit, or (3) the difference between planned and actual visit lengths, or (4) the frequency of visits per year among established customers. Now, if we in our research can also develop a realistic measure of camper satisfaction, and correlate it with some of these attendance measures, the cash value of camper satisfaction should

become apparent. And this is precisely what we did in a 1961 study of campers at one of New Hampshire's larger state parks.<sup>1</sup>

In this study, over 300 campers were asked to evaluate their visit satisfaction on a four-point scale: highly satisfied, well satisfied, satisfied, and dissatisfied. The most we can say about this scale is that people at one end of it were more pleased with their visit than people at the other end. We don't know how much satisfaction increases with each step of the scale. But the scale was apparently meaningful to campers; and their camping satisfaction was closely related to their length of visit (tables 1 and 2), and to their intentions to return for a future visit (table 3). Those relationships shown in the tables pro-

<sup>1</sup>THE 1961 BEAR BROOK STATE PARK CAMPER SURVEY. An unpublished report in the files of the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, Research Project FS-NE-1901. 47 pp., illus., 1963.

Table 1.—The number of camper-groups at each of four satisfaction levels, and the corresponding number of days camped beyond their original plans

Satisfaction level	Campers	Group-day surplus*
	<i>No.</i>	<i>Days</i>
Highly satisfied	100	45
Well satisfied	141	64
Satisfied	54	2
Dissatisfied	13	-8

\*Sum of deviations between planned and actual visit lengths.

Table 2.—Average visit lengths of camper-groups at each satisfaction level

Satisfaction level	Length of visit
	<i>Days</i>
Highly satisfied	4 $\frac{1}{4}$
Well satisfied	3 $\frac{1}{4}$
Satisfied	3 $\frac{1}{4}$
Dissatisfied	1 $\frac{1}{2}$

vide convincing proof that an effort to increase camper satisfaction can have both an immediate and a long-range pay-off.

On the average, campers whose expectations were "satisfied" stayed exactly as long as they had planned to stay (3 days), while those who were dissatisfied reduced their planned visit by 1 full day. Campers who were more than satisfied with their visit tended to stay an extra day, paying a bonus of \$218 in campsite rental fees.

The long-range effects of camper satisfaction are even more impressive, even if only a fraction of the camper's plans to return ever materialize. And the word-of-mouth advertising of highly satisfied campers may well provide replacements for those who fail to return. The fact that these figures are drawn from a sample of only 308 campers shows how easily these bonuses could add up to several thousand dollars over a full camping season.

### **More and Longer Visits**

The knowledge that camper satisfaction leads to longer and more frequent visits—that campers are rational consumers—led to a more detailed study, in 1964, of the camper and campground characteristics that are most commonly associated with long and frequent visits.

In this study we looked at some of the ways in which 37 "successful" private campgrounds differed from 48 "unsuccess-

Table 3.—*Percent of camper groups at each of four satisfaction levels who plan to return for a future camping visit*

Satisfaction level	Plan to return
	<i>Percent</i>
Highly satisfied	84
Well satisfied	60
Satisfied	56
Dissatisfied	23

ful" ones. Besides finding significant differences in campground ages, sizes, locations, investments, and attractions, we also learned that the average visits at the successful enterprises were longer (4½ days) than those at the unsuccessful ones (2 days).<sup>2</sup> This led to a more intensive analysis of the length and frequency of visit patterns of over 1,000 private campground visitors in 1964,<sup>3</sup> which re-affirmed the importance of campground characteristics to success, while disclosing several important characteristics of the campers themselves. The things that influenced visit length and frequency were camper's equipment, their past camping experience, and their preference (or lack of preference) for privately owned and operated campgrounds.

In examining the question of camper preference for private campgrounds, it became apparent that the public and private developments had contrasting images. Private campground visitors tended to view public campgrounds as being more crowded, and less restful; more primitive, with fewer conveniences; as having outstanding scenery, but few activities; and a more aloof management with poorer maintenance. The possibility that these images might reflect important differences in the interests and needs of patrons at these two types of campgrounds led to further studies in 1964, 1965, and 1967.

During the summers of 1964 and 1965 we began a long-term study of the differences in leisure behavior and annual camping participation of matched samples of about 850 public and private campground visitors.<sup>4</sup> And finally, during this past summer, we interviewed over 700 campers at New Hampshire state parks to find out how camping fees, and attitudes toward fees, influence camping frequency and the selection of campgrounds.

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<sup>2</sup>LaPage, Wilbur F. SUCCESS OF CAMPGROUNDS STUDIED AS GUIDE TO RECREATION PLANNERS. U.S. Forest Serv. Res. Note NE-43. 7 pp., illus. NE. Forest Exp. Sta., Upper Darby, Pa. 1966.

<sup>3</sup>LaPage, Wilbur F. SUCCESSFUL PRIVATE CAMPGROUNDS: A STUDY OF FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE LENGTH AND FREQUENCY OF CAMPER VISITS. U.S. Forest Serv. Res. Paper NE-58. 22 pp., illus. NE. Forest Exp. Sta., Upper Darby, Pa. 1967.

<sup>4</sup>La Page, Wilbur F. CAMPER CHARACTERISTICS DIFFER AT PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL CAMPGROUNDS IN NEW ENGLAND. U.S. Forest Serv. Res. Note NE-59. 8 pp., illus. NE. Forest Exp. Sta., Upper Darby, Pa. 1967.

This series of five studies,<sup>5</sup> along with several others done in recent years by different planning, research, and educational agencies, must qualify New Hampshire campers as among the most exhaustively studied groups of recreationists in the Country.<sup>6</sup> From all these studies we can now tie this research together into an orderly sequence and develop a general picture of what we have learned about the second goal of campground success—promoting longer and more frequent visits.

## **What We Think We Know**

A model for a successful campground is illustrated in figure 1. The raw materials—the camper, the campground, and managerial attributes—interact to produce camper satisfaction. However, our understanding of how each of these variables operates is not as complete, nor as uniform, as the figure seems to indicate. For this reason a brief statement of just what we do know—or think we know—about each of these variables seems like a logical place to begin.

Each of the following findings should be qualified by the addition of a probability statement, and by reference to the time and place where the studies were made. For example, the finding that “campers who use highly mobile camping equipment do not stay as long as tent campers”; reads like a universal principle because the qualifying phrases of “on the average”, “in New Hampshire”, and “during the early 1960’s”, have been left off. For another time and place where campers do not use tents, for example, the statement is totally meaningless. And please understand, at the outset, that practically every one of

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<sup>5</sup>The research described above was carried out in several distinct studies, which were not part of a coherent plan. However, the findings of early studies invariably influenced the objectives of later ones; and each committed the next to examining essentially the same camping market. New Hampshire, being a small State with a well-developed park system and a strong tourist economy, provided an outstanding laboratory for this building-block type of research.

<sup>6</sup>See also: Reid, Leslie M.; *OUTDOOR RECREATION PREFERENCES—A NATION-WIDE STUDY OF USER DESIRES*, 1963, drawn in part from a survey of campers at Dolly Copp Campground in northern New Hampshire. Also see: *THE NEW HAMPSHIRE STATE PARK STUDY*, a survey report by the New Hampshire State Planning Project.

these variables, including many of the camper attributes, has some potential for manipulation by management.

Here are our findings:

- Direct increases in campground size (number of campsites), campground age (in years), and investment (in dollars), are accompanied by direct increases in visit length, visit frequency, and percentage of visitors who plan to return in the future.
- The presence of a swimming and boating attraction at or near the campground is associated with longer and more frequent visits, and more numerous plans to return.
- An increase in the number of activities engaged in at the campground is accompanied by a slight increase in camper satisfaction.
- An increase in campground crowding results in a drop in satisfaction to the level where campers stay only as long as planned.<sup>7</sup>
- The location of a campground is important to success. In a regional comparison, the less successful ventures were mostly in a region remote from major metropolitan centers, where lakes were scarce, competition (both public and private) was keen, and the camping season was shorter.
- An increase in the variety of past camping experience accompanies an increase in camping satisfaction, but it also accompanies a more critical reaction to campground crowding.<sup>7</sup>
- A preference for private campgrounds, as well as a lack of preference for public campgrounds, accompanies longer and more frequent visits, and a greater incidence of intentions to return.
- Highly mobile camping equipment was generally accompanied by shorter but more frequent visits; and the incidence of mobile equipment was 100 percent higher at private campgrounds than at public ones.
- Trip plans are apparently fairly flexible, judging from the increase in actual over planned visit lengths. A surprising

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<sup>7</sup>LaPage, W. F. THE MEASUREMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RECREATIONAL EXPERIENCE. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of New Hampshire. 113 pp., 1962.

number of campers indicated that they had planned a 2- or 3-day visit and ended up staying a week or more.

- It is apparently impossible to identify "primary reasons for camping" such as economy, enjoyment of nature, or social contacts. Camping is a mixed bag of interests, including some apparently contradictory ones like "peace and quiet" along with the "opportunity to meet and visit with other campers".
- The incidence of past visits was almost invariably associated with longer current visits, and with a very high incidence of intentions to return. Past visits were also more common among private campground patrons.
- Campers who belonged to camping organizations were found to be twice as prevalent at private campgrounds as at public areas.
- The majority of successful campgrounds did not have camping owners whereas the majority of unsuccessful campgrounds were run by managers who were themselves campers.
- The majority of successful campgrounds had well-developed advance-reservation systems. And visits were longer at campgrounds with reservation systems than at those without them.
- The general finding that campground size accompanies success may indicate part-time management as well as fewer attractions and activities at many of the smaller enterprises.
- Successful campground owners were more than twice as likely to belong to a campground owner's association.

### **Questions of Motivation**

It should be obvious from this list of major findings that most of our knowledge is correlative and not causative. For example, Are successful managers more likely to join an owner's association? Or are association members more likely to be successful? Or, more important, is there some unmeasured third factor that creates both success and membership? The same questions can be asked for almost every one of the findings listed. Lacking definite knowledge of which comes first—success or its attri-

butes—we can see that there is no magic formula for success in these findings. However, there are some important clues.

The content of practically every one of these relationships can be cataloged into one, two, and sometimes three broad classes of camper motivation. These are: (1) variety—an interest in many and varied recreational activities, and in the choice situations that they represent; (2) service—a desire for individual services, personal interest, convenience, and the ego satisfaction that these things represent; and (3) some less rational motivators such as habit and prejudice.

Picking the last category first, the evidence that campers (like non-campers) are creatures of habit is impressive. In our survey of private campground visitors, 93 percent of the campers who had been to the campground before predicted that they would come back; but only 59 percent of the first-time visitors expected to return. Among the 308 state park visitors surveyed in 1961, the desire to "seek a change in the daily routine" was a major camping motive only for the repeat visitors—involving 65 percent of them. And yet, in their quest for change, they ended up routinizing their leisure by returning again and again to the same campgrounds.

The power of habit is so strong that it prompted us to hypothesize the existence of a repeat-visit cycle, wherein more past visits create longer current visits, and longer current visits result in more future visits. In our private campground survey, only 37 percent of the first-time visitors to a campground stayed for 4 days or more. Sixty-two percent of the campers who were on their second visit stayed for at least 4 days. With 3 past visits, the percentage of 4-day stays increased to 69 percent; and after 4 or more past visits, it increased to 73 percent. Among all classes of visitors, the longer the visit, the greater the percentage of expected returns. For first-time visitors on a 1-day visit, 38 percent predicted that they would return; on 2-day visits, 52 percent; 3-day visits, 65 percent; 4- to 10-day visits, 71 percent; and 11 or more days, 79 percent.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>THE PRIVATE CAMPGROUND VISITOR. An unpublished manuscript in the files of the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station. FS-NE-1901, 1965.

The assumption is that if you can just get the camper onto this cycle of more visits and longer visits, he will be trapped there, a victim of his own habit pattern. There is probably a strong element of truth in this; but there are, of course, limits. Visits can become no longer than the amount of available vacation time; and eventually even the most pleasurable experiences can become monotonous. However, these limits can undoubtedly be extended by imaginative management that is attuned to minimizing monotony through providing for new experiences and new developments in and around the campground.

## **Incentives**

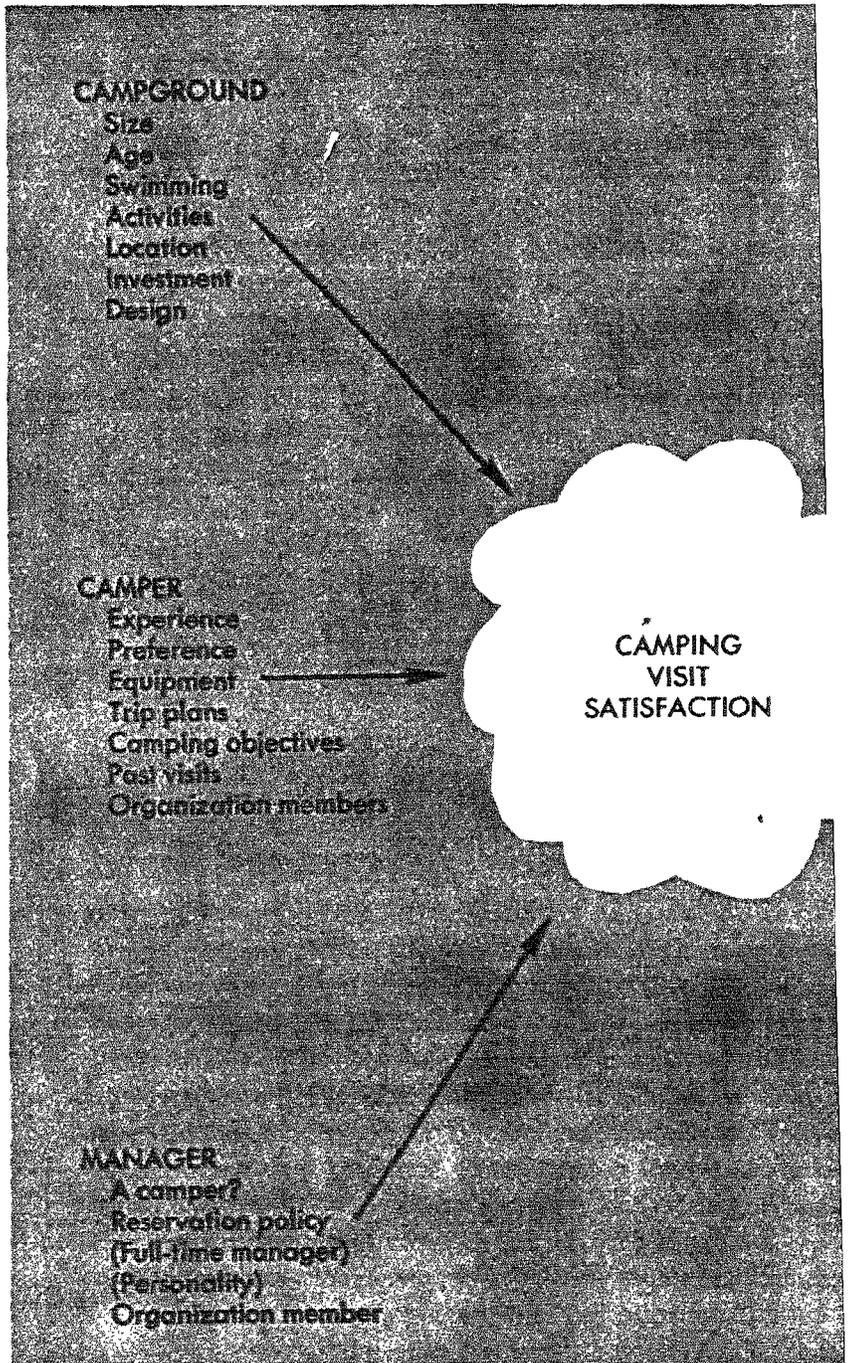
How do you get campers onto this lucrative cycle? More specifically, How do you convince the first-time visitor to stay longer than he had originally planned? And how do you get all visitors to come back for a future visit?

Obviously, giving them a first-rate camping experience has something to do with it. Just as obviously, your competition will be attempting to do the same. So something more is needed—incentives. Two possibilities come to mind; and with a little reflection, most managers could develop others keyed to their own individual operating styles. One possibility: A first-time visitor, upon his arrival at the campground, could be given a certificate entitling him to 1 day's free camping for each 2 days of paid camping. This is not price-cutting, or attempting to sell 3 days of services for the price of two. The objective is simply to get the camper to stay longer, so that he will be better able to appreciate all that your campground and its environs have to offer. Another possibility: established customers could be given a certificate, after a paid visit of 4 days or more, which would entitle them to half-price camping, on week-days only, during their next visit. In this case you would not only provide the economic incentive to return; you also would have created a tool for spreading busy-week-end traffic over the usually slack week-days.

We have tentatively labelled preference for, or prejudice against, private campgrounds as one of the less rational motives influencing camper visits simply because we have not yet identified any firm basis for preferences. This in no way diminishes their importance. If we look at the return-visit intentions of first-time visitors only, the impact of preferences is unmistakable. Return-visit intentions among campers who preferred public campgrounds were only 41 percent. When no preference exists—for either public or private campgrounds—the return-visit intentions increase to 59 percent. And, among those first-time visitors who prefer private developments, 72 percent say that they will come back. The length-of-visit pattern for these three groups is equally striking: 2, 3, and 5 days, on the average, for campers with a public-area preference, no preference, and a private-area preference, respectively.

Combatting entrenched prejudices and preferences is never easy. But it is a problem that has received a lot of attention in the marketing field, and many of the lessons of experience learned elsewhere may be applicable to campground management. Admittedly, in our survey, most of the campers having a preference for public areas were visiting a private campground for reasons of simple expediency. Very often they were awaiting a vacancy at some nearby public campground where they had originally intended to go.

Perhaps trying to capture these campers as permanent customers would be difficult. On the other hand, through no effort of your own, you would have solved the major tactical merchandising problem of getting the opposition to try your product. It's a little like the housewife who finds the grocer is out of Brand X, so she must try Brand Y or go without. In this case, your product need not necessarily be better, but it must be as good. Furthermore, the preference for public campgrounds is based, at least in part, on the generally lower fees encountered there. So the camper who is forced to try your campground may be quite receptive to the economic incentives mentioned in connection with habit and the repeat-visit cycle.



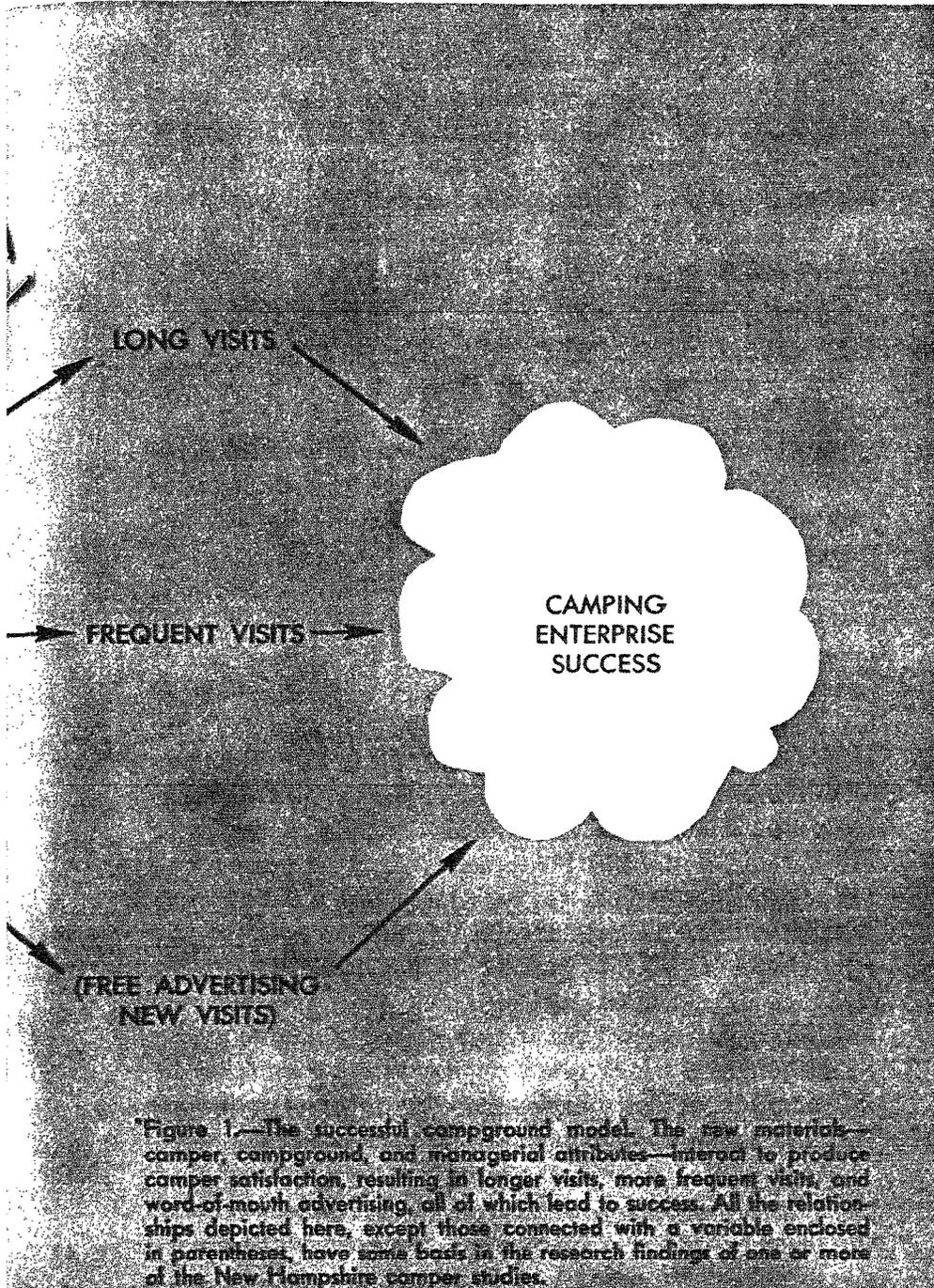


Figure 1—The successful campground model. The raw materials—camper, campground, and managerial attributes—interact to produce camper satisfaction, resulting in longer visits, more frequent visits, and word-of-mouth advertising, all of which lead to success. All the relationships depicted here, except those connected with a variable enclosed in parentheses, have some basis in the research findings of one or more of the New Hampshire camper studies.

Finally, only 20 percent of the private campground visitors we surveyed were in this "campers without a campground" category. Another 38 percent expressed no firm preference in either direction, public or private. This is certainly a worthwhile size group of fence-sitters to aim a promotional campaign at. And you can be sure that whatever efforts you expend to win these campers over can never be as intensively matched by the efforts of public agencies.

## **Variety & Service**

How to accomplish this dual goal of winning over the opposition and getting campers onto the repeat-visit cycle, takes us back into the other two categories of motivation—variety and service.

For a variety, a return to the grocer's shelf may be revealing. Today's supermarket is a model of merchandising efficiency that offers in a limited amount of floor space, an immense number of commodities; and for each commodity a large number of brands, sizes, and shapes. The many attractively displayed items are intended to be a substitute for the shopping list. The shelves are a smorgasbord of desirable items. If you have a brand-name preference, it is there. If you buy for status, you can pay more and get less. If you buy for economy, there are house-brands that sell for a few pennies less, but return a higher profit margin. And, if you have no preference at all, you can have the outright pleasure of selecting tuna fish in two grades, three colors, seven brands, and three sizes; or instant coffee in nine brands and three sizes. Shopping has become recreation. And to a large extent, recreation has become shopping. Not just shopping for the campgrounds, but shopping for what to do after you get there. Participation depends on the resources available.

One successful private campground operates on this same smorgasbord principle. The manager offers dozens of daytime and nighttime activities, sports, tours, and personalized instruction in water skiing, diving, tennis, and other sports. The owner's

guiding philosophy is that many campers today do not have a sharply developed idea of what the ingredients of a camping experience might be. By offering a variety of combinations, at a very reasonable \$5 per family per day, he enables each camping family to construct its own personalized camping experience. Or, if they are bargain-conscious—and who isn't?—they can stay longer to take full advantage of everything that is offered. In addition to good business sense, the manager of this unique enterprise also has an outstanding physical resource, and a sincere personal interest in the comfort and enjoyment of every visitor.

This personal touch, to be effective, is not the veneer of the so-called red carpet treatment, nor is it a paternalistic hovering over each campsite. And it is not something that is very easily researched or scientifically described. Among the few campground managers who have it, there is outwardly little in common. Inwardly they seem to share a profound concern that each camper who passes through their gates will have discovered something of value. That something may be simply the smell of a campfire, or how to water ski, or it may be a more significant insight about oneself or one's family.

The personal touch to campground management has been carried to the extreme in another highly successful New England campground where the manager, who has a special facility for remembering names of his established customers, calls all of his campers—adults and children alike—by their first names. He also sends Christmas cards to all his camping families, and birthday cards to the children. This particular private campground is almost a private club.

These twin concepts of variety and service are getting out onto the thin edge of our research. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to simply list some of the ways in which variety and service can be incorporated into campground planning and management.

Service has been expressed in terms of such things as advance reservations, adequate (and appropriate) directional signs, trailer hook-ups, adequate roads within the campground, camp-

grounds located near urban areas and not too far off the beaten path, long seasons, 24-hour attendants, telephone availability, competence in first aid, children's activities, teen interests, baby sitting, bulletin boards, rental equipment, instructional services, well-spaced water taps and toilet facilities, night lights, camp stores, regular firewood deliveries and trash removal, pre-season notices of changes in rates and services, available shelters, assistance to new campers, hot water, showers, campground maps, area maps showing tour routes, arrangements for discount rates at nearby attractions, posted rules and regulations, liability insurance, and almost anything that reflects a concern for the camper's convenience, enjoyment, and protection.

Variety tends to invoke images of all kinds of activities, sports, games, movies, dances, and special events. But variety occurs elsewhere as well: in the design of campsites, roads and trails; in the distribution and density of campsites within the campground; in the effective use of shore lines, open, shaded areas, and edges; in the types of trees and shrubbery that are preserved and planted; in the types of campers attracted; in the personalities, interests, and abilities of campground employees; in the changes in program offerings from week to week and year to year; and even in the rate structure and discounts offered.

How you combine these elements of service and variety with your own specific goals and strategies in operating a camping enterprise is management. And this puts us even farther out on the fringe of our research findings because we know so little about the goals and strategies of campground owners. Some owners, because of other commitments, may want to develop the business slowly; others may want to build up attendance as fast as possible even at the expense of minimizing income during the early years; and still others may prefer to realize the maximum income on as few visitors as possible. Some owners may want to cater to a very specific clientele, while others may be more concerned with local area development and the filling of a general need for more campsites. And questions of economics are invariably tied to managerial strategy.

## **Some Economics of Visit Promotion**

Up to this point, I have centered on the why and the how of promoting longer and more frequent visits, both directly through various incentives and indirectly through raising the level of camper satisfaction. And I have tried to stress the idea that both the direct and indirect approaches should be used together. To stress only the direct approach is foolishly deceitful, while emphasizing only the indirect means is foolishly naive. The question now is: Is it worth it? And I know of no empirical evidence to answer with. However, we can develop some concepts, which are theoretically sound—and you can test them.

“Is it worth the effort?” is really two questions in one: “Is there a potential for improvement?”, and “Can enough improvement be realized to offset the costs of a promotional scheme?” Apparently there is a good potential for improvement in the rate of repeat visits. Only 30 percent of the private campground visitors surveyed had visited the campground previously. But as many as 72 percent (those having a preference for private campgrounds) expressed a desire to make a repeat visit. Even among the first-time visitors who claimed to prefer public areas, 41 percent expressed their hopes of returning. It seems highly likely that management incentives can pick up a portion of this gap between expectations and realizations.

The potential for extending visit lengths is less clear. Very few weekend campers could probably be induced to stay for an extra day. But among campers on a long trip, there is probably a large proportion whose plans are flexible enough so they could stay for an extra day or even an extra week. Our data do not indicate what proportion of campers have flexible plans. But we do know that more than 50 percent of the private campground visitors were on a trip of at least 2 weeks duration, while only 27 percent of them spent more than 1 week at a single campground. We also know that one out of every two private campground visitors spends at least 20 days camping, on three separate trips, each year. The potential for capturing extra days

and extra visits exists, at least for every other camper coming through the entrance gates.

Whether trying to capture some of this potential is worth the effort depends also upon a campground's present volume of business, management's goals for increasing the volume of business, and the campground's capacity to absorb new business.

There are different ways of looking at campground capacity. The first, and most obvious, is *design capacity*—the number of campsites multiplied by the length of the season. A 100-unit campground, in a resort area where business begins on Memorial Day and ends 100 days later on Labor Day, has a design capacity of 10,000 camper groups, or 50,000 camper-days (at 5 campers per group). A much more useful definition is that of *visit capacity*, which reduces design capacity by the average length of a visit to arrive at the maximum number of group-visits that can be accommodated per season. As the average length of camping visits increases, capacity decreases.

A 100-unit campground, with an average visit length of 3 days, will have a Memorial Day to Labor Day capacity of 3,300 camper groups. If the average visit increases to 4 days, capacity is reduced by 24 percent to 2,500 groups; at 5 days, 2,000 families can be accommodated; and at 6 days, capacity drops to 1,600. And, since the length of visit is significantly different between new visitors and repeaters, the proportion of repeat visitors, in the annual attendance, will have a distinct impact upon campground capacity, as the figures in table 4 indicate.

If management goals are to be realistic then, they must take into account this three-way relationship between repeat visits, average visit length, and campground capacity. Realism also rules out goals in the range of 80 to 100 percent occupancy simply because of weather and the weekly cycle of camping activity. Greater weekday attendance can be promoted, but it will never equal weekend attendance unless all the sites are leased on a monthly or seasonal basis, and no transients are allowed. Finally, realism involves an acceptance by the manager who has already achieved 50 percent of capacity-use that he will

Table 4.—The effect of simultaneously raising the repeat-visit rate from 30 percent (actual past visits) to 70 percent (expressed intentions to return), and the average visit of new visitors from 2 days to 3.

(Based on a 100-unit campground having a 100-day season)

Total attendance		Repeaters		Average visit		New visitors		Average visit		Weighted average visit		Visit capacity <sup>1</sup>		Use, as a percentage of capacity <sup>2</sup>	
No.	%	No.	Days	No.	Days	No.	Days	No.	Days	No.	Days	No.	%	No.	%
3,300	70	2,300	4	1,000	3.00	1,000	4	1,000	2.75	3.75	3.50	2,670	124		
2,500	60	1,500	4	1,000	2.75	1,000	4	1,000	2.50	3.25	3.25	3,100	88		
2,000	50	1,000	4	1,000	2.50	1,000	4	1,000	2.25	3.00	3.00	3,300	65		
1,700	40	700	4	1,000	2.25	1,000	4	1,000	2.00	2.57	2.57	3,900	52		
1,400	30	400	4	1,000	2.00	1,000	4	1,000	2.00	2.57	2.57	3,900	36		

<sup>1</sup>Visit capacity is determined by multiplying 100 campsites by 100 days, and dividing the product by the weighted average visit length.

<sup>2</sup>Determined by dividing total attendance by the appropriate visit capacity in the preceding column.

have fewer strategies open to him, and can expect smaller increments for his promotional dollar, unless he is willing to enlarge his campground. As table 4 indicates, it is impossible to increase repeat visits up to the rate at which people say they would like to return, and at the same time prompt new visitors to spend an average visit of 3 days instead of 2. As a matter of fact, it is probably impossible to come anywhere near approaching the 70 percent rate at which visitors say they would like to return.

## **Choose Your Goals**

Obviously the major costs of operating a campground are the fixed ones, which go on unchanged, regardless of whether you entertain 50 or 500 campers. It is clearly better to have the campground occupied during slack periods even if the occupants may be paying reduced rates. Just as clearly, you don't want a lot of certificates for free or reduced-rate camping floating around which can be redeemed at any time. So, whatever promotional campaign is decided upon, it must be strategically designed to achieve only the goals you want it to. Given the situation of a 100-unit campground, operating at 36 percent capacity, with one-third of its visitors being repeaters (bottom line of table 4), four general strategies are apparent.

First, you could attempt to encourage repeaters to stay even longer than they already do. Their average visit could almost certainly be raised above 4 days since we know that their annual camping participation is five times greater than that. However, this carries with it the danger that the family that normally makes two 4-day visits per season to your campground might decide now to make only one 6-day visit. And perhaps one of those days will have been free as the incentive, resulting in a net loss of 3 days of paid camping from just that one family.

Second, a better strategy for repeat campers might be to hold visit lengths down and try to get the campers to come back more

often. For example, encourage the annual visitor to become a twice-annual visitor. This can be done either by discount rates for slack periods like fall weekends or summer weekdays, or by featuring a variety of special campground events during the season. A combination approach, featuring discount rates at times when special events occur in the surrounding community, is also feasible.

Third, you could try to promote longer visits by the first-time visitors. This seems to be a highly likely possibility, except for those on a weekend trip, by simply offering a third day free for every camper who registers for 2 days. Being a long-range strategy—extending the visit to get them onto the repeat visit cycle—this has some immediate costs. The costs are most evident for those new campers arriving on a Wednesday or Thursday, because their free day will then fall during the normally busy weekend. If capacity attendance on weekends is the rule at your campground, and there is no overflow capacity, this may not be an appropriate strategy unless you can modify it in some way.

Fourth, you could promote repeat visits by the new visitors. As already indicated, the best strategy for this may be to get them to stay longer on their first visit. On the other hand, not every new visitor has plans flexible enough to allow for an extension of the visit. Therefore, perhaps a combination of incentives that gives the new visitor his choice of an extra free day on his present visit, or on his next visit within the year, would provide the most comprehensive strategy for new visitors.

The number of possibilities for creating different types and combinations of incentives is limited only by the campground manager's imagination and his knowledge of his customers. In many respects, this face-to-face relationship of manager and customer is a far superior means of gaining understanding than the most carefully controlled scientific survey. Compared with interview techniques, your exposure to the camper is longer, more varied, less structured, less formal, and more relevant to the unique qualities of your own enterprise.

## Something Besides Science

In this same vein, I would like to conclude this by voicing a warning about consumer research and "scientific" formulas for success. The dangers in this common idea, that success is like baking a cake, should be obvious at this point. The problem is nicely summarized by Theodore Levitt, in the *Harvard Business Review*.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Levitt's thesis is that management, in recent years, has failed to manage:

It has been seduced by the self-confident and plausible claims of its researchers. But . . . management has been a compliant victim . . . because it does not consider what happens a seduction. Rather, it considers the whole affair highly scientific. And this has been a particularly congenial submission because management has always sought formulas and prescriptions for easier decision making. When easy formulas and scientific claims are accepted and employed without sufficient regard for the market conditions under which they will have to function, the senseless muddle which characterizes detergents, compact cars, and mentholated cigarettes is produced. No matter how many carefully controlled laboratory tests tell you that what is best for selling menthol cigarettes is green waterfalls beneath snow-capped mountains, the appropriate policy may be to avoid using these images if everybody else is using them. In marketing, sound strategy often consists not in doing a better job of what competitors are doing, but in doing what they are *not* doing.

The formula given in this paper—that success is a function of camper satisfaction—is obviously a do-it-yourself formula. Research can identify some of the things that produce satisfaction. Management can identify still others, and put them all together. But this is not enough in a highly competitive market.

You must also communicate with the camper, and convince him that you know what he wants, and that you can provide it. Gimmicks or incentives that will promote longer and more frequent visits are one way—possibly a very effective way—of communicating your awareness of camper interests. My suspicion that they may be very effective rests on the sure knowledge that they are not available to your major source of competition, the publicly owned and operated campgrounds. And this is not the

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<sup>9</sup>Levitt, Theodore, M-R SNAKE DANCE. *Harvard Business Rev.* 38(6): 76-84, 1960.

only weapon in the private campground operator's arsenal. You can also provide a level of personal service, advance reservations, and supervised activities that cannot be matched by public enterprise. And you can manipulate your fees to get a better distribution of attendance, whereas public campground fees are rigidly set.

In conclusion, each campground owner will have to write his own personal formula for success in the campground business. But the major ingredients are sure to involve promoting longer and more frequent visits through greater customer satisfaction.

