Assessing Spectators’ Satisfaction with Peripheral Elements of a Sporting Event: The Case of Super Bowl XLIII

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Introduction

It is commonly noted in the sport field that the core of the sport product (i.e., a sport event) is unpredictable, inconsistent and out of the control of the sport marketer (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). From the marketer’s standpoint, the emphasis is then placed on the design and control of the peripheral elements of the game or, as commonly called, the product extensions (Mullin et al., 2007). There are a number of variables that sport marketers can control, such as venue-related issues (e.g., access, cleanliness, security, parking), promotional initiatives, entertainment aspects of the game and overall product delivery, and community outreach programs, just to name a few. Moreover, as attention has gradually been turned to the overall fan experience, sport organizations have continued to invest in high levels of customer service and in relationship management programs (McKelvey, 2009).

The purpose of the present study was to build on past research by attempting to assess Super Bowl spectators’ satisfaction levels with a number of peripheral elements of the event. Secondarily, the study focused specifically on one of those elements, the halftime show, and solicited information relating to its perceived importance for event spectators. Perceptions about the Super Bowl halftime show from this study were further compared to those of a sample of Super Bowl viewers (found in Apostolopoulou, Gladden, & Clark, 2008) to identify potential differences among the two audiences.

Theoretical Background

Most viewers tune in to the Super Bowl broadcast either because of the specific match-up (i.e., teams playing) or because of the expected high level of competition. It is, after all, this game that crowns each season’s NFL Champion. However, there might be other motives, besides the core product, that lead some to this particular sport consumption. For example, every year much anticipation builds around the commercials that will appear during the telecast. In fact, of all peripheral elements of the Super Bowl broadcast, the commercials have been found to be the most important contributor to viewers’ enjoyment (Apostolopoulou, Clark, & Gladden, 2006).

The sport marketing literature has studied how one’s need for entertainment can serve as a motive to consume sport (e.g., Ferreira & Armstrong, 2004; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; James & Ross, 2002; 2004; Marcum & Greenstein, 1985; Schofield, 1983; Wann, 1995). With respect to the Super Bowl, Apostolopoulou et al. (2006) examined the relative importance of a number of entertainment-related elements (i.e., pre- and post-game show; coin toss with a celebrity; singing of the national anthem by a celebrity performer; halftime entertainment; and presentation of the MVP award) to viewers’ enjoyment of the broadcast. Their findings supported the notion that entertainment-related aspects are important, especially for casual (vs. avid) sport fans, and further revealed that the viewers of the Super Bowl fostered a variety of favorable and unfavorable thoughts and feelings toward one of the dominant peripheral elements: the Super Bowl half time show. Interestingly, their findings also exposed viewers’ perception that the halftime show was designed to attract casual and/or female viewers. These findings, however, could differ among event spectators who invest time and money to attend the event and potentially have higher expectations from peripheral sport product aspects, such as the half time show.

Methodology

Spectators of Super Bowl XLIII held in Tampa, Florida in 2009 were recruited as our sample. More specifically, a research team intercepted fans outside Raymond James Stadium the day of the game (February 1, 2009) and asked whether they would be willing to participate in a study about the Super Bowl. Email addresses from 150 spectators were collected. A link to an online survey was sent four weeks following the Super Bowl game. Study participants were asked to respond to questions pertaining to the following: a) Perceptions about the Super Bowl event; b)
Satisfaction with a number of peripheral elements of the event; c) Views on the Super Bowl halftime show; and d) General profile questions, including the degree to which they considered themselves a sport fan. All questions were rated on a five-point scale, where 1 was the lower end of the scale. Forty one (41) e-mail addresses were not usable. Of the 109 usable e-mail addresses, 68 completed surveys were received for a response rate of 62.4%.

Results

The majority of study participants were male (73%) and Caucasian (91%). Most were between the ages of 30-39 (28%) or 50-59 (28%), had achieved a college or advanced degree (84%), and reported annual household incomes of $80,000 or higher (76%). In addition, the sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of their sport profile, as an overwhelming 94% agreed that they considered themselves to be a sport fan.

In order to assess spectators’ satisfaction with the peripheral elements of the Super Bowl, respondents were presented with a list of 10 such elements (including the halftime show) and were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with each one. Event spectators appeared to be most satisfied with the ‘overall game experience’ (M=4.80), the ‘stadium hygiene and cleanliness’ (M=4.78), and the ‘quality of the sport facility’ (M=4.70). The elements with which spectators appeared to be satisfied the least were ‘ticket cost’ (M=2.80), ‘tailgating opportunities’ (M=3.85), and ‘ticket acquisition’ (M=3.96). The Super Bowl ‘halftime show’, featuring Bruce Springsteen, received a rating of M=4.29 and ranked sixth overall in terms of spectators’ satisfaction. The respondents also gave a slightly above average rating (M=2.85) to the halftime show in terms of its importance in the overall entertainment value of the Super Bowl.

To capture thoughts and feelings (i.e., brand associations) that spectators held toward the halftime show, they were asked to complete the following question: “I believe that the Super Bowl halftime show is ...” A total of 51 comments were generated. Analysis of those comments was performed using seven brand association categories/themes previously identified (Apostolopoulou et al., 2008) that dealt specifically with the Super Bowl halftime show. Spectators’ comments were similar to the comments made by Super Bowl viewers, but were overall more positive. Spectators felt that the halftime show was entertaining and a nice addition to the game. Interestingly, some respondents distinguished themselves with those watching on television and stated that the halftime show was not as relevant to them as the game itself and that it was a “made for TV program.”

Discussion

In closing, the goal of this research was to assess spectators’ satisfaction with peripheral elements of a sporting event and to capture their views about one specific element, the halftime show. Our results indicate that venue-related aspects as well as the overall experience (e.g., atmosphere, event festivities) were rated highly by spectators of the Super Bowl, while aspects that had to do with the acquisition and cost of their ticket were less satisfactory. The latter is not very surprising, considering the uniqueness of the Super Bowl event and the high levels of demand surrounding it. Furthermore, spectators’ satisfaction with the halftime show was about average. Given the investment in time and money required to attend the Super Bowl, it seems that the entertainment package might not be a significant motive for this group. In contrast, for those watching on television, the appeal of the entertainment package could be greater and may lead some who normally would not attend or watch the event to tune in.