

Marketing Techniques and Research in the NBA: Current Trends and Issues

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A variety of marketing techniques are used by National Basketball Association (NBA) teams to try to increase game attendance. However, until recently, NBA marketing directors have continued to value and use techniques similar to those used almost 30 years ago (Dick & Turner, in press).

Several studies have examined marketing in the NBA. In the early 1990s, Mawson and Coan (1994) surveyed NBA directors of marketing regarding 21 marketing techniques and their perceived effectiveness. The authors found the only significant difference between the high and low attendance teams was newspaper advertising and strategic planning (both had higher means for low attendance teams). Following up on this study, Dick and Sack (2003) surveyed NBA marketing directors during the 1997-98 season. Examining the same 21 techniques as Mawson and Coan, Dick and Sack found significant differences in the perceived effectiveness of eight techniques (as compared to Mawson and Coan).

While the above studies provided valuable information to sport marketers, they neglected the perceptions of those who actually attend the games. To address this issue, Dick & Turner (in press) surveyed both NBA marketing directors and spectators of NBA games. The authors compared the marketing directors' and spectators' perceptions of effectiveness for the top 20 marketing techniques from Dick & Sack (2003). They found significant differences in 15 of the 20 techniques; in each case, the directors of marketing rated the technique higher than the spectators. Also interesting was the fact that spectators rated promotional premiums/give-aways as the most effective technique, while the directors only rated it as the 13th most effective. Additionally, the lowest rated item by spectators (telemarketing) was the 7th most effective according to the marketing directors.

To extend the work of Dick & Turner (in press), a qualitative study was conducted to examine the discrepancies between NBA marketing directors and spectators with regard to marketing techniques. Additionally, current marketing trends in the NBA were examined. Each of the 30 NBA directors of marketing was sent a copy of the Dick & Turner manuscript, along with a Powerpoint presentation summarizing the findings. They were asked to read the materials and to participate in the current study. Follow-up phone calls were made to each director three weeks after the materials were sent; during this call in-depth interviews were scheduled. During the in-depth interviews, the directors of marketing were asked three primary questions: a) Based on the findings from Dick and Turner's study, do you think NBA teams should re-evaluate the techniques currently used?; b) How much research is conducted in the NBA (especially in regards to increasing attendance)?; and c) How has marketing in the NBA changed over the last 10 years?

Preliminary findings from the study showed that despite spectators' perceptions, NBA teams plan to continue the use of telemarketing to sell ticket packages. Generally, the directors felt this was one of the most measurable techniques that they used and the return on investment (ROI) was substantial. Also, while fans felt promotional premiums/give-aways was the best marketing technique, directors stated they do not see an increase in walk-up sales because of this practice. Furthermore, the directors did not feel spectators purchased multi-game packages based on give-away items.

With regard to conducting research, each respondent mentioned there was an extensive amount of research being conducted in the NBA, with a majority coming directly from the league office. In fact, the directors stated the NBA conducts research in each market and shares it with the other teams. Overall, the directors felt the biggest change over the last 10 years has been the NBA's increased focus on customer service and relationship marketing. They mentioned that the new buzzword at the NBA league office was "touch marketing", a term denoting the league's commitment to their fans. Other findings will be presented in detail, along with future research possibilities.