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Evolution and implications of a paradigm shift in the marketing of leisure services in the USA

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The evolution of leisure services marketing in the USA has passed through five stages in the past half-century: pre-marketing (activity/custodial focus), selling, user benefits orientation, community-wide benefits orientation and repositioning. The first two stages were supplanted by the user benefits orientation in the late 1970s. The user benefits focus transitioned into the leisure field from the business literature and remained pre-eminent until the mid-1990s. It was superseded because it had two conceptual flaws. First, it failed to address the notion of equity. Second, its focus on being responsive to individual users was inconsistent with the broader mandate of public leisure agencies to provide community-wide services. The emergence of credible scientific research in the past decade to support advocates' claims of community-wide benefits has facilitated emergence of the most recent evolutionary stage of leisure services marketing which is repositioning. Repositioning seeks to connect community-wide benefits the agency has the potential to deliver with an issue that is important to taxpayers and elected officials. It is argued that repositioning is the key to the future viability of public leisure agencies.

Keywords: leisure services marketing; user orientation; community-wide benefits; repositioning

Introduction

This article traces the evolution of leisure services marketing in the USA. It suggests that in the past half-century there have been five stages in this evolution: pre-marketing (activity/custodial focus), promotion/selling, user benefits orientation, community benefits orientation and repositioning. The first two stages are of historic, rather than contemporary, interest. For this reason only a cursory overview of them is provided. They serve as benchmarks which provide context for the conceptual advances offered by the three subsequent stages. The article's emphasis is on the conceptual underpinnings which explain the shifts to and through the latter three stages, and on the practical implications of those shifts.

Transitions through the last three stages are occurring slowly in the leisure services field. Nevertheless, the progress is encouraging for a profession that is only about 40 years old, if a profession is defined as needing an empirical body of knowledge on which to base its practice (Moore & Driver, 2005). The five stages are identified in Figure 1 which is entitled The Benefits Evolution Pyramid (the rationale for this title is discussed later in the article). The figure suggests that most agencies and professionals appear to be operating at the two lowest levels of the pyramid. Smaller numbers have embraced a user benefits focus, and a relatively small *avant-garde* set of agencies and professionals are pioneering the focus on community benefits and repositioning.

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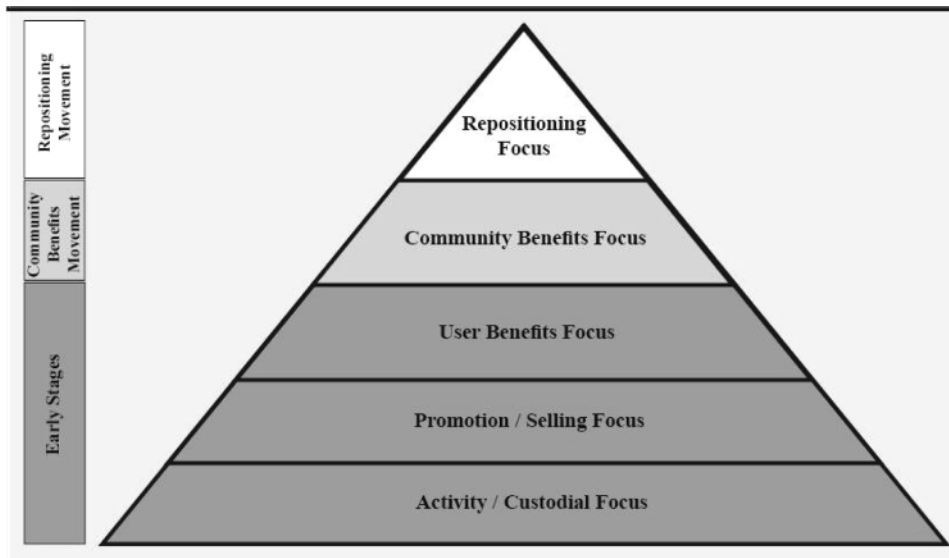


Figure 1. The benefits evolution pyramid.

Evolution of the user benefits paradigm

The activity/custodial focus and the promotion/selling focus stages shown at the base of the pyramid in Figure 1 were supplanted by the user benefits (or ‘marketing’) orientation in the leisure services field in the early 1970s in the UK and in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the USA. The catalysts for its emergence were the embracement of that philosophy in the business field and the onset of the tax revolt which occurred in the USA in the late 1970s. These strands are reviewed in the following two subsections.

Gestation of the user benefits paradigm in the business field

In 1960, Levitt published a seminal article in the *Harvard Business Review*. Many argue that this article was the conceptual foundation from which the modern field of marketing developed. Levitt pointed out that companies which focused myopically on enhancing the efficiency of their product so it achieved the status of ‘unchallenged superiority’, rather than focusing on their customers’ needs, invariably became obsolete and consequently disappeared. He noted that customers purchase products that best contribute to satisfying their needs and commented:

The view that an industry is a customer satisfying process not a goods producing process, is vital for all businessmen to understand ... Given the customers’ needs, the industry develops backwards ... creating the things by which customer satisfactions are achieved. (Levitt, 1960, p. 55)

Levitt emphasised that to remain relevant and viable, businesses should define their business (what they are trying to achieve) in terms of customers’ benefits, not in terms of products that the business currently produces.

Thus, for example, Levitt argued that many movie companies disappeared because:

Movies implied a specific, limited product. This produced a fatuous contentment which from the beginning led producers to view T.V. as a threat. Hollywood scorned and rejected T.V. when it should have welcomed it as an opportunity to expand the entertainment business. (1960, p. 45)

Levitt’s insight from almost a half a century ago is reflected in contemporary times by most of the surviving movie companies being divisions of entertainment companies which also embrace

not only traditional television networks but also cable and pay-for-view television, electronic games, record labels, DVDs, live entertainment, etc.

Another widely cited example from that era which illustrated Levitt's principle was attributed to Charles Revson, who was responsible for building Revlon cosmetics into the thriving enterprise it became. When he was asked what his firm produced, he answered, 'In the factory we make cosmetics, and in the drug store we sell hope' (Kotler, 1972a, p. 18). It implied that when people purchased facial creams and make-up, they did not want those products per se; rather they wanted what the products did for their self-image.

Levitt's contribution was integral to the evolution of a philosophy of business marketing in the late 1950s and early 1960s which said that the social and economic justification for a company's existence was the satisfaction of customer wants. This simple and intuitively appealing conceptualisation superseded two supply-oriented philosophies which had dominated business thinking in two previous eras known as the Product Era and the Selling Era (analogous to the activity/custodial and selling/promotion foci shown in Figure 1). They are briefly reviewed here because they characterised mindsets that prevailed in most leisure service agencies before the user benefits paradigm emerged.

The Product Era was associated with the advent of the assembly line which made it possible for the first time in history to produce large quantities of relatively inexpensive products. Customers, many of whom could not previously afford to buy, readily absorbed these products as fast as they were offered for sale. Demand exceeded supply, so business managers concentrated their efforts on enhancing efficiency of the supply. They were primarily concerned with supplying more of what they produced, rather than with selling what they had produced or trying to learn what customers wanted them to produce.

Ultimately aggregate market demand stabilised, but more suppliers were producing products with a result that supply exceeded demand. Thus, companies recognised a need to stimulate and arouse demand for their products and the Selling Era emerged. Sales departments were established to sell products aggressively. At this point, businesses moved from a product orientation to a selling orientation. Their main concern, however, remained supply and the product being sold, rather than the benefits that customers wanted or received.

The Marketing Era (user benefits focus in Figure 1) emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s when some companies, and influential academics like Levitt, realised that a sale was not predominantly dependent on an aggressive sales force, but rather on a customer's decision to purchase a product. They recognised that a company was more likely to succeed if it tried to look through its customers' eyes, identify their needs, and produce products that delivered benefits which met those needs.

A decade after Levitt's contribution when the Marketing Era was being embraced by enlightened businesses, Kotler published two articles in the *Journal of Marketing* which were conceptually important in the transition of this new benefits-based marketing philosophy into the leisure services field (Kotler, 1972b; Kotler & Levy, 1969). He identified the fundamental principle undergirding marketing in these terms:

The core concept of marketing is the transaction. *A transaction is the exchange of values between two parties.* The things of value need not be limited to goods, services and money; they include other resources such as time, energy, and feelings. (Kotler, 1972b, p. 49) [italics in the original]

Kotler explained that an organisation's mission was to deliver benefits valued by customers and, in exchange, recipients provided resources to support the organisation. He suggested that this relationship was not unique to business firms. Rather, it could be broadened to embrace non-profit and public organisations, and the array of goods, services and ideas which they supplied. In so doing he assumed there were minimal differences between managing private and public sector

organisations, and argued for the universality of marketing applications stating, 'Generic marketing is a logic available to all organisations facing problems of market response' (Kotlerb, 1972, p. 54). This 'broadening of the concept of marketing' proposal received widespread visibility.

Thus, by the early 1970s two axioms were established in the marketing literature. First, the goal of businesses was to create products that delivered benefits which met customers' needs. Second, this guideline for successful businesses could be extended into the realm of all other organisations that supplied goods and services, including public leisure agencies.

Gestation of the user benefits paradigm in the leisure services field in the USA

In 1974, Gray and Greben produced a seminal benchmark paper commissioned by the National Recreation and Park Association in which they expressed disillusionment with the prevailing perspectives of leisure services' professionals stating, 'They are activity centered. Definition in terms of activities is unsatisfactory' (Gray & Greben, 1974, p. 49). They argued that this activity orientation meant the field was still focusing on supply and had a custodial mentality believing that its mission was to look after facilities:

For thirty or forty years or more the recreation and park movement has been deluded by a false perception of recreation. This has warped our services, given us false priorities, prevented effective evaluation of results, and inhibited our ability to interpret what we do. Worst of all, it has prevented us from developing an understanding of our goals and methods. (Gray & Greben, 1974, p. 50)

They went on to state:

We should have discovered long ago the nature of the business we are in, but we have not ... The critical questions are not, How many were there? or who won? The critical question is, What happened to Jose, Mary, Sam, and Joan in this experience? (pp. 49–50)

The fallacy of the prevailing evaluation measure of counting how many were there has been pointed out by other commentators using an analogy with a hospital:

Hospitals need better measures of their contributions to society than just counts of the patients coming and leaving in that we also need to know what happened to the patients while they were in, and before they left, the hospital. (Driver, Bruns, & Booth, 2000, p. 4)

A leisure services agency has buildings, parks and natural areas, but what is their purpose? This shift to a focus on user benefits recognised that the field is not about the parks and facilities, it is about the experiences that people have at them.

It has been suggested that the limited scientific knowledge about the benefits of leisure that was available in the early 1970s was in itself a reason for the field's focus on an activity/custodial role:

As a result of the limited scientific knowledge about the benefits of leisure, most park and recreation practitioners (and researchers and educators) did not understand what recreation was and viewed it as an activity, like eating is an activity. The cause and effect links between benefits and settings etc. were not known or understood. Ergo, there was too little credible knowledge available for planners and managers to use to manage other than for activities. (Driver, 2006, personal communication)

Gray and Greben's article in 1974 was an indictment of the field's supply focused *modus operandi* at that time. It received wide visibility and was extensively discussed in professional forums. However, it has often been noted that a change in paradigms is not likely to occur until there is a crisis. Crises force a reappraisal of existing operating methods and persuade managers that yesterday's formulas for success may no longer work. The tax revolt which emerged in the mid-1970s in the USA transformed the political landscape and provoked such a crisis in the leisure services field.

In the previous 50 years, government spending swelled from one-tenth to one-third of the USA' gross national product (Crompton, 1999). During this period, the political emphasis was on

expanding the array of services delivered. After the tax revolt, political emphasis shifted to either reducing, or at least not raising, taxes. In a prescient observation at the beginning of this era, it was noted 'This is the new environment in which many park and recreation agencies now have to operate' (Howard & Crompton, 1980, p. 37).

The creed of all public agencies confronted with this challenging new political environment became 'doing more with less'; a mantra that led many in the leisure services field to move away from a focus on simply supplying facilities and programmes. They were now required to justify that these services were needed, which they sought to do by increasing the number of participants. They were also required to generate more revenue and become more self-sustaining.

To meet these new mandates, most U.S. leisure service agencies followed the route taken by their business brethren in earlier decades and moved from their Activity/Custodial (Product) Era into a Promotion (Selling) Era. They adopted a more aggressive posture where instead of merely offering programmes and services or maintaining facilities, they aggressively promoted them attempting to convince potential client groups to use them. A few progressive and enlightened agencies, however, moved beyond this and embraced a marketing orientation with its focus on identifying clients' needs and creating programmes that delivered benefits which met those needs. Thus, in responding to the tax revolt crisis, leisure service agencies tended to follow the evolutionary pattern that characterised the behaviour of businesses in previous decades when they were required to adapt to changing external conditions.

At the same time that the benefits approach was being introduced into leisure services in the USA under the banner of marketing, a parallel effort launched by Driver and his associates was emerging in the field of outdoor recreation. Driver's institutional base was the U.S. Forest Service and he initiated a long-term programme of research designed to better understand the nature of 'recreation experiences' and to scientifically identify the 'psychological outcomes' associated with outdoor recreation participation. The term 'psychological outcomes' was a scientific operationalisation of benefits. His guiding philosophy was that an agency's mission is not merely to manage resources, it is more fundamental – to justify the acquisition of those resources in the first place.

He developed a set of Recreation Experience Preference Scales for measuring those outcomes which were widely tested and used by the research community (Manfredo, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996; Moore & Driver, 2005). Like his peers in leisure services who were in the vanguard of using a marketing framework, Driver argued that managers in federal and state land agencies must address their users' preferences in terms of psychological outcomes sought, rather than in terms of activities pursued. These outcomes, not activities, provided answers to the question, *why* should these services be provided?

One of Driver's important contributions was the popularising of the term 'benefits approach' which replaced the earlier more technical terms of 'psychological outcomes' and 'marketing'. He recognised that the psychological outcomes term sounded too technical to resonate with the general public. The problems with the word marketing are discussed later in this article. The word 'benefit' refers to specific ways in which a particular leisure service either improves the condition or state of an individual or group, or prevents a worse condition or state from happening (Driver & Bruns, 1999). Driver introduced this transition to benefit terminology in his own research programme in 1987 and subsequently popularised it in the benchmark text, *Benefits of Leisure* (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991) by both commissioning and coordinating the efforts of the authors who wrote its 35 chapters articulating the state of knowledge at that time, and by arranging for its publication.

Limitations of the user benefits approach

In their 1974 treatise, Gray and Greben reported:

In most cities, publicly supported recreation and park budgets are an embarrassingly small portion of the total ... It is difficult to identify any great overall community interest and knowledge [of the recreation and park] movement or of our leaders. (Compare this with concern for law and order, public education, etc.) (1974, p. 32)

Over 30 years later, this observation is probably equally legitimate. While there was recognition among many of the field's professionals that the transition from activity/custodial-based management to a focus on user benefits enhanced the field's effectiveness and professionalism, it became apparent by the 1990s that it had a relatively small impact on changing perceptions of the field's relative importance among elected officials. The evidence for this was the limited growth in agencies' operating budgets, which are a reflection of elected officials' priorities.

In the 36-year period from 1965 to 2000, aggregate capital investment by U.S. local governments in leisure services facilities when measured in standard 1990 dollars (to remove the impact of inflation) was approximately \$70 billion. Tax support for operating revenues over the same period, however, increased by less than 5% in real dollar terms. The authors who reported these findings commented:

These data appear to endorse the prevailing conventional wisdom that while voters are prepared to invest substantial capital resources at bond referenda, their elected representatives who in most cases establish operating budgets, are reluctant to provide concomitant levels of tax support to operate those facilities. (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003, p. 136)

Further evidence of the relatively low budgetary status of the field was provided when annual local government expenditures on leisure services were expressed as a proportion of total local government expenditures. The resultant percentages in the 1980s and 1990s were substantially lower than those in the 1960s and 1970s (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003).

In the author's view, the primary reason for the lack of improvement in the field's prioritisation was that the user benefits model which the leisure services field adopted was borrowed from the business field where it was first developed and was not adapted to fit the very different external environment in which leisure services were delivered. There were two major failings in the transition: a misinterpretation of what marketing was, and adoption of an inappropriate model of marketing by leisure services personnel. These are discussed in the following sections.

The misconception of marketing

The business connotations associated with marketing after it transitioned into public leisure services in the late 1970s have been problematic. One contemporary author has observed, 'Confusion swirls around the topic of marketing like smoke from some eternal flame. Like smoke, this confusion both irritates and obfuscates' (McCarville, 2002, p. 8).

From the beginning, it was emphasised that marketing offered a philosophy and a set of tools that were generic, '*A marketing orientation is a state of mind appropriate for all public and social service agencies regardless of size or the particular emphasis of their programs*' (Crompton & Lamb, 1986, p. 6) [italics in the original]. As Kotler has suggested (Kotler, 1972; Kotler & Levy, 1969), the tools and orientation could be used by all types of organisations, but their application was determined by the mission and objectives being pursued. In the business world the mission is to generate profit, so the marketing philosophy and tools are used to that end. In contrast, in leisure services, the mission is to deliver specified community-wide benefits, and the philosophy and tools should be applied to that end. However, this distinction was not grasped by many who consequently misunderstood and misused marketing's philosophy and tools by trying to pursue business objectives in the social service context of leisure services.

This misapplication was encouraged by the tax cut environment and its mantra of ‘doing more with less’ which prevailed in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In the business world, the key to effective marketing is to direct offerings exclusively at responsive client groups and ignore all others. To elicit a purchase from people in non-responsive segments requires an extensive commitment of resources and is unlikely to be profitable, so these segments typically are ignored.

By adopting this philosophy in leisure services, efficiency was pursued at the expense of equity in that agencies ignored non-responsive segments that were expensive to serve and focused on services which would generate revenues so agencies would be less dependent on tax support. This focus resulted in local park and recreation agencies increasing their self-generated revenues substantially. In real dollar terms, on average, they more than tripled between 1965 and 2000 from \$5.1 billion to \$16.1 billion, so by the 1990s for every \$2 of tax funds received by local agencies they generated \$1 from users of their services (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003). However, in the late 1990s the proportion of operating expenses emanating from self-generated revenues plateaued, suggesting the potential of these funds for replacing tax revenues had been maximised.

Figure 2 shows the downward spiral of tax support that the fixation on generating revenues created for many leisure service agencies. The emphasis on revenue generation led to them focusing on responsive market segments with an ability and willingness to pay for services. At the same time, services which may have social merit but did not produce revenue were cut. This led to there being less justification for public tax support, and an expectation that users should pay for services that provided them with personal benefits, and the downward spiral continued. With remarkable prescience, 30 years ago Gray and Greben observed:

We are turning control of our social enterprises over to the accounting mind. The accounting mind reaches decisions by a method in which short-range fiscal consequences are the only criteria of value. Recreation and park services will not survive in that kind of environment. Most of the great social problems that disfigure our national life cannot be addressed in a climate dominated by that kind of value system. (1974, p. 50)

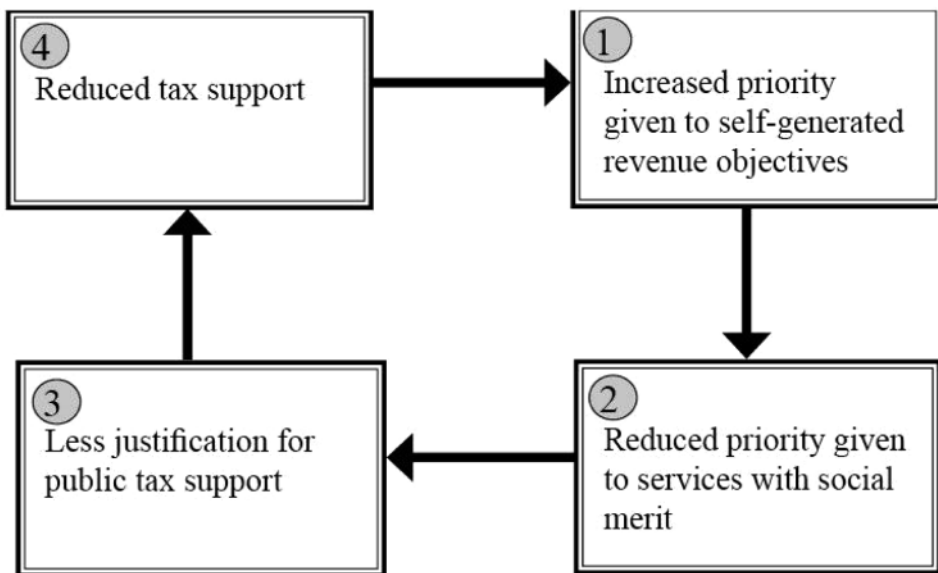


Figure 2. The tax support downward spiral.

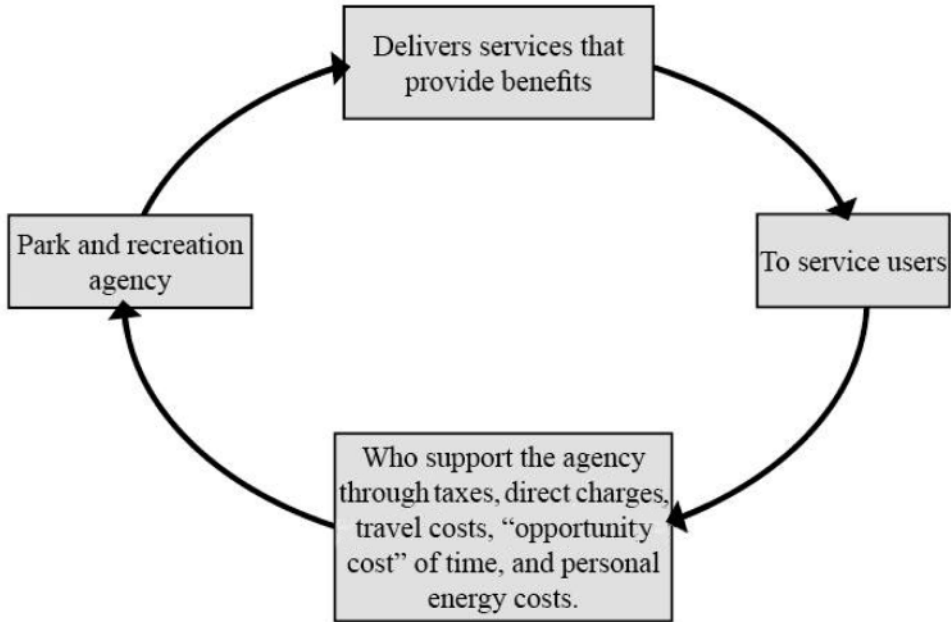


Figure 3. The voluntary exchange conceptualisation of marketing.

The inappropriate model of marketing

The second conceptual limitation associated with adopting the user benefits orientation model of marketing derived from business was that it proved to be insufficient for describing and explaining the broader mandate of a public leisure services agency.

Figure 3 shows the business field’s user benefits paradigm which was adopted in leisure services. The voluntary exchange mechanism that undergirds this paradigm requires something of value be offered to users who respond by exchanging something else of value. The essence of the paradigm is that it conceptualises an exchange relationship between a leisure services agency and users of its services. An agency delivers services that provide benefits which users seek. Users provide support to the agency through their payments of tax dollars and programme charges, travel costs for such items as transportation, the opportunity cost of not engaging in another activity during the time they spend involved with a service and the personal energy and effort expended to use the service.

The limitation of this model is that it includes only direct users of the agency’s services and non-users are excluded. The implication of this is that users and not general taxpayers should pay most of the costs of providing these services, since they receive most of the benefits from them. In the business world, this is acceptable because firms are likely to receive most of their financial resources from their service users. However, the largest portion of a leisure services agency’s budget is likely to come from taxes which are provided not only by users, but also by non-users of its services. But Figure 3 shows no exchange with this non-user group, so the paradigm is not designed to deliver benefits to them. If non-users perceive they receive nothing of value from the agency, then they are likely to be ambivalent to the use of public tax dollars to fund the agency’s services. Consequently, there is no mandate for the elected representatives of non-users to provide tax support.

The incongruity of this situation is illustrated in Figure 4. It reflects a common situation where tax resources are being used to deliver benefits to a relatively small subpopulation of users,

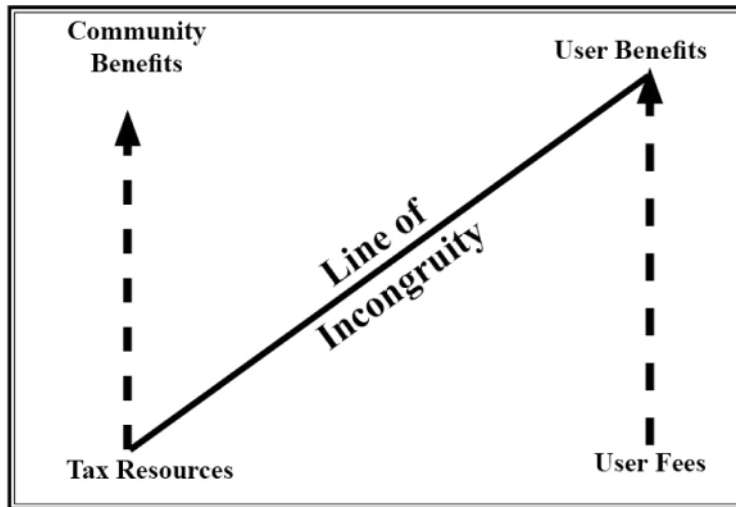


Figure 4. Incongruity associated with the user benefits paradigm.

even though the resources are contributed by everybody. The serrated lines in Figure 4 acknowledge that some tax resources go to services that deliver community-wide benefits and that user fees pay some of the costs of serving those users. However, in many agencies there is a perceived line of incongruity indicating that many taxpayers and elected officials believe much of the tax resource allocation to leisure services is used to deliver services to the small subpopulation of users. This is a vulnerable position for the field because it is not defensible.

The consequences of this incongruity have accentuated in recent decades and are likely to continue to do so since the rationale for supplying public recreation programmes (not parks) is eroding. The original intent was to create opportunities for people who would not otherwise have access and who, as a consequence, would use their 'idle hands' to engage in socially deviant behaviour. It was not a part of the original rationale to serve everybody. Nevertheless, 30 years ago, Gray and Greben commented, 'Unfortunately, even as late as the 1970s, recreation and parks professionals attempt to remain "all things to all people"' (1974, p. 31). In the current era, it is even more difficult to justify public subsidy of extensive recreation services for all sections of the population.

For an ever-increasing majority of a community's residents, there has been an outpouring of alternate competitive opportunities to public recreation offerings from home-based leisure in the form of electronic games and entertainment; from non-profit organisations and private clubs offering opportunities in arts, sports and education; and from commercial leisure companies involved in fitness and health clubs, theme parks, recreation amenities (golf, tennis, ice-rinks, marinas, etc.), gambling enterprises, concerts and vacations.

The increased marginality of public recreation amenities resulting from this competition has resulted in scepticism about the merits of supporting their provision. The days of recreation centres, senior centres, youth centres, etc. being perceived as core amenities that all communities should offer are probably over. The public sector's role amidst the plethora of competition is relatively small. It may be strategically important in specific contexts, but it is increasingly marginal.

Leisure service agencies traditionally have used user satisfaction, number of participants or programmes or revenue generated as their primary performance indicators. Demonstrating performance in these terms has been the primary justification for securing sustained or increased tax

allocations. However, they are inadequate performance indicators because they do not incorporate tax paying non-users' evaluations of an agency and non-users are often in the majority in a community.

While user benefit-driven programmes may lead to higher levels of satisfaction among participants and attract more revenue and increased numbers, such user benefits are unconvincing to many non-users and elected officials who are ambivalent or opposed to using public tax dollars to fund programmes that offer benefits only to a limited number of users.

Servicing user groups will always be a central element of the field's mission, but in many jurisdictions user groups have proven to be too narrow a constituency for sustaining or securing additional resources. Providing resources to a leisure services department so a minority of residents can have enjoyable experiences is likely to be a low priority when measured against the critical economic, health, safety and welfare issues with which legislative bodies are confronted.

The challenge: to enhance, not to discard, the user benefits approach

Before moving to higher stages of The Benefits Evolution Pyramid (Figure 1) in the following sections, it should be emphasised that there are philosophical, pragmatic and political rationales for agencies to embrace user benefits as part of their *modus operandi*. User benefits should be regarded as a base to expand upon, rather than an outdated irrelevancy to be abandoned.

From a *philosophical* perspective, user benefits derived in a leisure milieu make a substantial contribution to meeting fundamental human needs such as social interaction, recognition, excitement, self-confidence, self-esteem, ego-satisfaction, etc. The movement to a service economy, and from a regional or national to a global economy, means that a growing proportion of the population will not have access to jobs that are likely to facilitate such benefits. For these individuals, such basic human needs will have to be found in their familial or leisure milieus if they are to be experienced.

A second *philosophical* rationale to enhance, rather than discard, the user benefits approach stems from a recognition that while most benefits from participation accrue to users, in some instances there is a 'benefits chain of causality', which has the potential to contribute to societal goals:

Cardiovascular fitness is beneficial to the extent that a healthier, longer-living individual acts in such a way that ... Heightened self-esteem is beneficial to the extent that an individual who feels better about herself or himself acts in such a way that ... A greater sense of family solidarity or an individual is beneficial to the extent that.... (Dustin & Goodale, 1997, p. 21)

In each case the individual's personal benefit could have been positive impacts on society (it also could have been no or negative impacts!). In short, in some instances user benefits may have positive outcomes for the broader community.

A *pragmatic* perspective of the user benefits paradigm recognises the distinction between services that are part of an agency's 'core area of mission', which relates to community-wide benefits, and those that are part of its 'extant mission', which relates to its more entrepreneurial and proprietary activities. While core services are appropriately financed from a jurisdiction's general fund, for those facilities and services designed and structured to deliver proprietary benefits to particular groups (e.g. golf courses, marinas, adult athletic programmes) the user benefits paradigm is entirely appropriate. Such services often are financed from enterprise funds that are intended to be self-sufficient without any tax support. That is, all capital, operating and overhead costs are met by revenues accruing from users. In essence, they are a business operated by a public sector entity, so the business world's user benefits paradigm fits well.

In the 1980s, positive *political* outcomes were anticipated from adopting the user benefits paradigm, 'A commitment to marketing is likely to result in more popular and legislative support.

To the extent that marketing improves the satisfaction levels of client groups, an agency is likely to receive improved support for its activities from legislators' (Crompton & Lamb, 1986, p. 33). This proved to be naïve because it ignored the lack of attention to benefits for non-users.

However, users are a central constituency. They are likely to play a prominent role in securing agency resources because invariably they are the primary advocates, fundraisers and 'infantry' in referendum and lobbying campaigns.

Thus, user benefits and high user satisfaction are likely to be necessary conditions for acquiring additional resources, but they are unlikely to be sufficient. Hence, the challenge is to expand the conceptualisation so the user benefits paradigm is extended to embrace non-users, not to abandon that paradigm.

Rationale for a broader constituency

An agency's equity capital is accumulated from taxes, and those paying the taxes require evidence that they are receiving a return on their equity investment. Whether an entity be a public agency, non-profit organisation or commercial business, society must value its contributions in order for it to secure the resources it needs to continue to operate. Hence, it is insufficient for a leisure services agency to demonstrate that it delivers services well; it has to demonstrate that these services contribute to the community's general welfare. The *sine qua non* (indispensable condition) for a profession is that it performs a necessary service for the public at large. This goes far beyond responding to the demands of particular user groups.

Shifting the paradigm to focus on community benefits (stage 4 in Figure 1) that are important to a wide spectrum of residents, mainstreams the field with the community's vision and goals. If leisure service agencies are not perceived to be delivering relevant community-wide benefits that are considered by taxpayers and elected officials to be important, then they are likely to be disconnected from the majority in a community, and if there is no sense of connection there is no constituency for supporting tax investment. Thus, in the 1990s there was an emerging recognition of the vacuity of providing subsidised services which were justified by the rationale that narrow segments of the population wanted them.

The prevailing sentiment among many was: If only some segments of our community use leisure services, then why should the rest of us have to pay for them? If the paramount needs of a majority of residents are not met, the field does not deserve their support. Elected officials' guiding philosophy is likely to be utilitarianism, i.e. using resources to provide 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. The fallacy of equating 'greatest aggregate benefit' with quantity of participants is recognised. A reviewer of this article, for example, asked rhetorically, 'Is a community better served if 200 people picnic in a park or if one of their children is saved from drowning because she had been taught to swim in a public pool?' Nevertheless, the greatest number criterion frequently prevails in resource trade-offs made by elected officials. Given their stewardship role, the scarcity of resources, the precepts of democracy and the inability to compare qualitative aggregate benefits across services, they have no logical alternative. Thus, it has become increasingly clear that additional resources are likely to be forthcoming only when support for the field extends beyond that of existing users who directly benefit from the services delivered. It has been noted that:

Elected officials in the United States and Canada tend to hold the erroneous belief that most or all of the benefits of leisure accrue to the individuals who use leisure services, and that there are few if any spin-off benefits from this use to society in general. This contrasts with their views about the social merits of other social services (e.g. education, health services, transportation, police and fire) for which these elected officials acknowledge large benefits to society beyond those that accrue to the direct users of those services. (Driver & Bruns, 1999, p. 351)

These authors are pointing out it is widely acknowledged that having an educated society results in better living standards for all, not only for those who receive the education; that investing in inoculations and disease prevention reduces the spread of disease through society, while restoring those who are ill to good health enhances society's productivity; and that investing in public transportation and hike/bike trails reduces automobile congestion and pollution which benefits those who do not use these amenities. Similar community benefits emanate from some of the services provided by leisure service agencies, but they have not received similar widespread acknowledgement.

To gain the support of non-users, an agency has to provide a convincing answer to the fundamental marketing question, 'What is in it for them?' Broader community support is likely to be dependent on an agency being able to demonstrate in easily recognised, preferably quantifiable, terms which taxpayers and elected officials understand that park and recreation services are effectively and efficiently addressing issues of importance to the community. Widespread community support will be based primarily on the off-site benefits that accrue to non-users, rather than on the on-site benefits that accrue to users.

This premise suggests that what is required is a paradigm shift – by which the field's core mission becomes the delivery of community-wide benefits, while those services which are more proprietary focusing on user benefits be regarded as subservient and of secondary importance. In general terms, this is likely to mean that prioritisation of services will rank parks and natural areas first, then man-made facilities, then programmes. There will be exceptions to this (e.g. intervention programmes targeted at at-risk youth) but in most contexts parks and natural areas are likely to provide most community benefits, while most recreation programmes are likely to offer primarily user benefits.

Principles underlying the community benefits paradigm

The user benefits paradigm (Figure 3) was based upon three major principles: (1) an *open-system model* of formal organisations; (2) the concept of *voluntary exchange*; and (3) *self-interest motivation*. The community benefits paradigm rejects all three of these principles arguing that they are inconsistent with the environment in which leisure service agencies operate, and posits alternative principles (Novatorov & Crompton, 2001a, b).

The *open-system* model views a leisure services agency as being able to respond directly and quickly to the needs of an array of different segments. It assumes the agency has sufficient independence to enable it to respond quickly to the environment in which it operates and that it is the primary decision maker, free of a requirement to constantly refer actions for authorisation to a higher authority. These conditions are not typically associated with leisure service agencies. Rather managers are responsible to an elected legislative body which limits their discretion by giving them carefully proscribed performance measures that assess their effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the legislative body's goals. Major decisions are made by the legislative bodies; such decisions characteristically take a relatively long-time period to evolve; and the legislative body's focus is on servicing the community as a whole rather than particular segments. These are the characteristics of a closed system.

Figure 3 shows that the user benefits paradigm relies on *voluntary exchange*. An agency produces services that deliver benefits, while recipients in return provide financial resources to the agency in the form of fees and taxes. However, this is a mischaracterisation of what occurs. While travel costs, opportunity costs of time, personal energy costs and fees are voluntary costs paid by service users, in most communities, any fees collected go to the jurisdiction's general fund, not to the agency. Furthermore, taxes are not 'voluntarily exchanged'; rather they are contributed often reluctantly and are a legal obligation demanded by a legislative body. Taxes are collected

from residents, pooled with fees as a common resource, and then they are redistributed in the form of services to residents. Thus, redistribution not voluntary exchange is the relevant principle.

The user benefits paradigm contends that pursuit of personal *self-interest* is the essential motivation between an agency and its user publics. It suggests there is a *quid pro quo* which says, ‘If you give me what I want, then in return I will give you what you want’. This principle is of limited use since leisure service agencies often cannot offer the *quid pro quo* because the benefits individual groups may seek are not in the long-term interests of the broader community.

This point was illustrated by Hardin’s (1968) parable, *The Tragedy of the Commons*. A village had a pasture which was fixed in size but accessible to all its residents. Motivated by self-interest, all the villagers sought to maximise their own use of the pasture by grazing as many cattle on it as possible and expanding the size of their own herds. Villagers failed to recognise that in the long term the cumulative effect of pursuing their short-term independent self-interest goal harmed their collective interest. Without adequate and timely collective measures, the pasture and the villagers’ source of sustenance was destroyed. Hardin’s suggested solution was ‘mutually agreed upon coercion’ – coercion agreed upon through democratic voting procedures by a majority of the people affected which would restrict how many cattle each villager could graze on the pasture. The stewardship role of leisure service agencies which mandates them to reconcile use of a resource with preservation of the resource’s physical and ecological integrity, means that ‘mutually agreed upon coercion’ better characterises their *modus operandi* than facilitating unbridled personal self-interest.

The user benefits paradigm shown in Figure 3 has been ubiquitous in the leisure services field, but a viable future requires that it be replaced by the community benefits paradigm shown in Figure 5. This shows that local resources for a jurisdiction’s general fund primarily come from taxes paid by both users and non-users. The legislative body with responsibility for the general fund then redistributes those funds among departments, one of which is a leisure services agency.

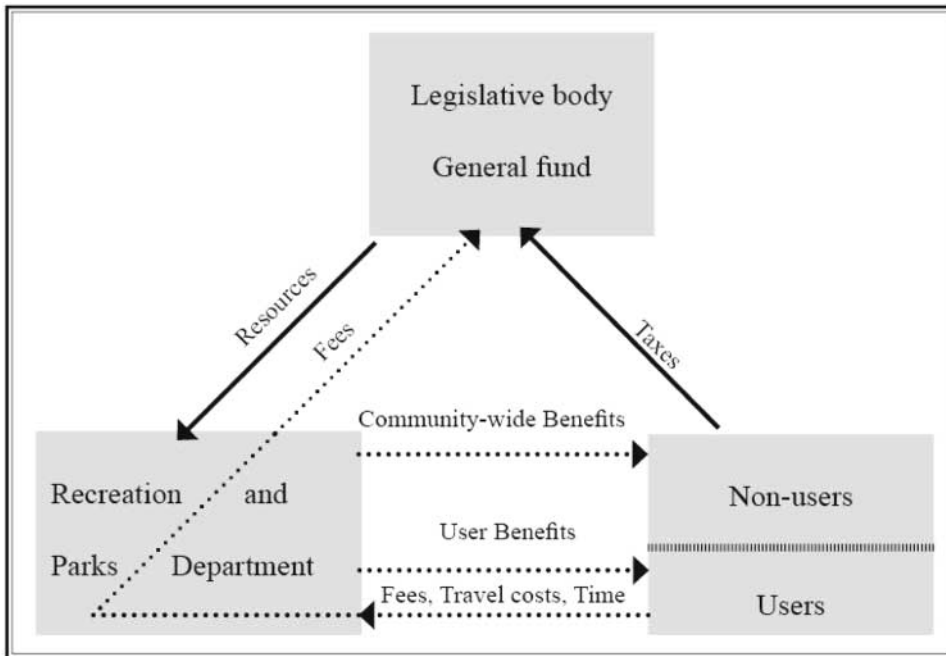


Figure 5. The community benefits paradigm.

The agency uses most of those funds to deliver services that provide community-wide benefits to all its residents, but it uses some of them to deliver benefits only to users. The users in return invest fees (which are collected by the agency but passed through to the general fund) travel costs and their time.

The three principles undergirding this community benefits paradigm are: (1) for the most part, it is a closed system whose actions are proscribed by a legislative body; (2) this central body redistributes the resources it collects; and (3) the paradigm eschews unbridled self-interest in favour of coercion mutually agreed upon. The legislative body's resource allocation decisions will be influenced by the extent to which its constituents perceive they receive community-wide benefits, but each of these principles emphasises that *the* key constituency for an agency is the legislative body which, respectively, (1) sets the goals; (2) collects and dispenses the financial resources; and (3) makes the rules and regulations that govern their use.

The community benefits paradigm confirms that an agency's ability to acquire the resources necessary to make effective contributions is dependent on its relationship with the central legislative body. The paradigm incorporates the user benefits paradigm (shown in Figure 3) but substantially extends it.

The community benefits paradigm recognises that the role of the central legislative authority is dominant, and that a leisure services agency assumes a place and role within the larger redistribution system. Given that an agency's well-being is dependent on its legislature's redistribution decisions, the key question is: What guides those decisions? There are three drivers: (1) perceptions of the value of the community benefits the agency offers to residents; (2) the relative importance of those benefits to the legislature's efforts to address issues of concern in the community; and (3) the legislature's value system as to how these community benefits should be redistributed – e.g. equally to all segments of the jurisdiction; a larger share to the economically disadvantaged; a larger share to those who pay the most taxes or whatever (Crompton & West, 2008).

The first of these drivers, discussing the value of community benefits that leisure agencies could deliver, is briefly reviewed in the next section of this article. The second driver, relating to the relative importance of leisure services, is concerned with repositioning the field which represents the fifth stage of The Benefits Evolution Pyramid (Figure 1) and is discussed later in the article. The third driver has to do with alternate notions of equity and is outside the scope of this article (Crompton & West, 2008).

A large majority of research in the leisure services field to this point has focused on better understanding the behaviour of users and potential users, and on the relationship between agencies and their users. This reflected the priorities dictated by the user benefits paradigm. The three drivers of the new paradigm direct that the field's research programmes should be reprioritised to address the nature, extent, structure, context and value of community benefits; their use and effectiveness in repositioning the field and explications of the slippery concept of equity. As science provides more evidence as to the nature, magnitude and contextual parameters of the community-wide benefits associated with leisure services, then leisure professionals have a responsibility to widen their horizons and become more confident in their advocacy claims for the field.

The community-wide benefits park and recreation agencies could potentially deliver

A comprehensive set of 19 community-wide benefits that agencies potentially could deliver is summarised in Figure 6. The 19 community benefits are classified into three categories: economic prosperity, environmental sustainability and alleviation of social problems.

Understanding their potential contributions is a prerequisite for using them effectively. This set of community benefits is intended to be comprehensive and complete. Obviously, not all agencies will have the potential or inclination to deliver all of these benefits. An agency's mission

or resources may exclude some from being considered, while characteristics of the jurisdiction in which an agency operates may make some of them irrelevant. Furthermore, it will be emphasised in the later discussion on repositioning that they should be prioritised and that an agency should commit to addressing only two or three of them.

Economic Prosperity

Economic development is widely viewed as being central to a community's economic prosperity because it is viewed as a means of enhancing the tax base. The enhancement is perceived to provide additional tax revenues which governments can use either to improve the community's infrastructure, facilities and services, or to reduce the level of taxes that existing residents pay. It is seen also as a source of jobs that provide income which enables residents to improve their quality of life. Leisure service agencies can be a central contributor to economic development. That role may take the form of:

1. *Attracting Tourists*: The major factor considered by tourists when they make a decision about which communities to visit on a pleasure trip is the attractions that are available. In most cities, those attractions are dominated by facilities and services operated by leisure service agencies and their non-profit partners (parks, beaches, events, festivals, athletic tournaments, museums, historical sites, cultural performances, etc.). Without such attractions, there is no tourism.
2. *Attracting Businesses*: The viability of businesses in the highly recruited high-technology, research and development, company headquarters, and services sectors, in many cases is dependent on their ability to attract and retain highly educated professional employees. The deciding factor of where these individuals choose to live is often the quality of life in the geographic vicinity of the business. No matter how quality of life is defined, leisure service opportunities are likely to be a major component of it.
3. *Attracting Retirees*: A new clean 'growth industry' in America today is the growing number of relatively affluent, active retirees. Their decisions as to where to locate with their substantial retirement incomes is primarily governed by two factors: climate and recreational opportunities.
4. *Enhancing Real Estate Values*: People frequently are willing to pay more for a home located close to a park or natural area than they are for a comparable home elsewhere. The enhanced value of these properties results in their owners paying higher property taxes to governments, reflecting the benefits they receive from their proximate location. When the incremental amounts of taxes paid by each property that is attributable to the park are aggregated, they are likely to be sufficient to pay a substantial proportion of the debt charges required to retire the bonds used to acquire, develop or renovate the park.
5. *Reducing Taxes*: There is a prevailing myth that development is the 'highest and best use' of vacant land. Consequently, growth is perceived to be the key to enhancing the tax base and keeping property taxes low. The reality is that while residential development is likely to generate significant tax revenue, in most developments the cost of providing services and infrastructure, especially to schools, to service the development is likely to exceed the tax revenue emanating from it so the taxes of existing residents will increase. Creating parks and natural areas is likely to be a less expensive alternative to taxpayers than residential development.
6. *Stimulation of Equipment Sales*: Manufacturers and retailers of recreational equipment, and others who sell related services (equipment repairs and leasing, outfitters, etc.) depend on there being recreation facilities at which people can use the equipment. This creates jobs and income for residents, and sales tax revenues for government.

Environmental Sustainability

Parks and natural areas enable nature to perform environmental services cost-effectively that otherwise would require costly investments in infrastructure and technology to provide.

These services include:

7. *Protecting Drinking Water:* Development of watersheds brings degradation to both aquifer and surface sources of drinking water. The degradation emanates from septic and sewer systems, from lawn and garden chemicals, and from rooftops, parking lots and highway runoff. In addition, the development removes the natural processes that filter pollution. Keeping water clean by acquiring or preserving watersheds as natural areas is almost always less expensive to taxpayers than having to invest in the expensive equipment needed to clean it after it has been polluted. The impervious surfaces created by development redirect runoff from water aquifers into culverts and drainage ditches, so in addition to adversely affecting its quality, development may result in reduced quantity of drinking water.
8. *Controlling Flooding:* When flooding occurs, it is testimony that the efficient and effective drainage system created by nature has been abused either by the overdevelopment of watersheds or the infilling of floodplains for development. To control it has involved substantial cost in dredging, channelling, concreting and building dikes and levees. This is expensive; tends to deflect the flooding to downstream areas, rather than resolve it; and periodically fails in times of atypical storms with disastrous consequences. (This was vividly illustrated in New Orleans in 2005.) Creating substantial park and open space areas in the watersheds and preserving the floodplains as greenways manages the flow of the runoff more effectively and less expensively than do concrete sewers and drainage ditches.
9. *Cleaning Air:* Air pollution threatens the health of those with asthma and other respiratory diseases, it contributes to heart and lung disease, and it increases the risk of cancer. Trees and vegetation improve air quality by removing from the atmosphere: (1) ozone, other gaseous pollutants and toxic chemicals; (2) particulate pollutants; and (3) carbon dioxide. Urban areas have especially high concentrations of these pollutants from traffic, boilers, generators and other sources, and trees are a relatively inexpensive way to mitigate these pollutants.
10. *Reducing Traffic Congestion:* A complementary strategy for cleaning air is directed at reducing traffic congestion. Automobile travel can be reduced by providing hike and bike trails to encourage people to walk and ride, rather than to drive. In addition to alleviating air pollution, diverting people to trails reduces the magnitude of investment needed in highways, and encourages people to exercise and embrace a more healthy lifestyle.
11. *Reducing Energy Costs:* The urban heat island effect is caused by the dark surfaces of rooftops, roadways and parking lots in urban areas absorbing the day's heat and radiating it at night. As a result, cities cool less at night than surrounding rural areas, and remain hotter during the days. The shade and evapotranspiration provided by trees act as natural air conditioners to help keep both individual homes and cities cooler, reducing the amount of energy and cost needed to do this.
12. *Preserving Biological Diversity:* Gene pools of species and ecosystems may be essential for future human survival. Species as yet unknown or un-researched may hold the key to future food, medicine and fibre sources. The preservation of natural areas and the creation of conservation corridors connecting them are of prime importance in preserving genetic diversity.

Alleviating Social Problems

From a societal perspective, all of the issues identified in this category of benefits are effectively summarised by the mantra, 'Pay now or pay later'. A failure to invest resources in delivering services that will pre-empt the potential social problems is likely to result in society paying a much higher cost at a later date to resolve the problems when they have escalated to a more serious level. If people are exposed to more than one or two of these social problems so they become mutually reinforcing, then the impact of them may be sufficiently great to reach the chronic problem level which is embraced by the term 'social exclusion'. Often the challenge is to assist vulnerable groups, frequently young members of ethnic minorities, in becoming employable and to engage in civic life and civil society. It involves bringing marginalised residents into the mainstream to strengthen community cohesion. Leisure services is potentially a strong vehicle for facilitating this social process of enhanced connectedness.

13. *Reducing environmental Stress*: Environmental stress may involve both psychological emotions, such as frustrations, anger, fear and coping responses, and associated physiological responses that use energy and contribute to fatigue. It is experienced daily by many who live or commute in urban or blighted areas. Parks in urban settings have a restorative effect that releases the tensions of modern life. Evidence demonstrating the therapeutic value of natural settings has emerged in both physiological and psychological studies. The cost of environmental stress in terms of work days lost and medical care is likely to be substantially greater than the cost of providing and maintaining parks, urban forestry programmes, and oases of flowers and shrubs.
14. *Community Regeneration*: Regeneration involves improving the physical, social, community and environmental aspects of an area. Effective regeneration is unlikely to be forthcoming if leisure services are not an integral part of it.
15. *Cultural and Historical Preservation*: Without a cultural history, people are rootless. Preserving historical remnants offers lingering evidence to remind people of what they once were, who they are, what they are and where they are. It feeds their sense of history and often is critical to community identity.
16. *Facilitating Healthy Lifestyles*: There is growing recognition that the key to curtailing healthcare costs lies in prevention of illness so people do not have to be treated by the expensive medical system. Most health problems are caused by people making bad lifestyle decisions. Engagement in physical exercise is a function of personal and social factors, behavioural change programmes and the physical environment. Traditionally, leisure service agencies have focused on programmes. Recent evidence suggests the extent to which the physical environment is 'activity-friendly' is a central factor because it makes it easier to elect to exercise.
17. *Alleviating Deviant Behaviour Among Youth*: There is strong evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of recreation programmes in preventing 'at-risk' youth from engaging in deviant behaviour. These programmes are likely to be most effective when their characteristics include: being carefully structured to provide interactions and relationships with adult leaders; leadership opportunities for youth; intensive and individualised attention by participants; a sense of group belonging; engagement in challenging tasks and activities; youth input into programme decisions; and opportunities for community service. The return on investment of such programmes is substantial when it is related to the costs of incarceration.

18. *Raising Levels of Educational Achievement*: There has been a movement to increase the amount of time that children are involved in educational activities beyond regular school hours in order to enhance their educational achievement levels. Recreation has proved to be an effective 'hook' for persuading many to participate in after-school programmes. They are permitted to engage in the recreation activities only after they have completed the educational enrichment components of the programme.
19. *Alleviating Unemployment Distress*: Leisure service agencies can contribute in two ways. First they are extraordinarily well positioned to create meaningful construction, renovation, repair, and maintenance projects that can absorb relatively large numbers of people who are unemployed. Conservation and park work is relatively labour intensive. It offers many opportunities for unskilled people to enter the workforce, and to subsequently develop vocational skills which expand their employability options. Second, agencies can develop recreation programmes targeted specifically at this target group designed to provide some compensatory benefits.

Figure 6. Community-wide benefits which leisure services agencies could potentially deliver.

In previous eras, support for the community benefits claimed for leisure services was primarily based on faith; intuition; 'commonsense'; occasional anecdotal evidence; and 'naïve' research which may (or may not!) have incorporated the best scientific techniques available to those working in earlier eras, but would not survive contemporary peer review as being good science.

Credible scientific research in this field, with a few notable exceptions, started to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. In the USA, it was stimulated by: the 27 volumes which constituted the report of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission in 1962; the expansion in graduate education in this field in the major universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s; the rapid increase in interest, visitation and participation in public leisure services in the second half of the twentieth century and the dawn of widespread accessibility to computing capacity in the late 1960s and early 1970s which strengthened research designs and encouraged the use of more powerful statistical tools.

During the past three or four decades, the field's knowledge base has expanded exponentially. This rapid increase in knowledge has included investigations of the benefits associated with leisure services. Thus, in reviewing the field's scientific literature one leading researcher concluded, 'I believe we have come a long way in essentially less than a half-century and have much to be proud of' (Driver, 1999, p. 524). He goes on to argue, 'In fact, few areas of scientific inquiry have realized such advancements in so short a time' (p. 529). He concludes by writing:

We now have good documentation that the benefits of leisure are tremendous – so much so that I now firmly believe that leisure, broadly conceived, provides as much or more total benefits to the citizens of most industrialized countries (i.e., ones in which basic needs for food, shelter, health services, and sanitation have been taken care of reasonably well) than any other social service, including health and educational services. This conclusion about the great social significance of leisure is based in part on the pervasiveness of leisure services to all domains of human endeavor ... and in part on the great size of the 'leisure economic sector' of many if not most, countries. (p. 531)

When the field's advocates fail to make the scientific case because either they are not informed or they are uncomfortable with the extent of the supporting evidence, others seize on that hesitancy to bolster their own case at the expense of leisure services. They make the lack of scientific certainty in this field the basis of their counter case for development, extraction, grazing or whatever, even though they have no stronger scientific support for their own case. Thus, their response when opposing a park or conservation proposal is likely to be, 'We cannot justify using

land for a park (or conservation use) and not using it for the economic benefit of the community because there is no scientific or economic argument for doing so’.

It has been suggested that ‘the evidence is limited, uneven and incomplete’ (Coalter, 2002, p. 43), and that ‘there is an urgent demand for more evidence’ (Coalter, 2001, p. 8). Indeed, there would probably be widespread agreement that the empirical evidence is incomplete, so in some cases the conclusions drawn from it must be considered tentative. However, managers and elected officials do not have the luxury of being able to delay decisions until unequivocal, incontestable evidence is available, they have to base their decisions on the current knowledge base. Policy issues in all contexts are frequently based on incomplete information. Indeed, if no policy decisions were made until all desired information was made available, then nothing would be done about anything!

Although the availability of empirical evidence means the field no longer has to rely on faith, there is a need both for evangelism to disseminate this knowledge and to be more skilled in presenting the case in a coherent and robust manner. Most professionals are not exposed to the scientific journals where the evidence is published. Hence, they are unaware of it. It has been observed that, ‘While great strides have been made in establishing closer working relations between practitioners and leisure professionals in the academic and research institutions, much additional progress is needed in achieving better technology transfer to the actual delivery of leisure services’ (Driver, 1999, p. 530).

‘Evidence or faith? It is time to decide’ was the title of a recent UK conference relating to benefits associated with this field. This question may have been legitimate even a decade ago, but today it is a straw man! The dichotomy is inappropriate. Critics who argue there is inadequate evidence to support the potential contributions of these benefits are wrong. There is strong enough empirical support for all of the benefits listed in Figure 6 to justify their advocacy in formulating policy.

At the same time, it is important that advocates are circumspect in making benefit claims and that they do not overreach or overpromise. Their circumspection should recognise five caveats. First, while the evidence is the best knowledge available, it is incomplete.

The next three caveats are contained in the statement: Leisure services *can contribute* to *alleviating* societal problems. The three italicised words each represent a caveat. ‘Can’ communicates that they do not always occur and their effectiveness is likely to be context specific, dependent on such factors as the way services are structured; the commitment and ability of their leadership; resources invested in them and the community, bureaucratic and political environments in which they are delivered. ‘Contribute’ conveys that an agency’s programmes are unlikely to be effective in isolation and that partnering with other agencies, departments or organisations is likely to be *de rigueur*. ‘Alleviate’ connotes that even when holistic responses are forthcoming, the problem being addressed is likely to continue to exist at some lower level rather than to be resolved absolutely.

A final caveat should acknowledge that the government entity which accepts responsibility for investing in leisure services that deliver community benefits may not be the entity which receives the cost savings or revenue enhancements that accrue from those benefits.

Repositioning: the key to a viable future for leisure services

The apex of Figure 1 is a focus on repositioning, which in the author’s view represents the ultimate stage in the evolution of the leisure services marketing paradigm. In their seminal 1974 treatise Gray and Greben lamented, ‘We are not identified with the major problems which confront our total American Society’ which they characterised as a ‘deep concern and disappointment’ (p. 33). They went on to recommend that the field should ‘focus park and recreation services on

the great social problems of our time and develop programs designed to contribute to the amelioration of those problems' (p. 52). Fifteen years later this failing was recognised in the UK when it was noted that advocating the provision of leisure service opportunities for their own sake lacked 'political clout' (Glyptis, 1989).

When an agency thinks in terms of how it can contribute to alleviating, and aligning with, a politically important concern, it is embracing a concept termed positioning. Positioning entered the lexicon of the business world in the early 1970s (Ries & Trout, 1972) and has become established as one of the most central and powerful ideas in the marketing field. Indeed, an agency's position is more important to its future viability than what the agency actually does. Understanding and implementing positioning is the key to leisure service agencies securing resources from legislative bodies. In many contexts, it is likely to be the only available inoculation against serious budgetary illness.

Repositioning is the strategy an agency can adopt to orchestrate a shift in its strategic direction by using a relevant subset of community benefits to sustain or acquire additional budget allocations. The process is summarised in Figure 7. The starting point is to identify an agency's stakeholders' perceptions of leisure services. It is likely that they will be perceived as having social merit, nice to have if they can be afforded, but as being relatively discretionary when compared to other services for which the jurisdiction is responsible. To change this, an agency has to identify issues that are of paramount concern in the community and select a subset of community benefits that leisure services can deliver to address those issues.

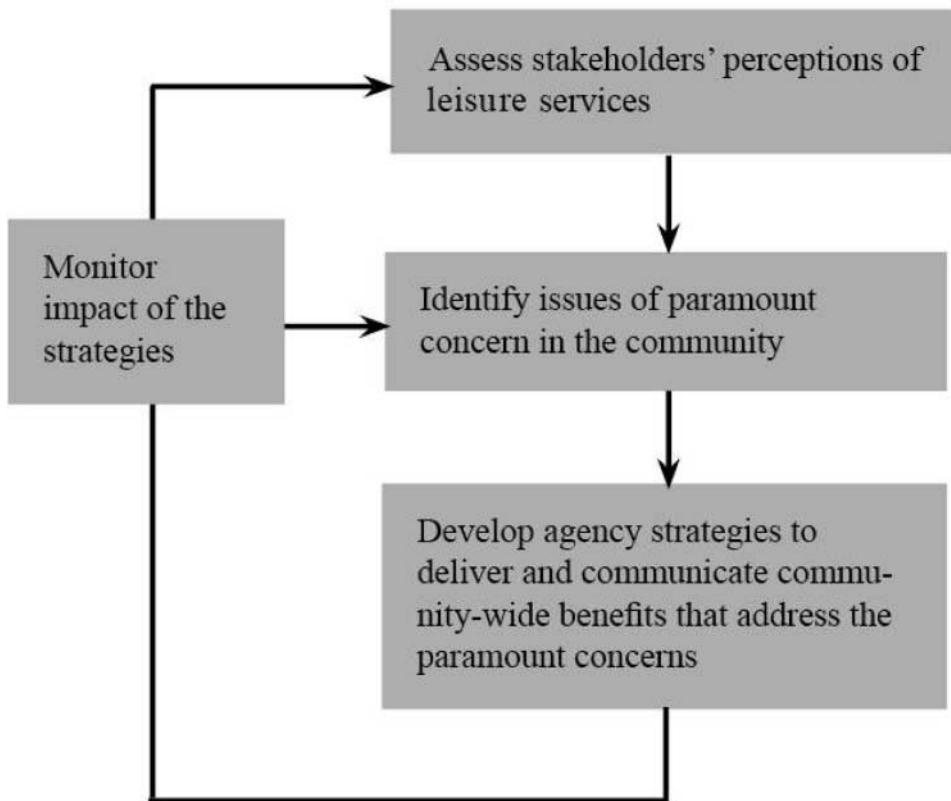


Figure 7. The process of orchestrating a shift in an agency's strategic direction.

A *position* refers to the place that leisure services occupies in the minds of elected officials and the general public, relative to their perception of other services that are competing for public tax dollars. *Positioning* is the process of establishing and maintaining a distinctive and valued place in the minds of the general public and elected officials for leisure services relative to other services, while *repositioning* is a deliberate set of actions designed to change an agency's existing position. The originators of the positioning concept observe, 'Positioning is thinking in reverse. Instead of starting with yourself, you start with the mind of the prospect. Instead of asking what you are, you ask what position you already own in the mind of the prospect' (Ries & Trout, 2001, p. 219).

The present position of leisure services that has existed in the minds of most stakeholders for several decades is likely to be that they are relatively discretionary, non-essential services. They are nice to have if they can be afforded after the important essential services have been funded. Their perceived lack of relevance among elected officials and taxpayers for addressing important issues is manifested in the absence of the field from the political platforms of people contesting elected offices at local, state and federal levels.

Some of the services which leisure service agencies offer will always be discretionary and non-essential, 'nice to have if they can be afforded'. They have social merit and a tradition of being offered in communities, but they will continue to struggle for budget allocations. Recreation centres, ice rinks and senior centres, for example, may fall into this category in many communities in that they are likely to offer benefits to individual users rather than community-wide benefits.

The key to sustaining or increasing investments in leisure services is for them to be repositioned so they are perceived to contribute to alleviating problems which constitute the prevailing political concerns of policy makers who are responsible for allocating tax funds. Only when they are so positioned will leisure services be perceived positively as part of the solution to a jurisdiction's problems, rather than as peripheral services that are 'nice to have' but which are a drain on a community's tax resources. An indicator of an agency's success in accomplishing this is to observe how central leisure services are in the narrative of elected officials. Are they frequently quoted or discussed as solutions to issues in 'stump speeches'?

The 'big idea' associated with repositioning is that funds are invested in solutions to a community's most pressing problems. The term 'investing' suggests a positive, forward-looking agenda with a return on the investments. Elected officials usually have no mandate to fund programmes; their mandate is to invest resources into solutions.

At this time, leisure services typically are not an integral element in the repertoire of strategies used by government entities to address issues of concern, but the list of community benefits in Figure 6 shows that the field has the potential to attain this status. The challenge for the next decade will be for the field to attain it. The key question is, 'What can leisure services deliver more effectively and efficiently than other agencies or organisations, which contributes to resolving important community problems?'

Leisure service agencies will always have a need for substantial support from tax dollars. There is widespread adoption of the many non-tax-supported funding and acquisition techniques that are available, but their use will not change the reality of the need for a core tax budget for much of what the field does. Money is not the field's problem because government entities have substantial budgets at their disposal. Justifying that leisure services should receive a greater proportion of their budgets is the problem. The challenge for advocates is not to persuade elected officials to raise taxes to enhance leisure services, because in most contexts that is an improbable outcome. Rather, the task is to raise the field's prioritisation in the competition for existing tax funds. Thus, repositioning recognises that the challenge is not economic per se; rather, it is political.

Members of legislative bodies who are responsible for an agency's budget decisions are elected on the basis of political platforms comprised of issues they perceive to be of concern to

community residents. Thus, their mandate and moral obligation is to direct resources to address those issues. Unless elected officials are convinced of the agency's potential to do this, resources are not likely to be forthcoming. If leisure services are not perceived to be addressing those issues, then agencies should expect their budgets to be reallocated to other services that do address them. This represents a logical and honourable action by elected officials.

Other public agencies such as those responsible for education, police, fire, roads, tourism, economic development and health, already have established positions. When residents are asked to describe the community benefits these agencies deliver, most are likely to be able to do it. Recognition of how their position(s) influences all (or a large majority of) residents' lives, results in these agencies receiving priority budgetary treatment. If leisure fails to attain a similarly relevant position in its publics' minds, it is likely to be marginalised.

Effective positioning requires an understanding of which benefits are important to stakeholders, and then a focus on delivering those benefits and communicating the effectiveness of their impacts to stakeholders. This is consistent with the political aphorism that the politics of seduction (via repositioning) are more effective than the politics of confrontation (constituent groups lobbying or harassing elected officials). It has been emphasised that, 'You have to select the material that has the best chance of getting through ... concentrate on the perceptions of the prospect' (Ries & Trout, 2001, p. 8).

The position is a long-term objective of what the agency is striving to become in (say) five or ten years time. It articulates what makes the agency's contributions valuable and answers the questions, 'What is our business?' and 'What should it be?' (i.e. 'What business do our residents and elected officials want us to be in?') It should be sufficiently specific to give guidance to the agency in determining what strategies and actions need to be taken to achieve the desired position. It becomes a powerful organising principle for the agency. In effect, it becomes the agency's brand. It has to provide a compelling vision of a desired position which all stakeholders – residents, elected officials and employees – can commit to and get excited about.

Generic position statements such as 'The Benefits are Endless', 'Discover the Benefits', 'We are the Fun Experts' or 'We Provide the Good Things in Life' (which are all popular positions espoused by U.S. leisure agencies) may sound terrific, but they are not likely to be effective in repositioning leisure services because (1) the benefits and their role in alleviating a community's problems are not specified; and (2) if they were all specified, there would be no focus and this is needed to create the 'mental fix' of what the contribution is in the minds of residents and elected officials. The Benefits are Endless, for example, could equally well be adopted by those advocating transportation, education, health or public works.

'The Benefits are Endless' and 'Discover the Benefits' position statements were developed to promote the field nationally in the USA which explains why they were so vague and generic. While the intent is laudatory, the rationale undergirding such an effort is muddled. It is widely recognised that in the USA, 'All politics are local'. The primary concerns of communities are different. Thus, any position which the field attempts to launch nationally that is specific enough to be useful is likely to be irrelevant to a large number of communities.

Compare those generic position statements to the more specific:

- Economic Prosperity
- Lifelong Learning
- Investing in Youth: Our Greatest Asset
- Step Up to Health: Healthy Communities Start in Parks
- Healthy by Nature
- Greener, Cleaner, Safer, Stronger
- Healthy Lifestyles, Liveable Communities: It Starts in Parks

'Healthy Parks, Healthy People' is the position statement developed by Parks Victoria in Australia. The state park agency's starting point was: 'A sustainable future for Parks Victoria is dependent on the organization's relevance to community needs and expectations'. The position statement's intent was to establish a link between a healthy park system and a healthy community, and by so doing heighten people's sense of the value of parks. The position communicates two principal health themes:

- The role of Parks Victoria in keeping the environment healthy by addressing such core public concerns as enhancing air quality, enhancing water quality and alleviating flooding.
- The physical and mental health benefits accruing to state residents using the park. To strengthen the position, the agency's 'associative strategy' has resulted in partnerships with respected health organisations in the state including:
 - Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
 - Asthma Victoria
 - Arthritis Victoria
 - National Heart Foundation

The endorsement, active involvement and cooperation of these organisations have enhanced the health linkage in people's minds. The 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People' position appears on all the agency's literature, notepaper, signs, vehicles, etc.

Source: Senior and Townsend (2004).

Figure 8. The Parks Victoria position statement.

Consider the position established by the State of Victoria parks agency in Australia 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People' which is described in Figure 8. It clearly communicates and connects two principal health themes: environmental health and residents' physical and mental health. The message is obvious. The position embraces a variety of constituencies who all can identify with the slogan and say 'yes, that's me', e.g. dog owners, joggers/walkers, biophiliacs and advocates of stress relief, tree and environmental protection advocates, those concerned with air and water quality, community garden supporters, etc.

In addition to aligning with determinate community issues, an agency has to be confident it can develop the capacity to deliver the benefits it promises, and that the benefits resonate and connect with stakeholders. It is futile to waste time and energy developing a position that the agency cannot realistically deliver to the community. Agencies must be realistic from the outset as to what can and cannot be changed. If a position is superficial and not reasonable or credible in the eyes of employees or stakeholders, it will not survive and will adversely, rather than positively, impact the agency.

The pay-off from embracing the community benefits/repositioning marketing paradigm

It has been noted that:

Professions, like organizations and individuals, can become so involved with the routines of daily activity they may lose sight of that for which they are working. Short-term objectives, momentary crises, and the latest fad or operating techniques tend to distort their perceptions. It is easy to assume that tomorrow will be like today and that what we are doing is what we ought to be doing – that we are where we ought to be. (Sessoms, 1992, p. 46)

If professionals focus all their energies on doing a good job of managing the park, recreation centre or swimming pool for which they are responsible, then that will define the level of their relevancy (Driver & Bruns, 1999). As a field, we must think more broadly about our relevance in society. If we fail to do so, then nothing broader will happen and we will be marginalised. As the adage goes, 'If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten'. If we do what we have always done, the field will be treated as it currently is by legislators. If we have ambitions to do more, then we have to change. Given the increased sophistication with which

other fields present their case and the increased pressures on governments to offer more and better services, if leisure services continues to do what it has always done, then it can expect fewer resources in the future.

Elected officials want to appear knowledgeable and authoritative about an issue. If they are to champion and become salespeople for a leisure project they have to be thoroughly briefed so it becomes ‘their’ project. This can only occur if the field’s professionals have a thorough understanding of a project’s return on investment to the community, ‘Leisure professionals who do not keep up with advances are just as professionally irresponsible as medical doctors who do not keep up with advances in their medical sciences’ (Driver & Bruns, 1999, p. 354). Agencies which embrace the community benefits or repositioning levels of the Benefits Pyramid are likely to see four major positive outcomes (Driver et al., 2000).

Better understanding and appreciation of the significance of leisure services by stakeholders and professionals

The final two stages of The Benefits Evolution Pyramid make the community benefits explicit, not merely implicit. Benefits are the way of expressing to others, as well as to the field’s professionals, the nature of leisure services’ contributions to society. Indeed, without the community benefits approach, the field has no *raison d’etre* since community benefits are the sole justification for receiving tax resources. The perspective shifts from ‘trivial fun and games’ for a relatively narrow segment of users, to delivering benefits that address important community issues and meet fundamental human needs, ‘Widespread understanding of the benefits of leisure, will increase public support for leisure and such support is necessary to any profession that delivers a social service which is highly dependent on public funding’ (Driver & Bruns, 1999, p. 364).

Strong justification for the allocation of public funds to leisure

By designing leisure services so they address community issues and contribute to alleviating community problems, agencies are better able to justify their budget requests. Elected officials are being held more accountable and must be able to explicitly explain how their investments in leisure benefit community residents. Consequently, it is appropriate that they require agencies to develop outcome-oriented performance measures and to provide ‘evidence-based’ justifications for their budget requests.

Clearer guidance for service prioritisations

Responding to the question, ‘What business are we in?’ in community benefits terms, defines the long-term vision of what an agency is striving to become and establishes the boundaries within which objectives, strategies and actions are developed. The commitment to community benefits-based performance measures in the budget process clarifies managerial objectives and directs the prioritisation of resource allocations.

Enhanced pride in the profession

The trivial ‘fun and games’ connotations associated by many with leisure have caused some professionals to feel uncomfortable and defensive. Sometimes professionals have a self-esteem problem. They are not convinced themselves that what they do is important, so they don’t prioritise their cause with the conviction and enthusiasm needed for an agency to develop a high profile in a community. It has been suggested that:

The two biggest challenges facing the leisure professionals are for each of us (a) to understand the science-based knowledge about the benefits of leisure and its important contribution to a society and (b) to communicate those contributions to others outside our profession. (Moore & Driver, 2005, p. 22)

The focus on community benefits is likely to increase professionals' pride in their community and in their career choice, and encourage more highly talented people to enter the field.

Notes on contributor

John Crompton holds the rank of Distinguished Professor at Texas A&M University, where he has been a member of the faculty since 1974. A native of Liverpool, he completed the first MSc course in recreation management at Loughborough University in 1969. Most of his work in the past two decades has focused on the financing and marketing of parks and conservation. He has authored or co-authored 16 books and numerous articles, some of which can be downloaded from his web site at <http://www.rpts.tamu.edu/faculty/crompton>. He is a member of the College Station City Council.

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