

Developing co-production in professional sports: Managing ritualized spectator behavior for new teams

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One of the features of the sport industry is the ritualized way in which products and services are consumed across the world. Fans of every sport have rituals and superstitions to help them enjoy the spectacle, socialize with other like-minded fans, and reduce some of the anxiety of watching their team play. Rituals can be a vehicle to gain or transmit knowledge (Jennings, 1982), promote social integration and unity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; d' Aquili & Laughlin, 1975), and help build tradition and a sense of history as they are relatively resistant to change (Rappaport, 1996; Tambiah, 1996). The consequence of ritual behavior is that marketers of sports teams face an unusual situation. While their teams garner uncommonly high levels of loyalty from fans (Parker & Stuart, 1997), they exert little influence over some important aspects of the core product (team performance, crowd atmosphere etc.).

The active involvement of customers in the production and delivery of services has become known as "co-production". The benefits of co-production, where customers create value with firms, are being increasingly acknowledged, to the point where co-production has become a key tenet in revisions to marketing theory (e.g., Vargo & Lusch 2004). Co-production is widely encouraged, despite the high demands it places on organizations (Auh, Bell, McLeod & Shih, 2007). Given the high degree of consumer involvement in sports, co-production seems inevitable. But should professional sporting organizations intentionally encourage co-production, and if so, how? Understanding the factors that contribute to attendance, on a broad scale, is important to sports marketers, and perhaps doubly so for marketers of new teams.

New teams face some obstacles already overcome by established teams, and must also compete with substitute forms of entertainment. It would seem advantageous to have fans of new teams quickly develop their own rituals to enhance crowd atmosphere and assist team performance. However, some ritual behaviors are clearly undesirable, (e.g., hooliganism), so understanding co-production is important to managers who may question whether rituals should be encouraged.

This study explores the fans and season ticket holders of new teams in Australia's A-League football (soccer) competition. There were two aims for the research. The first stage aimed to identify the antecedents to, and nature of, the ritualized behavior of spectators. In particular, the focus was on the various official and unofficial supporter groups that have emerged in the short existence of A-League clubs. To explore these behaviors, qualitative interviews were conducted with both members of these supporter groups and non-members (general fans of the clubs). This was complemented through direct observation of fan behavior at matches. This process aimed to understand how supporter groups have contributed to ritual behavior, how this may have resulted in benefits for the club (through attendance, merchandise spend and greater levels of involvement and attitudinal loyalty) and how the club could best manage and develop the benefits associated with supporter groups.

Consideration was given to the origin and development of rituals and to understanding structures and behaviors that encouraged them. In short, the first stage of the study sought to understand the rationale fans had for engaging in co-production and to gain a sense of the impact (positive and negative) that co-production has. The results of over 20 interviews suggested that supporter groups played a key role in creating ritualized behavior. Various groups were shown to have different formation processes, levels of organization, structures, communication patterns and points of identification (Fairley, 2006). However, in each case, the members believed their groups enhanced the experience of the sporting event through the creation of a better atmosphere. Rituals, processes and social interaction also assisted in garnering higher levels of attendance and involvement for members. Non-members supported this view, often freely citing the group ritual behavior as a major contributor to their positive experience on match days. Rituals including pre and post match traditions, seating positions and the use of banners, flags, songs, chants and other forms of support were examples of ritualized behavior commonly encouraged by, and highly typical of supporter groups.

Overall, social interactions and ritual behavior developed and encouraged by A-League supporter groups provide further support for the notion that brand communities play an important role in influencing customer behavior and enhancing customer loyalty. In the case of sport, they also add color and atmosphere to the stadium, enhancing the setting in which the core product or service is consumed, and broadening its appeal to non-core supporters or casual match day attendees. Evidence from spectators and supporter groups indicated that rituals could create positive outcomes for sport organizations. The second stage sought to quantify how wide-spread engagement in ritual behaviors is and the relationship that rituals have with desirable

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outcomes such as increased attendance, attitudinal loyalty or satisfaction. To measure this, 1140 season ticket holders of a single A-League team were surveyed to investigate the antecedents and consequences of fan ritual behavior.

Whilst only 2.4% of those surveyed engaged in rituals like regularly painting their faces in teams colors, 56% regularly sung songs with the crowd and 69% wore team colors. Pre and post-match ritual behaviors, such as gathering for food or drinks, were also common. These findings support previous research that found a significant and positive relationship between team identification, involvement and attendance, and extend previous research by finding a significant and positive relationship between rituals and attendance.

Our research suggests that for sport organizations, involvement in rituals is positively correlated with other positive business outcomes such as merchandise expenditure and game attendance. For sports marketing practitioners, the results indicate the importance of developing and managing consumption rituals tied to game day attendance, with a view to generating uncommon loyalty. New teams could be expected to have difficulties in building connections to their fans and developing long-term loyalty. Here, though, we see that inaugural members of a new team are already heavily active in pre and post game rituals. This study shows that sports marketers can be assisted in building attendance and retaining members by fostering and facilitating social rituals for fans on game days. Major sources of these rituals, in line with co-production, can include leveraging brand communities such as supporter groups, which were shown to arise in the absence of organized club-sponsored activities. In capitalising on the benefits of co-production, understanding ritualized groups and behaviors and how they evolve are particularly important for marketers of new teams given that once established, rituals are highly resistant to change.