

Attracting New Fans: The Role of Live Event Experiences

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Live sport events can assault the senses of attendees. The smells, tastes, and feel of live events are absent from mediated forms of event coverage. Broadcasts minimize many event sounds in order to overlay game commentation. Broadcasters also selectively determine which visual images audiences will see. In many ways, televised broadcasts of sport events sanitize the sensuality of the sport experience. Yet, the experience of the event through all five senses generates excitement, which can encourage people to attend live events rather than watch the same event on television (cf. Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Event marketers understand the need to differentiate live events from their televised format by expanding the event elements beyond the competition itself in order to encourage attendance (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Live sport events now routinely include augmentations (e.g., music, ancillary events, dance teams, party-like elements). This allows them to go beyond the pool of core fans to attract less involved fans and even non-fans with the hope of moving them up the escalator to higher levels of involvement and attendance (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). The visceral experience of attending a live sport event can therefore be a powerful lever to create or increase fanship. The challenge lies in getting a potential fan to commit to a live experience. This is particularly challenging for sports in which potential fans have little prior experience, or for sports that do not enjoy a positive image among consumers in their target market.

This study examines the relationship between interest in experiential elements of live events and interest and intention to attend. Non-fans with interests in the non-sport elements of a live event were identified via survey. Focus groups were then conducted to determine: (1) respondents' image of the sport, (2) sources of image, (3) valued experiential elements of other live sport attendance, and (4) ways to effectively communicate experiential elements to attract attendees. The Dickies 500, part of NASCAR's Chase for the Sprint Cup, was selected as the research site. NASCAR has been one of the fastest growing sport properties in recent years, and its Nextel Cup Series was the second rated regular season sport in 2007 trailing only the NFL (NASCAR broadcasting memo, 2007). Yet the proportion of NASCAR fans between 18 and 24 is only 14% (NASCAR fan base demographics, 2007). NASCAR, like other motorsports, is a sport with few participation opportunities. Further, live attendance at NASCAR events is a highly sensual experience that does not translate well via television. The noise and smells are indescribable, but are significant elements of the fan experience. Lastly, media portrayals of NASCAR fans have been less than complimentary. As a result, many educated individuals, particularly university students who have been shown to be greatly influenced by media and entertainment culture (Jackson, 2002) have a negative view of the sport and its fans (Kinney, McDaniel, & DeGaris, 2008). At the same time, university students are heavy consumers of live sport events, outdoor concerts, and party-like experiences: all elements of live NASCAR events (cf. NASCAR.com).

The study was conducted in two stages. In Stage 1 questionnaires were distributed to 1,800 university students across all colleges within the university; 1,258 useable surveys were returned. The survey included measures of interest in motor sports, NASCAR, live sport events, outdoor concerts, party atmosphere, and new experiences. All items were measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. Attendance at sport events, NASCAR events, and outdoor concerts as well as frequency of watching sport and NASCAR on television were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = very frequently. In addition, the survey asked respondents to rate the likelihood of attending the Dickie's 500 under 6 conditions (no incentive, bus trip with other students, student discount, Pit passes, friends going, and band performance). The 5 items were measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = not at all likely to 4 = very likely.

Results of the survey indicated low levels of interest in motor sport ($M = 2.48$) and NASCAR ($M = 1.90$). However, participants reported high levels of interest in live sport events ($M = 5.06$), party atmosphere ($M = 4.90$), outdoor concerts ($M = 4.83$), and new experiences ($M = 4.84$). Sixty-six percent of respondents have never watched NASCAR on television, and 84.4% have never attended a NASCAR event. On the other hand, this group does attend other sport events (51.8% report at least occasional attendance), and 65.7% watch sport on television frequently. In addition, 80.3% attend (at least occasionally) outdoor concerts. Four groups of participants were identified based on their interest in NASCAR (high and low) and whether or not they have experienced a NASCAR event. Each focus group will respond to five major questions: (1) how would you characterize NASCAR and NASCAR fans? (2) how did you develop your image of NASCAR and its fans? (3) describe your best and worst experiences at live sport events, (4) how would you describe a live sport event experience to a friend in a way that would give them a taste of the experience and would encourage them to go with you? and (5) how can NASCAR (or other sport

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organizations) help you to communicate the experience of attending an event so you could better convince your friend to attend?

Probes will be used to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions. Data will be transcribed and themes will be extracted and then combined into overarching categories (e.g., Cresswell, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Comparisons will be made between groups with and without NASCAR experience, and between groups with high and low interest in NASCAR. Analysis of these data should provide insight into the ways in which attendance experience can facilitate interest and involvement in a sport event, and suggest ways in which sport marketers can communicate experiential event elements to potential fans.