

CONSUMERS' FEAR OF DISSATISFACTION
WITH HIGH INVOLVEMENT SERVICES

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Abstract

In a comparison of the satisfaction expressed by a large sample of consumers with the child care alternatives of relatives, babysitters, nursery schools, and day care centers, the author discovered that significant differences existed. Parents rated communication as better from nursery schools and relatives than from day care centers, but the parents of day care children were more satisfied with activities. Despite these differences, all satisfaction scores were very high. It is suggested that perhaps parents and other purchasers of very high involvement services are unwilling, unable, or afraid to evaluate this type of service negatively because the psychological risks are too great if they admit poor service performance.

Data Analysis and Results

Multiple discriminant analysis was conducted on the satisfaction scores of 223 parents using the four child care providers as groups: relatives, babysitters, nursery schools, and day care centers. Group sizes varied considerably. Proportionately, 8 percent used relatives, 36 percent used babysitters, 8.5 percent used nursery schools, and 47.5 percent used day care centers. The variables used for measuring satisfaction were: meals and snacks, cleanliness, activities, communication about children, location, toys provided, outdoor play, number of playmates, and overall satisfaction.

The means of the four groups on each of the variables were very high. In fact, only in five instances did group means fall below 6.0 on a 7-point scale, with 7 being the highest level of satisfaction.

F ratios and measures of significance for each of the variables were also used in the analysis. Using a measure of significance of 0.05, three of the nine variables proved to be significant: communication, activities, and number of playmates. Looking further at these three variables and their means for the various groups, some insights appear. For communication, nursery schools rated highest followed by relatives. Day care centers were lowest. A high rating for relatives was reasonable because parents could logically receive more communication about their children from relatives than they could from a day care teacher with a whole classroom of children. However, the highest rating for nursery schools seems to indicate that their communication about the children was excellent in spite of the classroom atmosphere. Perhaps day care centers have some skills to learn from nursery schools on this dimension.

On the activities variable satisfaction scores show day care rating highest and relatives lowest. Parents appear to appreciate the structured educational activities that day care centers provide. For the number of playmates variable, nursery schools and day care centers rate highest, while relatives and babysitters are low. Parents apparently do not feel that group care settings are overcrowded. Rather, they appreciate a larger class size. Relatives and babysitters were most often criticized for not having enough playmates available.

A more precise measure of group differences, though, should appear in the multiple discriminant analysis. Three functions were used in the analysis with the first function accounting for 80.25 percent of the variance. This function was dominated positively (0.851) by the activities variable and negatively (-0.789) by the communications variable. As could be guessed by the earlier discussion, the day care group centroid was highly positive on this function, and the relatives group was most highly negative. Interestingly, the nursery school group was closer to the in-home providers than to the day care group--probably because of its good communications rating.

The second function accounted for 15.2 percent of the variance and loaded heavily negatively (-0.739) on the meals and snacks variable and somewhat positively (0.562) on the number of playmates. Nursery schools had the highest centroid here. Day care centers and home providers rated similarly.

The confusion matrix indicated that 62.33 percent of the cases were predicted correctly. Though these results are far from stellar, the discriminant functions improve prediction over chance or random assignment by roughly 15 percent.

Conclusion

More interesting, though, than the minor differences among providers are the tremendously high levels of satisfaction that parents report on their child care providers. The overall satisfaction scores rate from a low mean of 6.53 for day care to a high of 6.84 for nursery schools. Few products would find such overwhelming approval in the marketplace! The possibility--or even probability--of parents' overestimation of the quality of child care does pose problems for determining what true levels of satisfaction are. It may well be that these elevated satisfaction scores result from extensive cognitive dissonance occurring over the consumption of exceedingly high involvement services. It is a challenge to the marketing researcher to discover an accurate means of measuring the true satisfaction.