Marketing Challenges and Strategies for the Professional Bowling Association (PBA) Tour: An Examination of the Relationship between Sociodemographics and Fan Motivation

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Marketing Abstract 2011-212
Saturday, June 4, 2011 3:40 PM 20-minute oral presentation (Room 236)

Bowling is one of the most popular participant and spectator sports in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), more than 1.7 million adults in the U.S. attended at least one bowling event per month in 2008. The PBA Tour was established in 1958, becoming a high profile sport in the 1960's and 1970's. However, the PBA Tour has suffered due to negative perception on the sport of bowling. Thus, the PBA Tour has lost significant market share and experienced a lack of interest from fans and the media alike. The PBA Tour regained some of its’ main stream attention through a broadcasting contract with ESPN in 1998 which has helped in establishing stronger fan base. In the upcoming 2010-2011 season, the PBA Tour will televise more than 23 events on ESPN and ABC showcasing world-class bowlers in an exciting tournament structure. The marketing of the PBA Tour presents multiple challenges. One of the primary challenges of operating the PBA Tour as a successful sport business is the lack of consumer demand on related products and services of the PBA Tour. The PBA Tour has often been saddled with limited seating for spectators at events as most bowling centers can only seat a few hundred people. Fans at the events are crucial for their business. Fullerton (2007) noted that “live audiences not only provide a significant stream of revenue to the marketer, but also contribute an emotional asset” (p. 319). Having a limited number of fans at events causes lack of revenue generation and less exciting atmosphere based game involvements such as cheering, whistling, and booing during the events. The PBA Tour has developed diverse marketing channels such as televising events on ESPN and an online broadcasting service called the Xtra Frame in order to increase marketability of their product. However, the television ratings and other related sales have not been increased due to lack of consumer demand. According to Karp (2009), the 2008-2009 Lumber Liquidators PBA Tour on ESPN averaged a 0.8 cable rating with about 910,000 viewers, flat from the 2007-2008 season. In addition, brand loyalty for the PBA Tour is not as prestigious as many other professional sports. Bowling has been considered a recreational physical activity instead of competitive sport. Fred Schreyer, PBA Commissioner/CEO, stated a majority of their fan base is that of blue-collar consumers and thusly they cannot charge $100 per seat (Evans, 2006). This is in addition to the perception of bowling not being highly recognized as a competitive sport. Lastly, there is no systematic study that has been conducted on relationships between sociodemographic variables and fan motivation factors associated with PBA Tour events. The marketers of the PBA Tour may not have a clear direction guiding effective use of marketing strategies due to this lack of systematic fan based studies.

Motivation is an inner state of arousal that donates energy to achieve a goal (Hoyer & Maclnnis, 2008). Fans are attracted to sporting events for a variety of reasons and it is important to understand motivation in order to more effectively promote sporting events. Fan motivations have been used to examine the factors related to determining an individual’s intention to attend spectator sports (James & Ridinger, 2002; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005; Trail & James, 2001; Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003; Wann, 1995). Previous research has emphasized the antecedents of fan motivations explaining why they attend a particular sporting event such as professional sports (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003; Pease & Zhang, 2001; Zhang et al., 2001) or intercollegiate sports (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wigley, Sagas, & Ashley, 2002). Based on increasing consumer interests in consuming PBA products and services, PBA Tour administrators need to better understand consumers’ motivation associated with their attendance. Wann (1995) identified eight motives to attend the sporting events: self-esteem, diversion, entertainment, eustress, economic gain, aesthetic value, affiliation, and family ties. Trail and James (2001) identified nine motives to explain why people attend sporting events (i.e. vicarious achievement, acquisition of knowledge, aesthetics, drama, escape, family, physical attraction, social interaction, and skill of participants).

In addition to fan motivations, it is crucial for sport marketers to understand their specific target audience’s characteristics prior to promoting their product and service due to the broad range of consumer segments within spectator sports (Fullerton, 2007). Sociodemographics and psychological factors are two of the most constructive segmentation approaches in sport consumer behavior studies (Fullerton, 2007; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008; Masteralexis, Barr, & Hums, 2009). Therefore, understanding the relationship between sociodemographics and fan motivation is necessary.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between sociodemographic variables and motivation factors of spectators of PBA Tour events. A questionnaire was formulated consisting of two sections: sociodemographics and fan motivations. First, this study has adapted the revised Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC) used by Woo, Trail, and Anderson (2009) containing 21 questions under seven factors: vicarious achievement, acquisition of knowledge, aesthetics, social
interaction, drama/eustress, escape, and physical skill. Modification of the item wording has been made to reflect the PBA Tour setting appropriately. The MSSC has shown good internal consistency and construct validity from previous research (Fink et al., 2002; James & Ridinger, 2002; Trail et al., 2003). In addition, the survey also contains 8 questions regarding the sociodemographic variables of gender, age, residence, ethnicity, education, occupation, household income, and marital status.

Data will be collected at two different PBA Tour events in Northwestern Region of the United States and will be completed by December 31, 2010. Participants will be selected via a convenient and purposive sampling method. Respondents will be asked to take part in a self-administered survey. Once data collection ends, results will be analyzed through descriptive statistics, regression analyses, and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) using SPSS Ver. 17.00 statistical program. To examine the reliability of the measure, Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) and construct reliability will be analyzed with implementing cutoff values of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Convergent and discriminant validity will also be analyzed to examine the relationship between observed variables and latent construct.

This research is important in order to understand the consumer demands and characteristics of fans consuming PBA products and services. Results will be discussed based on related theory and literature on fan motivation and consumer segmentations. This study will provide practical implications through analyses so that PBA Tour administrators can identify target markets and understand specific market demand variables that directly influence individuals’ decisions to attend an event. Sociodemographic variables will also be examined with related marketing variables in order to retain current spectators and enhance their consumption levels. Lastly, suggestions for future research will be included.