The Next Generation: Looking at UTK Students’ Potential Future Engagement with GSMNP

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Abstract
The purpose of this research was to understand the next generation’s, aka Gen Z’s, engagement with Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) by studying the motivations and perceptions surrounding engagement with GSMNP amongst undergraduate students enrolled for the 2018-2019 school year at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). The various research findings informed marketing strategy applications for potential use by GSMNP.

Introduction
The research topic was sparked by a Visitor Study conducted in 2008 by the National Park Service (NPS) Social Science Program in which 16-25 was the least represented age group (Papadogiannaki). The issue was then reined during an email conversation with Julie Whitted, Class Coordinator for Experience Your Smokies, during which she mentioned that GSMNP does not need help with just visitation from younger generations (GSMNP receives over 11 million visitors annually), but instead needs help getting the next generation involved and engaged with the park. From there, the following research question was developed:

What are the motivations and perceptions surrounding engagement with Great Smoky Mountains National Park amongst undergraduate students enrolled for the 2018-2019 school year at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville?

In an effort to incorporate key topics learned as a marketing student, the following research question was also asked:

What can Great Smoky Mountains National Park do to engage the next generation of visitors, volunteers, donors, fundraisers, and activists?

Through quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups) research methods, the research team worked to better understand the target market and develop marketing applications backed by data.

Reference

Some Key Findings

Outdoor Importance vs. GSMNP Visitation
- The majority of survey respondents who had not visited GSMNP indicated being outdoors as “somewhat important” or “very important.”

GSMNP Visitation Influences
- The 170 survey respondents who had visited GSMNP were asked what would influence them to visit more frequently. 24.71% said “More free time/better schedule/less work,” 13.33% said “More people to go with who want to do the same activities,” and 11.76% said “closer proximity/better access.”
- Of the survey respondents who had not visited in the previous 12 months (22), 63.64% indicated “Too busy” and 36.36% indicated “I have no one to go with.” Of those who had only visited once in the previous 12 months, 63.64% indicated “Too busy,” 36.36% indicated “I have no one to go with,” and 36.36% indicated GSMNP to be “Too far away.”
- Focus group participants mentioned events and free transportation as ways to get them to visit more frequently.
- Focus group participants mentioned traffic, lack of time, and lack of knowledge as reasons that negatively affected their visitation.

Marketing Channels
- 52% of all respondents recalled seeing promotions for GSMNP on some form of social media channel.
- Nearly all focus group participants mentioned the use of social media to reach UTK students was a good idea.

Interest in Engaging with GSMNP
- Of the 55 respondents who had not visited GSMNP, 94.55% indicated that they were interested in visiting. 30.91% of those interested explained “I like the outdoors / parks / wildlife / mountains” and 29.09% explained “Seems cool, fun, and beautiful.”
- Following focus group discussions, the distribution of interest in getting involved with GSMNP shifted further towards “extremely interested” and “very interested.”

Marketing Strategy Applications
Target Markets and Engagement Potential
From this data, we can conclude that there is a market for new engagement with GSMNP. Also, the majority of survey respondents who had visited indicated that being outdoors was “very important” or “somewhat important,” meaning that there is a market for increased engagement with GSMNP. These findings establish target markets within the study population that can be used to differentiate marketing efforts.

Ideas to Influence Visitation
Survey respondents and focus group participants provided ways GSMNP could reach university students and motivate them to visit. The study population mentioned the following ideas: host events targeted toward college students, provide transportation to and from the park for students who may not have a car or the money to pay for gas, partner with various UTK departments or offices for trips or events, attract various organizations for volunteer opportunities, collaborate with professors to offer academic incentives that could be fulfilled by engaging with GSMNP, inform students of the park’s needs that they can satisfy through involvement, and maintain a newsletter targeted towards students. To reach students who mentioned “closer proximity/better access” as a visitation influence, GSMNP could market the closest entry points and activity locations in proximity to UTK’s campus.

Social Media as a Marketing Channel
These findings point to the recommended use of social media to attract 18 to 25-year-olds through the use of influencers, hashtags, story takeovers, story features, advertisements, etc.

Use of Exposure to Increase Engagement Motivation
Since the majority of those who had not visited were interested in visiting, GSMNP should isolate this market to target heavily. The interest is there, but the motivation is not. Also, increasing exposure among target markets and sharing featured stories that the markets could relate to could increase motivation. The more the target market is exposed to GSMNP and feels a connection with it, the more they are motivated to engage and get involved.

Methodologies
Quantitative Methods (Survey): The anonymous survey, built in QuestionPro, consisted of 40 questions with skip logic. The survey was distributed between January 14th, 2019, and January 29th, 2019, to a convenience sample of currently enrolled undergraduate students 18-years or older through the communications office of six of the nine UTK colleges and the Honors and Scholars Program. Due to the unequal nature of distribution (convenience sample), unequal representation across UTK colleges, and potential double exposure to the survey, the response rate could not be calculated. The survey had a completion rate of 91.24% with 251 students starting the survey, 232 completing it, and 225 valid responses. Following completion/non-completion, respondents were invited to indicate interest in focus group participation. This list was used as the potential focus group participant population. The survey data was analyzed in SPSS and Excel, using Chi-Square Tests, crosstabs, and frequencies.

Qualitative Methods (Focus Groups): To triangulate the survey data, focus groups were conducted on February 26th and 27th, 2019. Of the 64 survey respondents that indicated interest, five participated across two focus groups. A question bank was used to facilitate discussion depending on the direction that the conversations went. A straw poll, taken prior to and following the focus group, was used to measure the impact of the discussion. Participants’ identities were kept confidential. The focus group data was transcribed from the video recordings and analyzed subjectively.

Limitations
- The time and resources allowed limited the target population for both the survey and focus groups.
- The convenience sample collected may not fully represent the UTK undergraduate population or the 18 to 25-year-old population as a whole and should be taken into account when interpreting results.
- Caution is advised when interpreting any data with a sample size of less than 30.
- Some participants associated Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Townsend as being part of GSMNP, leading me to believe that some people do not know the park’s boundaries.
- A respondent may not have answered all questions posed to them during the survey or focus group, or they may have answered them incorrectly.
- It is impossible to know whether or not data provided by respondents and participants is truly factual and/or reflects actual behavior.