Perceptions of Season Tickets: A Minor League Baseball Franchise Setting

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Marketing Abstract 2010-221  
June 5, 2010 1:25 PM  
Poster (Audubon)

Sports teams, at all levels, continually search for ways to maximize revenues. Often times minor league sports franchises attempt to do this through season ticket sales. Understanding consumer satisfaction can help increase these sales. Consumer satisfaction research has been conducted in various contexts; however, there is a relative paucity of original research within the context of minor league baseball.

This study examined perceptions of the ticket selling process administered by a minor league baseball franchise. More specifically, we examined if current practices are effective in satisfying season ticket holders regarding marketing activities, purchase process (including choice), price, ticket usage, and intent to repurchase. Furthermore, we identified the perceptions of season tickets among non-season ticket holders regarding marketing activities, choice, and price. Minor league sport organizations rely heavily on season ticket sales and retention, therefore, season ticket satisfaction and non-season ticket holder perceptions are vital.

While the sports market in the United States had an estimated $44 billion to $60 billion impact on the economy in 2008, consumers are still weary of spending their discretionary income on sports (Humphreys & Ruseski, 2009). Over the past several years many minor league sport organizations have had a decreasing number of season ticket holders. Sport organizations can identify and address areas that need improvement by understanding the perceptions of consumers. By addressing these needs, organizations are able to attract and retain the discretionary income of these consumers.

Due to the exposure consumers have with other entertainment options and economy, season ticket marketing activities have been an increasing concern for professional sport organizations. Team marketing departments must find creative ways to attract fans to purchase tickets (Burton & Corniles, 1998). According to Dick and Turner (2007), sport consumers have a favorable perception of mini ticket packages (partial season ticket plans), radio and television advertising, e-mail offers via internet and website, direct mail, and word of mouth.

Two components of consumer satisfaction within a purchase situation include satisfaction with the purchase process and satisfaction with the outcome (Herrmann, Xia, Monroe, Huber, 2007). The purchasing process begins with the prospect becoming informed with the initial information about the product and a price, and ends with an informed choice. Factors impacting the consumer's satisfaction with the purchasing process include: expectations, choice, service fairness, comparison of alternatives, availability of product information, and interaction with the sales people (Herrmann et al., 2007; Greenwell, 2007).

Voss, Parasuraman, and Grewal (1998) suggest that price fairness might be the dominant determinant of overall satisfaction. When a perceived price-performance inconsistency exists it is coupled with strong negative effects on consumer satisfaction. When consumers encounter performance or quality uncertainty, they are more likely to form their expectations based on price (Herrmann et al., 2007).

Full usage of season tickets is utilizing all tickets within the purchased season ticket package (Zhang, Connaughton, & Vaughn, 2004). When sport organizations begin negotiations with potential sponsors, game attendance is a common influencer that is discussed. When season ticket holders do not use their tickets, they do not spend money on accompanying items (e.g. parking, concessions), and sponsors often invest less capital. To overcome this lack of ticket usage, organizations sometimes choose to implement special programs and services for season ticket holders (Zhang et al., 2004). Lachowetz, McDonald, Sutton, & Clark (2001) confirm the importance of season ticket holder attendance in their study of Customer Lifetime Value (LTV).

Consumer retention is the renewal of existing consumers (Wilkinson, 2009). Consumer retention focuses on repeated support from a marketer to the consumer. It is closely related to repeat purchasing behavior and brand loyalty (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997). Repeat purchase behavior, or consumer retention, is triggered by the
marketer’s activities, and a key to consumer retention is consumer satisfaction (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997). Therefore, based on this theoretical assumption, to retain season ticket holders, it is the organization’s responsibility to satisfy the needs of the consumers. This is done by organizations effectively recognizing its member’s contributions, valuing its members, offering its members a quality service, and building a strong relationship with its members. When these actions are implemented, the organization is likely to increase member repurchasing intention (McDonald & Stavros, 2007).

A consumer satisfaction survey was administered to 726 season ticket and non-season ticket holders of a Triple-A baseball team located in the southwest. One hundred and seven responses were removed because of incomplete surveys, making the final sample 618 (368 season ticket and 250 non-season ticket holders). The survey consisted of questions that required a response to seven-point Likert scale (anchored at strongly disagree and strongly agree), ranking, and fill-in-the-blank text boxes. Perceived satisfaction with the purchase process, marketing activities, ticket options, price, intent to repurchase, and ticket usage services, were assessed among season ticket holders. Perceptions of the marketing activities, ticket options, and price were assessed among non-season ticket holders. Non-season ticket holders were not asked about the purchase process, intent to repurchase, and ticket usage because of their lack of season ticket ownership. Means, variances, and standard deviations were used to identify effective and ineffective procedures. Following the computation of the descriptive statistics, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with perceived choice, price, and value.

Results among this sample indicate it was ineffective to rely on television and radio advertisements for season ticket sales, there were favorable experiences with the purchasing process, there were fair and appropriate price perceptions, the repurchase intentions were based on team loyalty, and consumer ticket usage was related to the perceived team loyalty. The ANOVA suggests value and price of season tickets among the two groups differ significantly.

The results suggest satisfaction with, and positive perceptions of season tickets should be a primary concern for sport franchises. Further, satisfaction with the purchasing process in conjunction with price evaluations will have a direct effect on overall satisfaction and intent to repurchase. In addition, it would be beneficial for sport franchises to implement special programs for ticket utilization, in an attempt to increase season ticket usage.

Further research should investigate whether perceptions change longitudinally when managers attempt to address consumer satisfaction needs. In addition, studying the effectiveness of special programs for ticket usage would confirm the program’s importance.