Abstract 2012-163

There is an understanding that not all sport fans are the same. Over the past 30 years there have been numerous studies that have shown that sport fans differ in terms of identification (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997), motivation (Armstrong, 2002), and behavior (Gibson, Willming & Holdnak, 2002). Moreover, it has been demonstrated these differences can be found amongst fans that cheer for the same team (Kerr & Emery, 2011). The result has been that researchers and managers alike have a better understanding of what motivates fans and why they behave the way they do.

Nevertheless, what we have less understanding of is why some fans stop being fans. Some authors have suggested that although we know a great deal about fans, we know relatively little about the reasons and the processes involved with the decision fans make to turn their back on their team/sport/player and stop cheering (Funk & James, 2001). In other words, we do not know much about the ex-fan and their separation from their former object of affection.

In this presentation we offer a conceptual model that explains the possible reasons for fans to make the transition to ex-fans. In brief, our model is based upon the Valence Instrumentality Expectancy model of organizational motivation (Vroom, 1964). The crux of the VIE model is that each individual has a specific valence about their position in an organization. They will be motivated if the valence is positive and will lead to a positive outcome. Yet, motivation will lag if the valence associated with the job is negative or the outcome is negative.

We argue that there is a similar process involved with sport fans. There are a number of reasons why sport fans are fans and continue to be fans. These Fan dimensions include a positive image and association with either one or all of the following: a team, a sport, a player, a league. These dimensions of fandom intertwine to explain why a fan is a fan. Nevertheless, we argue that not all Fan dimensions are created equal for all people. In fact, fans will have different valences associated with each dimension. Thus, for example, some New England Patriots fans focus more on the team while others focus more on individual players like Tom Brady.

Proposition 1: Sport fans weigh and rank their reasons for fandom.

We also argue that there is another component of fandom that is often overlooked: Life. Our position is that sport fans also have a valence around the importance that they place on the day-to-day activities of their lives. So, once again, a younger Patriots fan might be in a stage of life where they have few responsibilities or commitments outside of being a fan. Yet, as this fan ages it is conceivable that family or work responsibilities will play a larger role in the fan’s life. Thus, the valence associated with the Life components of an individual’s fandom will take on greater importance which may impact the possibility of continued fan behavior.

Proposition 2: Sport fans weigh and rank the importance of Life (non-Fan) dimensions.

In our opinion it is the valence (importance) fans attach to each of the four Fan dimensions and the Life dimension that impacts their decision to remain a fan. Fans continually assess their Fan and Life dimensions and evaluate whether important events are positive, negative or neutral. In so doing each fan connects the valence of their fandom to an evaluation of important events. What results is that a value can be associated with all elements relevant to their fandom and ranked according to these values.

For example, the young Patriots fan may have a low valence with a neutral value attached to his/her Life dimension activities and a high valence with a positive value associated with Tom Brady. This allows the fan to make a strong commitment to the team. Yet, over time the valence associated with the Life dimension for this fan may increase as
s/he starts a family. Moreover, the birth of a child is a positive event that makes the valence of the Life dimension more significant. Thus, despite the once strong connection the young Patriots fan might have had to Tom Brady, their valence associated with the Life dimension is high and when tied to an important event (e.g., birth of a child) the draw of the sport object is reduced or negated. As such, there is greater propensity to becoming an ex-fan.

Proposition 3: Sport fans will attach positive, negative and neutral values to fan and non-fan events.

Proposition 4: Sport fans that form negative judgments of Fan dimensions with strong valences will be more likely to become ex-fans.

Proposition 5: Sport fans that form positive judgments of Life dimensions with strong valences will be more likely to become ex-fans.

We make two contributions with the presentation of our conceptual model. First, as there is little that has looked at a fan’s slide down the ladder of commitment, there has been a call to theorize and explore the processes involved with fans becoming ex-fans (Funk & James, 2001). Our model is a first attempt to heed this call.

Second, we argue that fans make their decision to be a fan or an ex-fan based on internal rankings of the components that comprise their fandom and their life. What this suggests is that each fan has a specific valence associated with these components. We argue that identifying the valence of each fan is an important part of understanding whether an individual continues to be a fan or opts for fan-object separation.