A Comparison of Motivational Factors Affecting Attendance Between Avid and Casual Fans at Minor League Hockey Games

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Minor league professional sports such as Minor League Baseball, Minor League Hockey, National Basketball Association Development League, Arena Football League, and Indoor Soccer League have been successful spectator sports in North America (Robinson & DeSriver, 2003). Despite the disadvantages of having smaller budgets, playing in smaller cities and facilities, and paying lower players' salaries than in the major leagues, these minor leagues have been popular because they provide quality and affordable family entertainment. Additionally, minor league ticket prices are inexpensive, the food is good, the bathrooms are clean, and the promotions are appropriate for families (Robinson & DeSriver, 2003; Masteralexis, 1998; Johnson, 1995). In fact, minor league sports have focused on marketing and customer service to attract fans (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2000). In North America, hockey has been a popular minor league sport. Minor league hockey brings in an estimated 35 million fans annually, just three to four million less than affiliated minor league baseball teams (ESPN, 2006; McKeon, 2004). Additionally, minor league hockey is one of the fastest growing professional sports in North America (Zhang, Lam, Connaughton, Bennett, Pease, Pham, Killion, Ocker & Duley, 2004; Zhang, Pease, Lam, Bellerive, Pham, Williamson, Lee & Wall, 2001).

To increase or strengthen fan support, minor league hockey marketing managers should understand spectator motivation. Also, they need to identify different motives among different types of fans. Implementing effective marketing communications after assessing the motives of the different types of fans is crucial to creating more heavily committed and highly identified fans (Stotlar 2005; Pitts & Stotlar, 2002; Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2000; Milne & McDonald, 1997; Shani, 1997). This concept has been referred to the Sport Consumer Escalator (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2000).

The studies of sport spectator motivation have primarily focused on the following areas: (1) psychological factors (e.g., vicarious achievement, skill mastery, stress reduction, escape, and team identification) (2) Social factors (e.g., social facilitation, group affiliation, and family entertainment) (3) game related factors (e.g., ticket price, team success, quality of games, star players, game promotions, overall entertainment value, and aesthetic value of venues) (Rohm, Milne & McDonald, 2006; Zhang, et al, 2004; Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003; Zhang, Lam & Connaughton, 2003; Gladden & Funk 2002; McDonald, Milne & Hong; 2002; Trail & James, 2001, Zhang, et al, 2001; Shoham & Rose, 2000; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Wann, 1995; Melnick, 1993). Specifically, Zhang et al (2001) suggested that three motivation factors (salubrious effects, achievement seeking, and stress and entertainment) significantly predict minor league hockey attendance. Additionally, Zhang et al (2004) found that game enjoyment factors such as game features, party atmosphere, and socialization opportunities were important reasons to attend games, supporting the fact that minor league hockey game spectators focus more on the amusement nature of the game than major league spectators.

Previous researchers have suggested that different types of fans could have different motives to attend games (Funk, Mahony & Ridinger, 2002; Greenwell, Fink & Pastoe, 2002; Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000; Sutton, McDonald, Milne & Cimperman, 1997). For example, avid fans with high degrees of psychological and behavioral loyalty to their teams would continuously support their teams regardless of economic factors (e.g. ticket prices) or team won/loss record. On the contrary, casual fans with lower identification may be motivated to attend simply by the entertainment value of the product, and may be more attracted to the sport for its pleasurable or stress-relieving qualities (Funk, Mahony & Ridinger, 2002; Greenwell, Fink & Pastore, 2002; Sutton, McDonald, Milne & Cimperman, 1997).

To assess minor league hockey attendance motives overall, and to examine if casual and avid fans have different motives, the literature on sport spectator motivation was utilized to select the following variables: team success, game quality, star players, fan relations, price affordability, game day presentation, and community involvement (Zhang, et al, 2004; Gladden & Funk 2002; McDonald, Milne & Hong; 2002; Wann, 1995; Melnick, 1993). These variables are believed to be important motives due to the nature of minor league hockey games, the mission of minor league team operators, and their overall marketing strategies. The Fan Motivation Questionnaire (FMQ) was created for this study by adopting measurement scales from related literature (Zhang, et al, 2004; Gladden & Funk 2002; McDonald, Milne & Hong; 2002; Wann, 1995; Melnick, 1993). The initial FMQ was pre-
tested for its reliability and content validity. After confirming the reliability and content validity of the 7 motivational factors (each utilizing a 5-point Likert scale), the FMQ was distributed to spectators at a game of an American Hockey League team located in the U.S. Northeast. SPSS was used to analyze the 272 returned surveys. Statistics significant at the 0.05 alpha level are reported below.

First, all scales were tested for reliability using Cronbach’s Alpha, which ranged from 0.854 to 0.946. Of the 272 respondents, 163 (59.9%) were male and 109 (40.1%) were female. 74 were season ticket holders (27%), and 198 were non-season ticket holders (73%). 113 (41.5%) of respondents indicated that they were avid fans of the team, and 159 (58.5%) respondents indicated that they were casual fans. Among the avid fans, 64 (56.2%) were current season ticket holders, while 9 (5.9%) of the casual fans were. Thus season ticket holders tended to be more avid fans. As for important motives, avid fans indicated game quality (M=3.96; SD=1.02), community involvement (M=3.86; SD=1.09), and price affordability (M=3.55; SD=1.05) as three important factors. Casual fans indicated game quality (M=3.71; SD=0.96), price affordability (M=3.69; SD=0.93), and community involvement (M=3.35; SD=1.02), as three important factors. Two factors, team success (M=3.03; SD=0.90) and star players (3.22; SD=0.93) show relatively lower mean scores than other motives. Finally, independent t-tests were conducted to determine the mean difference between the avid and the casual fans in the 7 motives. Significant (p < .05) differences in the mean on the dependent variables of star players (t=2.38, p=0.02) and community involvement (t=2.49, p=0.01) were found between the avid and casual fans. No significant (p > .05) differences were found between avid and casual fans in the importance of team success, game quality, fan relations, affordability, and game day presentation.

The results of this study empirically support the results of previous studies that marketing managers in minor league hockey should strive for high quality games, present a variety of game-amenity activities, keep prices low, and maintain an active community involvement. Also, minor league hockey teams should keep the avid fans and the season ticket holders informed of their community involvement programs since this factor has been proven to be the most important attendance motivation found in this study. Additionally, developing different ticket packages or discount ticket programs, and communicating the high quality of play, could prove to be effective when targeting casual fans.