

PORTRAIT OF A PADDLER: PROFILING MICHIGAN'S WATER TRAIL USERS

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Abstract

Over the years, there has been an environmental movement nationwide, particularly in urban areas, with an increased attention on water health and greening cities with trees and open spaces. Public programs such as parks and recreation have long histories in making a conscious effort to better protect and improve environment quality and access. Water in urban areas is gaining attention particularly by non-motorized recreationists and public recreation providers by forming water or blue trails. Increased participation in water sports, such as canoeing and kayaking, has created a greater demand for recreation opportunities (Uunila & Currie, 1999). This research study profiles paddle participants who utilized urban water trails in the Detroit metropolitan area. The study was based on paddlers who use electronic or web-based information to stay connected to the paddling community and recreation opportunities. Listserv registrants were studied as a form of viral marketing. Facebook members were studied to understand the influence of social media on paddling activities and social connectivity. Paddlers who were on a Listserv were more likely to respond to the survey, on average to be over 50 years old, were more familiar with paddling programs sponsored by a local retail store, and were more likely to plan future day paddling trips by researching online, compared to Facebook members. This research showed electronic access to interested recreationists and Facebook members affords valuable communication and research opportunities.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As our living environments have become increasingly developed particularly in urban areas, the need for people to connect with nature is present. To accommodate the dramatic growth in outdoor recreation participation, federal, state, local government agencies, professional and individual organizations continue to develop programs of education, management, conservation and outdoor recreation programming (Jensen & Guthrie, 2006). In 2006, approximately 70 million people in the United States participated in recreational boating, including paddle sports such as canoeing and kayaking. The demand for canoeing and kayaking comprised the fastest-growing segment of the boating market (National Marine Manufacturers Association [NMMA], 2006). From 2005 to 2006, canoe sales in the United States increased by 23%, and kayak sales increased by 11%, while powerboat sales decreased by 5% (NMMA, 2006). This increase in demand will have economic, social, and environmental impacts for communities, particularly urban areas where residents and tourists seek opportunities to recreate outside in developed and natural environments (Godfrey & Clarke, 2000; English, Marcouiller & Cordell, 2000).

The problem addressed by this research was to profile paddlers who use electronic or web-based information to stay connected to the paddling community and recreation opportunities. This group was of interest because of the growing influence of electronic marketing and social networks. We were also interested in assessing response rates of electronic populations of recreation users. Specifically, Listserv registrants of a recreation equipment retail store with a program and marketing department were studied as another form of viral marketing and social networking. Facebook members were studied to understand the influence of social media on paddling activities and social connectivity.

2.0 HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

Given the interest in studying paddlers who were also web users, two populations were identified to study. The web survey was the best option to reach the web user population. The study also had a small budget (less than \$2,000) and web surveys are inexpensive to implement compared to mail or phone surveys.

The survey was designed by MSU researchers (see Vogt, Knollenberg, Kim & Groth, 2011) and then shared with Riverside Kayak Connection (RKC), a retail recreation equipment store, a Sea Grant educator, and the River and Trails Planner in Michigan for the National Park Service; all partners in this study along with a regional greenways non-profit organization. In 2009, an initial study of paddler program participants was completed by the researchers and the mentioned partners. The programs varied in terms of expertise, paddle length, and day versus overnight were offered in a printed catalog and on-line, and heavily promoted through local park and recreation departments. Many questions that were asked in 2009 were replicated in the 2010 survey. New questions about the role and use of social networks and Listservs were developed. The survey instrument was created by MSU researchers and reviewed by the owner and managers of the retail paddling store (RKC) and a Sea Grant

educator who develops and leads water trail programs. Once the survey was finalized and programmed into Qualtrics, the web link was sent to the webmaster of the retail store to send to the Listserv as the owner was unwilling to directly provide the Listserv to the researchers. The Facebook survey was sent by MSU researchers as a member of the Facebook network and sent as an event to all Facebook followers.

On November 8, 2010 the web survey was mailed by RKC to their Listserv (N=2,550) and posted as an “event” on Facebook page “Riverside Kayak” (N=1,800). For the Listserv population, everyone was sent an initial e-mail, inviting them to complete the survey. Several weeks later, another email was sent to remind the participants of the survey. There were a total of 542 web hits on the survey, however some opened the survey and didn’t complete any questions (n=92) and some completed a portion of the questions (n=50). The approximate response rate was 18% (n=450). A second web survey was designed for the Facebook population and included a few different questions at the beginning that specified social media and the respondents who utilized it. Out of 1,800 members of the RKC Facebook only 91 responded to the survey and only 59 completed the survey to the last question. This is a 3% response rate, and although their results are presented, they should be considered less reliable compared to the Listserv results.

Results from both the Listserv and Facebook respondents are provided, but Listserv results are considered to be more reliable. Descriptive statistics were primarily used to profile these web-engaged paddlers. Respondents may have been on both population lists and we did not have either list in our possession. The Listserv was considered proprietary by the retail store and Facebook lists are difficult to generate. We asked each population whether they belonged to the other population. The 21% of Listserv respondents indicated that they were Friends on the RKC Facebook; while 51% of the Facebook respondents were on the Listserv. Eight percent of the Listserv respondents were not sure if they were registered with the Facebook friends list and 17% of the Facebook respondents were not sure if they were on the Listserv. The remaining percentages indicated they were not on the other list.

3.0 WHO COMPLETED THE SURVEY

More men (66% Listserv sample; 53% Facebook sample) completed the survey than women. For those who gave their age, the range was 18 years old to 76 years. The average age from the Listserv was 52 years old and Facebook 43 years old. Slightly more than one-third of the respondents lived in Wayne County, the county where Detroit is located and shares the shoreline of the Detroit River with Canada. Over one-quarter (27%) of the Facebook respondents lived outside of Southeast Michigan and 15% lived out of state or out of country (Canadian residents).

Listserv respondents were most likely to be living in a household with a spouse or significant other and no kids (42% Listserv), followed by single with no kids (28% Listserv). Facebook respondents were equally likely to be married with no kids (35% Facebook) or single with no kids (35% Facebook). High-income households (>\$80,000 in 2009 before taxes) were the most common respondents, (39% Listserv; 44% Facebook).

4.0 PADDLING HISTORY AND CURRENT EXPERIENCES

Paddlers were asked how long they had been paddling. About one-third of Listserv respondents (37%) and Facebook (35%) have been paddling for over 10 years. Two to five years was slightly more common for Listserv respondents (39%) and less common for Facebook respondents (26%). Facebook respondents were more likely to be in their first year of paddling (21% Facebook; 6% Listserv).

Very few respondents indicated that they paddled every day (1% Listserv, 2% Facebook). Listserv respondents were most likely to paddle several times a month (36% Listserv) and Facebook respondents were most likely to paddle a few times a year (30% Facebook).

To see how Southeast Michigan rated as a paddling destination, paddlers were asked where they paddled in the past 12 months as well as how they perceived their paddling destinations. The Huron and Detroit Rivers were the most popular destinations among Listserv respondents. Perceptions of the urban area as a paddling destination were rated on a positive to negative scale. The most common perception about the urban water trail in the Detroit area was “very positive” (36% Listserv; 36% Facebook) and even more selected “somewhat positive” (35% Listserv; 35% Facebook). About one-quarter (21% Listserv; 28% Facebook) of the respondents held mixed perceptions (both negative and positive) about these urban water trails. Virtually no one gave the urban area a “very negative” rating as a paddling destination.

5.0 FINDINGS ON WEB-BASED PADDLING COMMUNITIES

One of the goals of offering a Listserv and a Facebook network is to promote the retail store and the programs they offer. Some of these programs are free and others have fees. Facebook also offers its members the opportunity to market their own recreation activities through posting pictures and offers to let others join a paddle. The Listserv population was asked to indicate how they were enrolled in the RKC Listserv. The top response was by shopping at the RKC retail store (53%), followed by signed up online from the store’s website (23%), by registering for a program (8%), an employee of the store registered them (2%), through Facebook (1%) and other ways (12%). In the “other” offering, 12% recalled signing up at Arts Beats and Eats Festival, a demonstration day or at other events.

Facebook respondents were asked how frequently they visit RKC's Facebook page. About 55% said once a month; 28% about a once a week, 13% said never and 4% said at least once a day. The reasons they visit the Facebook page include: checking the status of an event (53%), looking at pictures (46%), posting links and articles (4%) or writing on RKC's wall (3%).

Both web-based populations were asked whether they were familiar with RKC's paddling programs. Listserv respondents (77%) were more familiar with RKC paddler programs than Facebook respondents (64%). The RKC retail store was the most popular way for the Listserv respondents (35% Listserv) to learn about the programs (Table 1). The next most popular form of "marketing" for the Listserv respondents was at an event (22% Listserv). For Facebook respondents, Facebook (22%) and the store (20%) were most popular.

Besides the viral marketing that a Listserv and Facebook membership affords, we were interested in the information search and decision making of a self-selected paddling trip for a day context. Both set of respondents were most likely to research a paddling day trip online (45% Listserv; 33% Facebook), a finding that suggests how linked these populations are to electronic forms of information (Table 2). However, the next most popular responses were to visit a destination and check out paddling routes as a form of a reconnaissance visit (30% Listserv; 29% Facebook), followed by consulting with friends and family (29% Listserv; 24% Facebook) (which could occur online). Not planning a trip, which implies no pre-trip information search or planning, was indicated by 18% of the Listserv respondents and 14% of the Facebook respondents.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Respondents familiar with RKC programs were asked if they participated in a RKC paddling program. Listserv respondents were more likely to participate in 2009 (42% of Listserv participated) compared to 39% of Facebook respondents; in 2010, 32% of Listserv participated in a RKC program compared to 41% of Facebook respondents. In 2009, one program was the most common number of programs for both groups, but in 2010 one time and three or more times were well represented in the Facebook respondents, whereas one program was most common for the Listserv respondents.

Program participants were asked to rate on a five-point scale their (dis) satisfaction with the RKC paddler program that most recently participated in. Six of ten Listserv respondents were "very" satisfied as the most common rating. Facebook respondents gave higher ratings with 44% "extremely" satisfied. A total of four people across the two respondent groups selected "very dissatisfied" and no one selected "extremely dissatisfied." The reasons respondents offered for being satisfied included: friendly staff, experienced and informed staff, enjoyed paddling with other people, attention to safety, and RKC is well organized with good informative people. Although less than 1% of respondents were dissatisfied, some reasons respondents selected dissatisfied were: could be better organized and leaders needed more formal leadership and training, and unfriendly and unknowledgeable staff. Paddlers were also asked if they returned to the paddling site of a program they participated in. Fifty-seven percent of the Listserv respondents had returned within a year where they paddled in a program and 69% of the Facebook respondents.

6.0 DISCUSSIONS AND SUMMARY

The findings of this study of paddlers suggest that a retail Listserv or a Facebook Friends group is a valuable communication channel to share experiences, stay connected with other paddlers, and learn about paddling and other recreation opportunities. As efforts are made by parks and recreation professionals and resource managers to protect and improve urban water resources, nonprofit organizations and retail stores are playing an important role in providing programs to introduce paddling to novices with paddling skill building, safety training, and rental or demonstration equipment. A next stage for novice or experienced paddlers is to possibly visit a retail store and buy their own equipment, participate in another guided program, or join a more informed group of paddlers to share experiences.

A few key findings can be gleaned from this research both on the topic of using a Listserv and Facebook event to study recreationists and the role of web-based information channels for business-to-consumer communications (i.e., Listserv) and consumer-to-consumer communications (i.e., Facebook). First, a Listserv yielded a higher response rate than a Facebook launched survey. An updated Listserv has the potential to directly reach an older-aged adult audience that may not use Facebook regularly. Second, the results suggest that web-based communications play a role in learning about recreation opportunities or making trip decisions, but the web is not the only source of information. Place navigation, reading books and magazines, and talking to friends and relatives continue to play a role in the marketing of recreation opportunities and destination promotion. Finally, both web-based populations reported high income levels and interest in travel and other recreation activities, which suggests that this "new community" could be motivated to participate in conservation efforts supported through donations and personal effort. The right projects and communication appeals that ask for their help in making this urban water trail into a paddling destination could be attempted.

In order to increase support for any urban water trail development, maintenance or promoting use, communication from an audience of users and supporters is necessary. This study showed that a retail store has taken an important business enterprise role and community leadership in creating an online community of paddlers through both a Listserv and a Facebook page.

Ellison et al. (2007) reported that Facebook and other forms of online communities are developing important social capital among people with shared interests, as well as fostering individual psychological well-being. The feeling of being connected by these social media communities will be further explored in future research. Recreation programmers can further healthy lifestyles and social cohesion by creating online and actual recreation user groups that yield a multitude of benefits to individuals and communities.

Many US cities were originally developed on waterways that afforded transportation of people and goods, a source of food, and open space. Many manufacturing enterprises relied on water in their shipping, production or disposal processes. Cities are now realizing that these waterways have economic, environmental, and social benefits in the form of conservation efforts that often lead to recreation opportunities. Paddlers are one type of recreation user that will benefit from improved urban waterways that provide a safe and healthy experience. While recreational kayaking might be most popular, some water trails provide for kayak fishing and kayak sailing (Michigan Sea Grant, 2011). Some water corridors may also be suited for natural whitewater routes or a man-made whitewater courses. Besides the traditional forms of marketing including on-site signage, press releases and other media communications, and published books on recreation or tourism, the web affords a connection with local and out-of-area paddlers to learn about and connect with other paddlers. This research study provides new insights into the extent of web communications being used by urban paddlers in connecting with other paddlers and facilitating paddling experiences.

Table 1 - Sources of knowing about RKC's programs for those who are familiar

	Listserv n=321	Facebook n=45
Riverside Kayak store in Wyandotte	35%	20%
At an event (demo day, street fair)	22%	16%
RKC website	18%	4%
Friends or family	8%	16%
2009 or 2010 summer catalog	6%	4%
Repeat participant	6%	9%
Others ¹	3%	9%
Facebook	1%	22%
Part of a conference	1%	0%
Saw a program in progress and asked	<u>1%</u>	<u>0%</u>
Total	100%	100%

¹ Others: E-mail, Quiet Water Symposium

Table 2 - Methods of planning for one-day paddling trip not part of a RKC program

	Listserv n=450	Facebook n=91
Possible two selections		
Research online	45%	33%
Visit destinations and check out paddling routes	30%	29%
Consult friends and family	29%	24%
Do not prepare	18%	14%
Purchase books on kayaking	14%	13%
Stop at a store like RKC and discuss with staff	12%	13%
Others	8%	9%
Consult magazines	5%	3%

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