

AN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MARKETING AUDIT OF CURRENT CONSUMERS, PROSPECT GROUPS, AND INDUSTRY TRENDS RELATED TO CAMPING SERVICES AT PATRIOTS POINT

PHASE 1 (PART 2): QUALITATIVE AUDIT

RESEARCH TEAM:

KHALID BALLOULI, PH.D.

TODD KOESTERS, M.S.A., J.D.

MATTHEW BROWN, ED.D.

RICH HARRILL, PH.D.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
COLLEGE OF HOSPITALITY, RETAIL, AND SPORT MANAGEMENT
2026M CAROLINA COLISEUM
COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA 29208
phone (803) 777-2560
e-mail BALLOULI@SC.EDU

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the qualitative audit was to compliment the methods in Phase 1 with qualitative components that could corroborate, extend, or elicit new findings from those gleaned in Part 1. The audit consisted of the lead investigator assuming the role of a secret camper, complete with a real church youth group whom he brought to Patriots Point to camp one night (10 adults and children). This observation method is popularly used in consumer studies, and provides a means through which managers can assess the overall management of their facilities and service quality offered by staff members and service providers, respectively. Further, since the lead investigator assumed the role of an actual customer, he was able to engage in sales inquiries prior to visiting, which allowed for a qualitative look at sales efforts and effectiveness. Since the qualitative audit represented the second one completed by the researcher in successive years, he was further able to compare his camping visits at Patriots Point and assess areas where staff and operations have improved, declined, or remained stagnant.

Observation data were collected by the principal investigator using general observation methods (Robson, 1993). The sites and attractions available to customers who camp at Patriots Point (i.e., main site locations plus camping-specific locations) were mapped and activities were recorded in a field notebook. The observation method generated data from personal and customer accounts. The main strength of observation research is that it offers an opportunity to record events when and where they happen. The main disadvantage is that observation is often labor-intensive and time-consuming. Other weaknesses are related to the accuracy of counts of people and activities, and subjectivity in the interpretation of data (Silverman, 1993; Hammersley, 1992). While there is a fine line in qualitative analysis between rigid factual reporting and exploratory interpretation of observations, based on the qualitative analyses we conducted, managers can rest assured that the findings and conclusions provided within this report were done so with limited subjectivity. Also, as means to understand the protocol for reliable and trustworthy observational research, we have provided the assessment tool on which we based our qualitative judgments (see Appendix A).

In addition to observations collected on-site, researchers kept a research journal for the duration of this research as a means to facilitate the development of ideas and reflections. Casual remarks were facilitated through the following: 1) participation in conference calls by phone with Patriots Point marketing staff; 2) participation in sales probes by phone with Patriots Point sales staff; 3) action of sales purchase using Patriots Point online reservation system; 4) on-site camp visit at Patriots Point with a group of 10 adult and youth campers; and 5) informal dialogues with adults and youth campers during on-site visit (non-interviews).

The findings are provided in a way that highlights the chronological order of observations made. Findings reported first are no more important than others reported later, and vice versa. Further, we have highlighted “key findings” that stood out above other less meaningful observations and insights. As such, the following section is meant to serve as both a results and recommendations section, as opposed to presenting each these related areas separately.

FINDINGS

As mentioned, this was the lead investigator's second such "secret camper" visit to Patriots Point. Upon preparing for his first overnight camping visit, the lead investigator contacted two camping employees listed on the Patriots Point website by as part of an in-depth sales inquiry audit. There were many issues and barriers related to the reservation process on which he reported, including:

- the group was not sponsored or affiliated with some larger non-profit, governmental, or religious organization that would assume liability for the group with regards to insurance
- the check made out to Patriots Point even needed to come from such an organization
- the group was attempting to register for a camping trip too close to the time of the visit
- registration for camping at Patriots Point must be finalized at least 3 months in advance
- the primary reason given for the advanced registration was largely for meal preparations
- regardless of these above issues, the weekend we were requesting was "booked solid"

For this second camping visit, the lead investigator decided to visit the Patriots Point camping page to see if the online reservation process (which was not functioning very well one year ago) had been improved to alleviate some if not all of the aforementioned issues. Indeed, the online reservation process was very much improved. For this camping visit, the principal investigator assumed the role of a youth church group leader interested in registering a group of 10 (seven boys, 6-9 years, and three adults) for a one-night visit less than three weeks outside the date of arrival. Although the timing of reservation was close to the weekend of choice (less than three weeks), there were no issues with reserving camping dates due to time constraints. The website clearly noted two conditions for groups registering less than 45 days before the date of arrival: payment must be paid in full at purchase, and educational programming could not be ensured.

Key Finding #1. With regard to the caveat of having to pay in full at least 45 days before the of the date of arrival, we found some inconsistencies with this particular condition as well as some areas of sales interference because of it. For example, while the lead investigator was making his reservation less than three weeks prior to the date of arrival, he was only requested to make a \$5 deposit for each member of his group upon completing the reservation. Further, he received an email one day later confirming his reservation but informing him that final payment was due on January 6, 2016. This finding highlights an issue with what Patriots Point prefers (payment to be received 45 days prior to the date of arrival or else at the time of purchase) and how the system is currently set up to handle shorter-notice reservations. As far as sales interference is concerned, it should be noted that the Patriots Point camping website in fact doesn't mention how payment should be made for groups reserving less than 45 days prior to an arrival date. It states *your total payment must be received 45 days prior to arrival* to guarantee lodging aboard the ship. For groups that are interested in making relatively last-minute reservations (45 days or fewer), this verbiage gives the impression that it would in fact be too late to do so. We recommend that the website clearly articulate that groups can reserve available berthing areas up to a designated date(s) closer to the date(s) of arrival, but payment must be made in full at the time of reservation. Furthermore, we recommend reviewing the billing process for groups that have made a deposit to ensure that the appropriate payment deadlines are communicated. If the lead investigator was an actual camping leader, he would have been justified in paying the \$5/person deposit and then waiting until after the new year to pay the remaining balance based on the email communication that was received.

Understanding that Patriots Point actually wants to have full payment upon registration, the lead investigator contacted Brittanie Vincent by phone to complete his registration payment. Brittanie was very warm on the phone and promptly emailed the lead investigator his receipt and a packet

of materials designed to help us prepare and pack for our camping visit. Findings from the prior audit revealed that, “outside of headings that were in plain text, the packet was very much a miss in opportunity to brand the customer experience with Patriots Point.” Conversely, the packet for this audit was a well designed and attractive deliverable for people to have beforehand and when they come to visit. However, not all the materials presented by Patriots Point were designed with the organizational brand or the consumer experience in mind.

Key Finding #2. As part of the overall camping visit, the lead investigator received a total of six individual paper materials: reservation invoice (e-mail), payment receipt (e-mail), camping packet (e-mail), plan of the day (on-site), education program sheet (on-site), press release (on-site), and Palmetto Islands County Park admission (on-site). In we consider that each of these materials is a consumer touchpoint and opportunity to positively influence brand attitudes and perceptions, then it is worth noting that no two documents look the same with respect to a logo design, font style, and overall presentation. Studies show that marketing communication in the form of print and digital (e.g., e-mail) materials can have positive effects on the brand when consumers believe the materials are well designed and crafted around a common brand theme or presentation style. To this end, we recommend editing all of these files and designing them around a common style or theme with an emphasis on logo design (the Patriots Point logo ought to be included on each material), font style, and layout. In essence, these materials should seem as if they were included in one larger packet (imagine taking one page out of the extant Patriots Point camping packet; it would be clear that it belongs to the rest of the packet).

Key Finding #3. In addition to our recommendation of branding all touchpoint communication, we also recommend that the Patriots Point camping marketing and sales staff have a thoughtful discussion about who are the desired target groups for this novel camping opportunity. While it may seem the Boy Scouts of America and Reserve Officer Training Corps (as well as the related organizations) are a natural fit given the historical and military education opportunities afforded to campers while aboard the USS Yorktown, virtually all of the reservation and packet materials are tailored towards these organizations and their affiliates. For example, the press release paper, the education program sheet, and the Palmetto Islands Count Park admission paper each have a space where the group leader is to fill out the “Scout Troop Number.” If indeed there are other target groups of interest to Patriots Point (e.g., YMCA, church groups), then it is recommended that all marketing and sales communication be either 1) individually personalized for each target group or 2) made to communicate with all types of groups. To this end, it was noted by the lead investigator that event the entrance to the berthing quarters had a sign that read “Scouts Entry.”

Unlike the first on-site audit conducted one year ago, the lead investigator received a follow-up phone call from a sales associate to confirm his visit and take any questions about the camping trip. Simply receiving a follow-up phone call about the upcoming reservation was positive itself; however, there were some areas of improvement that are worth noting. Similar to the last audit, researchers reported a lack of upselling of services beyond what was already chosen by the lead investigator during the online reservation process. As such, the phone conversation was brief—researchers recorded that the phone conversation lasted less than two minutes. While this maybe is not too much out of the ordinary for order-taking services, not once was our lead investigator asked if he had visited Patriots Point before, if he had camped at Patriots Point before, or what activities he was hoping to take part in during the visit. Consistent with our previous qualitative audit, the service provided on the phone for this sales inquiry seemed to be almost “automatic,” as if the call was meant to be more for the associate to ensure who and how many were visiting and less about the customer to ensure his expectations were met.

In addition to the follow-up call from a Patriots Point sales staff member, the lead investigator also made initiated contact with staff by phone. On the date of the group's arrival, there was an issue with the final number of campers that would be able to attend. Therefore, a phone call was made to Patriots Point to alert them that one adult and his four sons would not be able to attend and that the group would only comprise 5 total campers. After having provided this explanation to the staff member who received the call, we discussion immediately turned towards the policy regarding the minimum number of campers (10) and a non-obtainability individual refunds. We understand that guidelines are put in place for reasons outside of customer knowledge, thus we were not surprised by hearing them again over the phone given our unanticipated circumstance. However, the staff member reacted as if we had cancelled a product order instead of receiving our phone call as for what it was: "heads-up" notification to let staff members know the group would be smaller than they were originally anticipating.

Key Finding #4. Overall, we believe the staff members who receive most of the sales calls and for camping visits to Patriots Point no longer work within the very rigid structure of rules and guidelines that previously allowed for only a select group of consumers to become campers of Patriots Point. This is an improvement to the previous audit. However, the brief conversations we had with sales staff still did not exhibit high quality sales and service training that is needed from employees who work in the hospitality and tourism sector. We recommend the sales staff undertake some quality sales training, if for nothing else to remind them about the importance of consumer relationships and how to provide better before- and after-sales customer service.

Key Finding #5. As was the case with the previous audit, there was no follow-up phone call by a staff member following our visit to Patriots Point. When customers express a passing interest in a product but are not willing to purchase it immediately, sales efforts naturally worsen. However, once customers have purchased a product, follow-up sales opportunities have been shown to be much more fruitful as relationships form between the product, the brand, and the customer (Oh & Parks, 1997). As will become a major theme of this research, relationship marketing principles dictate that the lead investigator ought to have been emailed or phoned about his experience: "in what areas were you most satisfied and dissatisfied," "in what ways could our camping staff have made your visit more enjoyable," "do you plan to tell your friends or family about your camping experience?" Moreover, considering that quantitative surveys were conducted at the completion of the camping visit, sales associates and marketing staff have readily available information with which to use when following-up with individual group leaders.

For this analysis, it is best to describe the findings by listing them as a timeline of events. Our group arrived to the USS YORKTOWN on Thursday, December 10, at approximately 9:00 AM EST. Parking for our vehicle was spacious; however, after parking we were not offered golf cart service to the USS YORKTOWN entrance point, which was so convenient during the previous audit. According to instructions in the Patriots Point camping packet, "the group leader should contact the Public Safety Officer, who will be in or near the Security Gatehouse in front of the larger Gift Shop/Ticket Booth building...the Public Safety Officer will contact the Scout Duty Officer via radio to coordinate your boarding the USS YORKTOWN." As a first touchpoint to the customer's experience (if you exclude the parking attendant, who was very welcoming), this officer was seated inside a small booth and difficult to see. Similar to the sales staff, this officer seemed confused as to why our group was so small and that our group was from a church. She communicated by radio with officers aboard the ship, who were aware of our estimated arrival, and then let us through to board the ship.

Key Finding #6. Consistent with the previous audit, we found some key individuals noted in the camping packet were not informed about our group, and thus, they were surprised we were not a larger group comprised of scouts or JROTC members. We recommend that all of the employees involved in the camping experience be informed of who to expect on or before the date of each group's arrival. Imagine if each group could approach the USS YORKTOWN and be greeted by name, and by someone out from behind an enclosed booth. Furthermore, as was recommended for the sales staff, we also suggest that these types of non-sales employees be trained to properly greet and send off campers in a way that might build longer lasting relationships with the brand.

Just before 9:30 AM, our camping group boarded the USS YORKTOWN and moved to the area that was to be our meeting place for the duration of our stay. We were greeted and joined by fire marshals and a senior staff member. A few records about this particular part of our trip: First, it was clear that the senior staff member was indeed prepared for our downsized, non-scout group and was nonetheless excited to have us camp on the ship. He was very professional and, in stark contrast to the previous year's audit, quite personable. Last year, safety precautions and measures in case of an emergency were provided quickly and unenthusiastically. We could not help but feel a lack of earnest communication between the staff and the group leaders last year. However, this year we saw this senior staff member (Dave) many times in passing during our visit—he met our group at the mess hall, movie theater, the climbing wall—and he was always warm and curious as to how we were enjoying our experience.

Once we checked in, we headed to the berthing areas to unload our sleeping gear, bath supplies, and change of clothes. Although they had seen pictures on Patriots Point's website, none of the adults or boys had visited Patriots Point. Similar to last year's audit, the immediate response was one of excitement for both the adults and the boys. One notable area of improvement was that the bathroom and showers were vastly improved due to what looked like new flooring and paint.

Key Finding #7. After leaving the berthing quarters, we made our way to the flight deck since we wanted to stay close by for lunch (lunch was served between 11:00 AM and 2:00 PM. Lunch was easily the worst part of the camping experience. As will be detailed further, dinner and breakfast were improved from last year's audit; however, lunch was the minimum one may expect while on such a camping visit. All lunch bags included turkey and cheese sandwiches with one condiment packet for mustard and mayonnaise. Additionally, all bags included one regular Lays bag of chips and a chocolate chip cookie. I can speak for our group that expectations were not high for lunch or any meal aboard the ship—food simply was not why we our boys were excited about the visit. However, by not offering a selection of sandwiches, chips, or cookies draws attention to the lack of food quality. Research from the food service industry has shown that by simply allowing your customers to make a selection, even between two options, you are more likely to receive positive food quality ratings even if the quality of the food remains unchanged. In other words, we think that, if the food quality cannot be enhanced by one change or another, simply having some type of selection for the camper will draw less attention to the food they would otherwise have to eat.

Key Finding #8. For the most part, the quality of food and service was improved for dinner and breakfast relative to the previous audit. The service was friendly, portions were generous, and the food was hot and well prepared. This is important for the camping program as studies show that most people evaluate their tourism experiences based notably on the quality of food and service surrounding food provisions. However, one thing to note is that the vending machines still have issues with accepting bills and returning change. The principal investigator actually lost some of his money by trying to use the vending machines. Perhaps seemingly a minor point of emphasis, we recommend monitoring the vending situation for these reasons: 1) available drinking options after hours are vital to some campers, and 2) it is a touchpoint and ought to be treated as such.

The remainder of the day was spent experiencing various areas of the ship. All of the areas were well received by our group (and others aboard the ship by all observation). In particular, the new Vietnam Era Exhibit was rated very highly by members in our group. For the boys, the inclusion of multiple interactive experiences really set the exhibit apart from other areas. All in all, we find consistency with last year's audit in that the interactive exhibits appealed most to our boys—who at ages 6-10 prefer to receive their history lessons through stimulation. However, all things being considered, there was not a single area of Patriots Point our group didn't find exciting, enjoyable, and educational. It is hard to imagine any group being disappointed with the USS YORKTOWN or any of the various parts of the Patriots Point experience. The main product is in good shape.

Key Finding #9. One cause for concern with regard to our group enjoying their visit aboard the ship is customer service related. We will highlight this area of concern with two examples. First, our group had to wait more than 25 minutes for a staff member to meet us at the climbing wall which was our originally selected and confirmed educational program. We were scheduled to be at the climbing wall by 12:00 PM. We arrived about 11:50 AM, not knowing how much time we would spend training or receiving instruction. At 12:15 PM, no one had yet come to meet us. So we had to walk back to the main entrance to ask someone to come meet us at the wall. We were told that a staff member was currently collecting helmets and would be there shortly. The staff person arrived around 12:30 PM, at which time we started our “how-to” and safety instructions. In addition, and perhaps more discouraging, was the fact two of our boys were crudely hurried out of the Apollo 8 exhibit by a female security guard. It must have been close to/past closing hours aboard the ship and while our boys were in the middle of Apollo 8 exhibit. The security guard very quickly approached us and exclaimed, “You can't be in there. We're closed now and we have an event going on tonight.” Without pausing to speak with the adults she climbed into the Apollo 8 exhibit in the middle of the interactive video and demanded two boys to get out. The other adult in the group, not knowing we were on site for a qualitative audit, was very upset about the lack of common courtesy and the impolite tone of the security guard. If we were to be asked to rank the worst part of our experience, it would be having our day end on this note.

Key Finding #9. We departed Patriots Point later that evening. Upon our departure, we inquired about checkout procedures with staff members in Patriots Point camping offices. We were told there were not any procedures to follow when checking out (other than filling out a survey) and that our group was free to go as we pleased. This was yet another missed opportunity to gather information about the group before our visit was complete. Camping staff passed on a valuable opportunity to build relations with us (and seemingly other groups) for the future. As we noted, we I did not receive a follow-up phone call or email about our visit, which makes the procedure to checkout even more disappointing from a relationship marketing standpoint.

APPENDIX A – Assessment Tool

<p>Tangibles: Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, printed materials, any deliverables</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are facilities attractive? • Are written materials easy to understand? • Does technology look modern?
<p>Reliability: Ability to perform promised service dependably, accurately, on time, and as expected by customers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a response is promised in a certain time, does it happen? • Is service performed right the first time? • Is level of service the same at all times of day and for all members of staff?
<p>Responsiveness: Willingness of service personnel to help customers and provide prompt service</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When there is a problem, does organization respond to it quickly? • Is staff willing to answer client questions? • Are public situations treated with care and seriousness?
<p>Competence: Possession of necessary aptitude and knowledge to perform required service tasks promptly and simply</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are materials provided appropriate and up to date? • Can staff use the technology quickly and skillfully? • Does staff appear to know what they are doing?
<p>Courtesy: Politeness, respect, consideration, and approachability of all service personnel when engaged with customers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does staff member have a pleasant demeanor? • Does staff refrain from acting busy or being rude when clients ask questions? • Did those who answer the telephone considerate and polite?
<p>Access: Approachability, ease of contact with service personnel, ease of moving about the facility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it easy to reach the appropriate staff person in person? by telephone? by e-mail? • Are service access points conveniently located? • Was it easy to park near and move about the facility?
<p>Communication: Listening to customers, keeping customers informed, engaging customers in a language clearly understood</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can staff explain clearly the various options available to a particular query? • Does staff avoid using technical jargon when speaking with clients? • Did staff clearly identify camping itinerary and schedule of activities/events?
<p>Understanding the Customer: Making the effort to know customers and their needs, clear attempt to build strong relations with customers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did someone on staff make attempt to address client by name? • Does staff try to determine what client's specific objectives are? • Is level of service and cost consistent with what client requires and can afford?