

NASCAR's stars-n-bars dilemma: Pop culture -vs- social responsibility

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NASCAR has become a \$3 billion business with 106 of the Fortune 500 companies involved with the sport in some manner. Driving the interest in the sport by the business community is NASCAR's broad appeal to consumers - 1 in 3 American adults follow the sport. Each year as NASCAR begins its thirty-six race series the sport's ties to its southern heritage come to the forefront as questions arise regarding the potential conflict between images of the Confederate battle flag and the lack of ethnic diversity among the sport's fans and drivers. At odds are NASCAR's responsibility to its loyal fan base to maintain the aura of the sport's roots and a commitment towards social responsibility to promote equality and diversity. The purpose of this study was three fold: 1) determine how prominent the Confederate battle flag actually was at one race track, 2) determine why race fans displayed the flag, and 3) determine if race fans who displayed the flag would stop attending the race if the flag was banned from the race track. Data were collected at one campground (2298 campsites) on track property over a five day period preceding the race at the same spring NASCAR event in 2006 and 2007. The number of campsites displaying a Confederate battle flag were then tallied to arrive at a percentage of sites displaying the flag. In addition to the frequency counts, data were collected by asking the owner of the flag, the following two questions: 1) "Why are you displaying the Confederate battle flag?" and 2) "If the flag were banned, would you still attend the race?" The responses were then analyzed to reach some conclusions as to why the flag was being flown and how might its being banned from the track's property impact the fan's attendance. During the week of the 2006 race the flag was being flown at 46 (2%) campsites and only 23 (1%) of the campsites in 2007. The predominant reasons for flying the flag were southern pride and NASCAR's embodiment of the freedom of individualism and self-expression. None of the respondents suggested their intent was to offend other attendees. When asked if banning the flag on track property would deter future attendance, all of the fans said they would still attend the race. The findings of the study suggest that NASCAR does not have a "stars-n-bars" problem. The presence of the flag on track property was minimal and if it were banned the fans would still attend the event. The issues to be expanded upon during the discussion of these findings will include NASCAR's need to embrace a climate of diversity and inclusiveness (social responsibility) to attract new consumers while catering to many of its core consumers who value the southern pop culture that NASCAR embodies. Additional points of discussion will include an assessment as to what point sport managers should divest their organizations of images that some consumers might find offensive.