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Determinants of Ongoing Participation in a Masters-level Sport: The Impact of Internal Attributes and Experiences with the Organization

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to empirically determine which factors best explain ongoing participation in a masters-level sport. Ongoing participation, a form of customer loyalty, is critical in many non-profit service industries where organizations have limited resources available to attract new customers.

The objective of this research leads to the inclusion of a breadth of variables. Several internal factors are hypothesized to play a role in ongoing membership, including the source of motivation, perceived ability in the sport, identification with the organization, level of participation, and personal attributes such as age, gender, and family stage. External factors that are hypothesized to influence membership include attributes of the service organization: the quality of service received, and the impact of coaching.

The hypotheses are tested in the context of membership in United States Masters Swimming (USMS). USMS is a national, non-profit, member-based organization that supports fitness and competitive adult swimmers. Members pay an annual fee to join and must renew membership at the beginning of each year. Data was collected using two online survey instruments: (1) targeting recently renewed USMS members and (2) targeting former members. Usable responses include 5,496 continuous members of more than one year and 543 former members with low intent to rejoin.

The results provide empirical evidence that several factors help determine whether a member of an athletic membership organization will stay with the organization. The motivational factors of enjoyment and fitness, competition, and social connection all support ongoing membership. In addition, a feeling of connection to the organization, as well as positive perceptions of service attributes are important in developing lasting customer relationships.

This research contributes to theory-building regarding member-based organizations in sports and provides practical insights for managers in masters sports and member-based sports organizations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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