Loyalty Programs Rewards Based on Tourism Services: A Study of Their Influence on Behavioral Loyalty

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the differences found in behavioral loyalty according to the typology of the incentives of a loyalty program and also tests, if tourism rewards based on experiences and travels show the best results in terms of buying behavior. The research had a longitudinal dimension. Data of the study were compiled throughout seven years from the transactional data bases of a loyalty program and the analyzed retailer. The variables used to measure behavioral loyalty were based on existing literature. A sample of 1,200 people was selected, where 383 of them had redeemed. To contrast the proposed hypotheses, three types of tests were implemented: T-test, Wilcoxon test to confirm the results obtained with the T, and for independent samples the test Kruskal-Wallis was carried out. The results reflect that those members who choose incentives based on experiences and travels show better values in the behavioral variables (volume of the basket, average annual expenditure, and average numbers of visits to the store). Nevertheless, differences found between the types of rewards are not statistically significant. Finally, the research highlights the degree of importance for tourism businesses of being part of a multi-sponsor loyalty program, offering redemption of points in tourism services.

Keywords: loyalty programs, consumer behavior, rewards, behavioral loyalty, redemption, tourism

Introduction

Concern for customer churn has led to the proliferation of loyalty programs based on possession of cards that allow the accumulation of points or to obtain discount coupons (Dekay, Toh, & Raven, 2009). In Spain, according to Infoadex (2011), real investment in loyalty cards estimated in 2010 was 41.8 million Euros. Despite its substantial size, this figure represents a decrease of 9.9% in relation to 2009 (46.4 million). After five years’ of steady increases, the decrease may be associated with the general decline of investment in advertising and marketing caused by the general crisis period which the country is going trough. However, industries where loyalty programs are more widespread, are tourism services as airlines or hotels (Kim, Shi, & Srinivasan, 2001). In fact, according to a study developed by Hosteltur and Deloitte (2012), 30% of travel
agents considered “relevant” a loyalty program as a selection factor of the tourism product and it is particularly influential in the choice of airlines (67%) and cruises (68%).

The literature reviewed reflects that there are few conclusive studies on the impact of loyalty programs on customer loyalty (Villacé, Ponzoa, & Reinares, 2011). On the one hand, very favorable positions are found confirming the influence of loyalty programs (García Gómez, Gutiérrez Arranz, & Gutiérrez Cillán, 2006; Demoulin & Zidda, 2008, 2009; Lacey, 2009), while others also support more moderate points of view: loyalty programs influence on behavioral loyalty but it is something temporal and reduced (B. Sharp, & A. Sharp, 1997; Nunes & Drèze, 2006; Meyer-Waarden, 2008). At the more critical of the effectiveness of loyalty programs, there are opinions that clearly question their ability to influence customer loyalty (O’Brian & Jones, 1995; Wright & Sparks, 1999; Benavent, Crié, & Meyer-Waarden, 2000). Actually, the authors believe that these programs are promotions, therefore they do not encourage customer loyalty.

One of the factors that influence the success of a loyalty program is the reward, i.e., the incentive or benefit given to a client for his/her participation. However, there are limited researches that examine specific aspects of managing rewards based on tourism (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Reinares & García de Madariaga, 2007).

At the international level, the most common types of rewards used in loyalty programs are: tourism, tangible personal, tangible utility, and tangible pleasure, and the ones less developed: ecology, solidarity, and social benefits (Ponzoa Casado, 2007).

In Spain, the awards related to the tourism sector have a high level of acceptance among users of loyalty programs (Ponzoa & Reinares, 2010a). According to these authors, the percentage of redemption in tourism services is 30.9% of total rewards redeemed in units (see Table 1). This participation is low, when is compared with the most important category: tangible rewards (appliances, household accessories, DIY, cooking, etc.), which have a lower unit cost and, therefore, greater access for holders who accumulate fewer points.

### Table 1

**Distribution of the Redemption According to Different Parameters and Types of Rewards in Multi-sponsor Loyalty Programs (2009) (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of reward</th>
<th>Holders</th>
<th>Rewards redeemed</th>
<th>Points used</th>
<th>Euros used</th>
<th>Total reward value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plane tickets</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other tourism services</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible rewards</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity rewards</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discount coupons</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure and experiences</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Source: Ponzoa and Reinares (2010a).*

However, taking into account the economic value of the reward, it is observed that 39.8% of the holders of a loyalty program in Spain redeemed 69.4% of the value of prizes associated with tourist services (plane tickets and other tourist services as hotels, car rental, etc.). On the other hand, 42.1% of the holders redeemed 16% of tangible rewards (DVDs, etc.). Solidarity rewards and discount coupons were less chosen, 0.2% and 1.2% respectively.

Given the importance of rewards in running loyalty programs and the large investment made by companies in them, this research aims to deepen their studies. The principal objective is to analyze the
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differences found in behavioral loyalty according to the typology of the incentives of the program. More specifically, it aims to analyze how the incentives based on tourism services influence on the customer’s behavior.

On the other hand, the research also aims to study the degree of importance for tourism businesses of being part of a multi-sponsor loyalty program, offering redemption of points in tourism services. And finally, it will be discussed the need for corporate sponsors of loyalty programs of having tourist services companies in their portfolios of affiliates.

Data from longitudinal research (over seven years in 14 Spanish provinces) come from the electronic platforms of the loyalty program and from the analyzed retail chain. The sample consisted of 1,200 people, of whom 32% had redeemed their points. In order to achieve the objectives, the study is divided into two parts: The first part is a theoretical review of the literature; and the second one is setting out the empirical analysis carried out and its conclusions and implications for the tourism sector in the use of these programs.

**Literature Review and Hypothesis**

According to the literature review about the effect of rewards in the performance of loyalty programs, there are many authors who admit their positive influence (Dowling & Uncles, 1997; Yi & Jeon, 2003; Smith & Sparks, 2009a; Villacé et al., 2011), even Meyer-Waarden and Benavent (2006) highlight the ability of the rewards to influence purchasing behavior. Specifically, they state that satisfaction with the rewards influences more on behavioral loyalty than on the attitudinal one, because satisfied customers have more spending, more visits, and their preferences for the retailer’s brand are higher than for those who are not satisfied with the reward (Demoulin & Zidda, 2008).

However, against these points of view, researchers such as B. Sharp and A. Sharp (1997) and Bolton, Kannan, and Bramlett (2000) show their misgivings about whether rewards influence the development of loyalty or not. Shugan (2005) reaffirming his negative opinion about loyalty programs, even notes that the programs fail to choose the right person to rewarded for his purchasing behavior, rewarding the person who takes the decision to buy rather than the payer, this is the case of business travelers.

Kivetz (2005) maintains an intermediate position, on the one hand, he says that incentives attract consumers to loyalty programs, so they are very important, but, on the other hand, consumers may develop rejection to the brand. This is because customers want to act freely, without external constraints, and the reward of a program can be considered as an external impulse to act (Brehm & Cole, 1966). Therefore, to get a positive effect to the brand, the rewards should be designed to increase the intrinsic motivation of the client to achieve the reward, reducing the external pressure. Thus, the incentives which the customer has in his mind, without the marketing efforts made by the company, will be better valued by customers than incentives obtained from the program, without premeditation (Jakobson, 2004).

Other investigations about rewards show that redemption of points accumulated through the use of the loyalty program, is not directly related to greater behavioral loyalty by its members. However, it appears that customers who redeem their points have better values in all variables of purchase behavior in comparison to customers who do not do it (Villacé Molinero, 2010). In fact, customers who redeem their points show a greater basket’s volume, a higher frequency (a higher average annual number of visits), and a greater number of categories and items purchased. The most significant increases were seen in the average price and annual expenditure compared with non-members of the program. This trend supports the results achieved by Long and
Schiffman (2000) and Moore and Sekhon (2005) and the premises on which the present study are based.

**Influence of the Type of Reward Chosen in the Redemption of Points on the Behavioral Loyalty**

The literature review shows that it is the type of reward which really influences the outcome of loyalty programs. For a better comprehension, the different classifications of incentives are set out in Table 2, most of the studies use these types of rewards. However, some researchers note that these classifications are insufficient and too general (Mimouni & Volle, 2003). For this reason, authors such as Reinares and Blanco (2008) expanded it, incorporating tourism, ecological, and solidarity rewards among others.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Types of rewards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dowling and Uncles (1997)</td>
<td>Immediate or deferred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong or weak association with the brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim et al. (2001)</td>
<td>Inefficient incentives (high cost to the company).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Efficient incentives (marginal cost).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roehm, Pullin, and Roehm (2002)</td>
<td>Strong or weak association with the brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tangibles and intangibles rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modest rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Functional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hedonistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economical rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relational.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hedonistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition and symbolic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Source: Adapted from Reinares and Blanco (2008).*

Regarding the relationship between the different types of rewards and the purchasing behavior, it is necessary to point out that for some researchers like Roehm et al. (2002) or Cedrola and Memmo (2010), utilitarian tangible rewards based on price reductions and discounts, despite producing higher levels of satisfaction, are not the most effective in improving behavioral loyalty, as improvements occur only in the short term. At the same time, these rewards are usually related to the volume and not to the frequency of purchase, so they are less interesting to develop customer loyalty (Shug, 2005). Otherwise, intangible rewards or “soft rewards” (such as travel and experiences) are more effective in terms of attitudinal loyalty (Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005; Ponzoa & Reinares, 2010b).

However, Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle (2010) are against these claims. Their research shows that utilitarian benefits explain the loyalty better than other types of incentives; rewards based on preferential treatment are not significant.
On the other hand, when there is a high involvement to the product purchased, incentives directly related to it are preferred (i.e., free flights in a loyalty program of an airline) (De Wulf & Odekerken-Schröder, 2003), even immediate and intangible incentives are preferred (Yi & Jeon, 2003) and vice versa. Overall, it can be said that the immediate rewards are preferred for behavior modification, at least in the short term (McCall & Voorhees, 2010).

Against this point of view, some investigations show that in situations in which loyalty program requires high efforts by consumers, they prefer hedonistic and luxury incentives, such as travels or hotels. Moreover, hedonic rewards are especially preferred among consumers who have a sense of guilt associated with the consumption of non-necessities (as they feel that they do not spend their savings on luxury goods, but are rewarded for their purchasing behavior). For the same reason of guilt, customers who make use of loyalty programs for professional purposes (hotel stays, car rentals, etc.) also prefer hedonic rewards instead of cash. By contrast, incentives based on needs (usually of a monetary nature) are more attractive when the effort to participate in the program is low.

Regarding the cost of the incentive for the company, Wansink (2003) argues that the most expensive incentives are the most inefficient ones in terms of cost-outcome, being also those which have the least influence on loyalty. To Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle (2010) what matters is the perception of the clients about the investment that is holding the company to get their loyalty, not the intrinsic value of the reward. In the travel industry, program rewards (flights, hotel rooms, etc.) are seen as having high added value for customers, while for sponsoring companies they represent a small additional cost. According to Leenheer, Van Heerde, Bijmolt, and Smidts (2007), valuable incentives only serve to encourage new members to the program. In this regard, Reinares and García de Madariaga (2007) claim that if the objective of a company is to attract new members, the rewards should be intangible and more specifically, they should be related to leisure.

The lack of consensus about the existing differences in behavioral loyalty based on the type of reward chosen by customers to redeem their points, lead us to make two hypotheses:

H1: In loyalty programs, there are significant differences in behavioral loyalty depending on the type of reward in which the customer redeems the points accumulated.
H2: Rewards based on experiences and travels show the best results in terms of buying behavior.
H2a: Customers who redeem their points on travels have a higher volume of annual basket in the store.
H2b: Customers who redeem their points on travels have a higher frequency of purchase at the store.
H2c: Customers who redeem their points on travels make a greater average annual expenditure in the store.

**Methodology**

Many authors such as Smith, Sparks, Hart, and Tzokas (2003) or Lewis (2004) believe that to measure the success of a longitudinal research, is needed to allow observation of purchasing behavior over a given time compared with transverse research which provide a static view of consumer behavior. Even authors like Mägi (2003) highlight the unreliability of the survey to measure the effectiveness of loyalty programs. For this reason in the present study, the collection of information had a longitudinal dimension.

The data were obtained through the electronic platform of the loyalty program and the retailer’s transactional platforms. Monitoring data was performed by assigning them a code; personal or sensitive data were deleted because they did not provide relevant information for the analysis.
For the two big multi-sponsor loyalty programs in the leisure sector in Spain, one of them was selected to analyze it. The selection was based on the suitability of its formal characteristics to fulfill the intended goals, as well as typological representativeness of Spanish households. Different types of retailers took part in the selected program such as travel agencies, hotels, banks, gas stations, opticians or supermarkets. For the analysis only one brand, not related to tourism, was selected: an optician chain (all its shops were included in the study) but with different kind of incentives, such as travels.

Data of the study were compiled throughout seven years (from April 1, 2002 until May 9, 2009) from the transactional data bases of the loyalty program and the analyzed retailers. A random sample of 1,200 program members was selected, where 383 of them had redeemed their points. The geographical scope of the sample was focused in 14 towns scattered in different parts of the Spanish geography.

The variables used to measure behavioral loyalty were calculated from the transactional data obtained from platforms, and based on existing literature. In this sense, the variables used in the analysis were:

2. Average purchase price: APPRICE (García Gómez et al., 2006; Meyer-Waarden, 2008; Smith & Sparks, 2009a; Ponzoa & Reinares, 2010b)
4. Number of items and categories per purchase: NARTIC and NCATEG (adapted from Benavent et al., 2000; García Gómez, 2009; Smith & Sparks, 2009b).
5. Annual number of visits to the store: ANVISIT (B. Sharp, & A. Sharp, 1997; Benavent & Crié, 2000; Lewis, 2004; P. Reinares, & E. Reinares, 2005; Yuping, 2007; Smith & Sparks, 2009b).
6. Average annual expenditure: AAEXPEN (Adapted from García Gómez et al., 2006; Meyer-Waarden, 2008; Smith & Sparks, 2009b).

Moreover, to analyze the redemption of points, dichotomous variables were used: (1) RED, shows if the customer has redeemed the accumulated points (Lewis, 2004; Ponzoa, 2007, Smith & Sparks, 2009b); (2) ACCRED, represents the average monthly accreditation from signing up in the program (Lewis, 2004; Ponzoa, 2007; P. Reinares, E. Reinares, & Mercado, 2010; Smith & Sparks, 2009b); and finally the types of rewards: (3) LEISURE; (4) TANGP (tangible products); (5) TRAVEL (it includes flights, hotel stays, discounts in car rental); (6) NGO (Non Governmental Organizations); and (7) EXPER (experiences) (Reinares & García de Madariaga, 2007; Bridson, Evans, & Hickman, 2008; Reinares & Blanco, 2008; Smith & Sparks, 2009b).

To contrast the proposed hypotheses, three types of tests were implemented: T-test for related samples; Wilcoxon test (nonparametric analysis) to confirm the results obtained with the T; and for independent samples the test Kruskal-Wallis was carried out.

**Results and Main Findings**

First of all, and in order to study whether there are significant differences in behavioral loyalty depending on the type of reward in which the customer redeems the points accumulated, the results for the variables related to buying behavior depending on the type of incentive are analyzed.

As it is shown in Table 3, rewards chosen by the most number of individuals are the tangible products and travel, selected by 217 and 109 individuals respectively. The other types of rewards are significantly less
chosen, this is the case of redemption in leisure (32), experiences (14) or NGO’s (11). Overall it shows that the rewards associated with better outcomes in the buying behavior variables are the experiences and travel. In this way, higher volume of the basket is seen in the experience category (4.51) and in the travel category (3.30). Due to the high standard deviations obtained, the median value was also checked. Although it is not shown in Table 3, it confirms that customers who redeem on travel rewards show a greater volume of the basket (2.73), accepting therefore the hypothesis H2a.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ngo</th>
<th>exper</th>
<th>leisure</th>
<th>tangp</th>
<th>travel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>DT</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>DT</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volab</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
aprice| 162.7| 142.3| 199.6| 367.6| 234.2| 473.5| 179.7| 346.9| 136.6| 135.2|
|atime| 544.7| 421.6| 559.7| 597.3| 550.1| 386.5| 568.7| 477.1| 487.9| 483.2|
nartic| 2.70| 0.60| 2.14| 0.75| 2.29| 0.71| 2.33| 0.87| 2.20| 0.77|
|ncateg| 1.70| 0.54| 1.37| 0.37| 1.48| 0.46| 1.51| 0.47| 1.45| 0.45|
|anvisit| 1.22| 0.93| 2.36| 2.67| 1.16| 1.02| 1.27| 1.21| 1.69| 1.50|
|aaexpen| 141.0| 76.0| 181.2| 156.4| 177.9| 294.8| 139.6| 120.8| 142.5| 95.6|

The same applies to the variable time inter-shopping, the reward based on travel corresponds to a shorter time between purchases (mean: 487.9; median: 271.6). So, the hypothesis H2b concerning the frequency of purchase at the retail outlet is confirmed. In addition, customers with the highest number of store visits per year are those who choose experiences as reward in the first place (mean: 2.36; median: 1.36); the second place is for travel rewards (mean: 1.69; median: 1.34).

On the other hand, the highest average annual expenditure is for customers who also redeemed experiences (mean: 181.2; median: 142.55). However, leisure rewards are associated with higher average prices of the basket, 234.2 Euros on average, followed by the experiences (199.6). In this case, the hypothesis H2c should be rejected, although these results are also interesting for the tourist industry.

Finally, the greatest number of articles and categories purchased at each visit to the store is shown in customers who have redeemed their points on NGOs and tangible products. Customers who redeemed to help NGOs buy 2.70 products on average at the retail outlet (median: 2.67), representing 1.70 categories purchased on average (median: 1.50). In addition, those who redeemed for tangible products also have a high number of articles and categories purchased.

In order to test the first hypothesis, the Kruskal-Wallis test is performed, in which no differences were found between the above mentioned means. The p-values, all of them above 0.05, lead us to accept the null hypothesis of equality of means (see Table 4).

Therefore, the hypothesis H1 is rejected: There is no significant difference in behavioral loyalty depending on the type of reward in which the customer redeems the points accumulated. The hypothesis H2 has to be rejected also, at least partially. Although customers who redeem their points on travel rewards show the highest: (1) volumes in the basket; (2) average annual expenditure; and (3) average number of visits to the store and therefore less time inter-shopping, these differences found between the mentioned means are not statistically significant.
Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$H$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$df$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VOLAB</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPRICE</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATIME</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARTIC</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCATEG</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANVISIT</td>
<td>7.91</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAEXPEN</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

Although the analysis of the types of rewards, in which the customer redeems its points, shows that there are not statistically significant differences in behavioral loyalty based on this variable, the conducted research highlights the importance of the inclusion of rewards related to tourism in the current loyalty programs. That is because the best results in the buying behavior variables have been reached on rewards based on experiences and travel. Confirming the results of Roehm et al. (2002) or Cedrolo and Memmo (2010), the intangible rewards are more effective in improving behavioral loyalty.

These findings have several implications in tourism business. First, for tourism companies, it is relevant to emphasize the importance of travel agencies, hotels or car rental services in the composition of the portfolio of companies belonging to a multi-sponsor loyalty program. In this sense, even tourism companies which have their own loyalty programs (monosponsor) should consider the option of joining to a multi-sponsor program. This way, with their own programs can reward their loyal customers and with adherence to a multi-sponsor one can attract new clients (Leenheer et al., 2007; Reinares & Garcia de Madariaga, 2007). Their tool to negotiate with the loyalty programs is that the inclusion of incentives based on travel and leisure experiences, improve the volume of the basket, purchase frequency and average expenditure made at the retail outlet.

Secondly, there are important implications for loyalty programs. Given these results, it seems obvious that the need to include tourism companies as partners in the program, where customers can accumulate points and redeem them. Moreover, from the point of view of implementation and monitoring programs, it is important to have different sections of points for each category of product or service offered as a reward. In this way, customers can be encouraged by all of them. This price range has to be included in the most preferred rewards such as travel and leisure experiences, so it would be necessary to deepen into this categorization of tourist incentives.

Moreover, loyalty programs should offer a greater variety of types of rewards due to the heterogeneity of the participants (Reinares & Garcia de Madariaga, 2007), including the incentives and gifts based on travel experiences. This heterogeneity, in reference to the categories or types of awards, must be accompanied by a certain stability in the prizes offered over a period, so changes do not frustrate the efforts of the owner (in the sense when they are next in achieving the desired award, it disappears or it is replaced by a less appealing or interesting reward to the owner). However, managing multiple rewards can generate an operative problem for the program management (Ponzoa, 2007).

Among the limitations of the study, it is necessary to note the need to use variables taken on its mean
rather than on its absolute value. This decision was based on the difficulty of handling the large volume of transactional data that it was available. Although numerous studies applied the same way of data reduction (Meyer-Waarden, 2008) and use the same variables, it is true that standard deviations detracted from the result provided by this measure of central position, which is used very often.

Finally, based on the obtained results an important number of future researches are raised. Firstly, given the current development of monosponsor loyalty programs with partners, it seems appropriate to test whether the results obtained here would be the same in this type of program. On the other hand, it would be interesting to deepen into what kind of travel and experiences are most appropriate to include in loyalty programs, so segmentation and categorization of relational rewards would be more efficient.

References


