

## 2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

### Fists or Finesse: Unwritten Rules and Marketing to Ice Hockey Fans

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**Marketing**

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**20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)**

**Abstract 2013-159**

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**(Room 410)**

#### Introduction

The sport of ice hockey has had a strong fan following since the game's North American creation. Given the sport's mainstream popularity, stakeholders (i.e. sponsors) place high value on the marketability of their products and services towards ice hockey fans. Current research has addressed the uniqueness of marketing to sport fans in general, the behaviors of highly identified fans, and purchase intentions of sport consumers (Madrigal, 2000; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). However, there has been little research related specifically to understanding why marketing to ice hockey fans is a unique challenge. Future research in this area is critical for the hockey industry, as ice hockey in North America is currently facing another uphill climb after the 2012 National Hockey League (NHL) lockout.

Ice hockey is game of amazing skill and physical play with occasional barbaric violence. Hockey fans generally fall in one of two stances, either for or against physical play (Lupinek, 2009). To market specifically to an ice hockey fan, researchers and practitioners must first understand the interrelated forces of ice hockey fan culture. It is suggested in this research that there are three key areas that ice hockey fans pull their culture from. These factors include the unique unwritten rules (UWR) in the sport of ice hockey, the media images, and the culture of identified hockey fans (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). Specifically, this study proposes that understanding the linkages of ice hockey's UWR and identification on Funk and James' (2001; 2006) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) reveals valuable marketing relationships specific to ice hockey fans.

#### Conceptual Development

Ice hockey's UWR is the first key component, even though these unwritten rules are a pervasive theme throughout all the proposed factors. The major unwritten rules of ice hockey that relate to fighting are defined as respecting the red line during warm-up, not touching the opposing goaltender, not shooting the puck after the whistle, skating with the hockey stick below shoulder height, choosing an equal or deserving fighting opponent, removal of the helmet with visor attached before fighting, knowing when the fighting opponent is finished, and not celebrating empty net goals (Lupinek, 2009). It is the use of fighting as acceptable reaction and playing strategy from which ice hockey's unwritten rulebook is built upon. The player reinforcement of these UWR's is what keeps the sport of hockey unique in relation to other mainstream sports. Ice hockey promotes physical play and is the only major professional sport that allows and promotes fighting (Colburn, 1986; Jacobson, 1993). Players have continued to learn and maintain the culture of the game and UWR through social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This is a critical factor for improved comprehension of UWR at the team level, as organizations decide the marketability and fit of their product to potential sponsors.

The second key factor that creates and reinforces ice hockey fan culture is the portrayal of the sport through media images. Most notable to this factor is agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which describes the ability of media to influence the salient topics in the public agenda. In general, ice hockey highlights are comprised of either a physical play or a skill play. On the physical side, the media will often show a fight between two players or a big body check. In opposition, a goal, a great save, the speed of a player or tactful stickhandling move might be showcased as an example of skill play. The marketing materials of teams, sport highlight shows (e.g., SportsCenter), and sponsors generally utilize only images from one of these examples. The image choice is usually decided upon based on the agenda and strategies of the outlet and the target markets acceptance of the UWR culture.

The third key factor is that ice hockey's fans reinforce their own culture through their fan identification. High public displays of fan identification are common in ice hockey generally stemming from long-term fan loyalty, which even

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continues through franchise relocation (Hyatt, 2007). This research suggests that, loyalty to an ice hockey team differs in that it often results in a lifetime of psychological commitment displayed through the attachment or allegiant stages of the PCM (Funk & James, 2001). Many of the variables leading to an individual's awareness and attraction to a certain team or sport have been identified throughout the sport management literature (Ross, Walsh, & Maxwell, 2009). These socialization agents include, but are not limited to, team success and geographic proximity (Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996) along with family influence (Kolbe & James, 2000), original 6 (Barrett, 2001), media exposure and star players (James & Trail, 2008), and out of market fan clubs in non-professional markets (Kraszewski, 2008). The PCM is utilized in this study to explore the relationships between an ice hockey fans knowledge and acceptance of the sport's UWR in relation to fan identification.

### **Practical and Theoretical Implications**

Understanding these three key areas of ice hockey fan culture will allow organizations to develop marketing specific strategies designed to better reach ice hockey fans. These fans are highly identified, generally achieve high levels of psychological connections on the PCM, and stand on either side of the issue of violence in hockey. What we as researchers and practitioners do not know is the salient influencers of an ice hockey fan when choosing a lifetime of loyalty upon reaching the levels of attachment or allegiance on the PCM. Understanding this consumer decision within team selection and game playing style will allow marketers to key in on what actually drives ice hockey fan identification and consumer behavior.

A number of untapped research opportunities exist when exploring the dynamics of fan identification and the UWR of ice hockey. This research will be significant to sport industry in several marketing areas. Understanding the mechanisms that influence ice hockey fans to move from attraction to attachment on the PCM will enable teams and leagues to create a better "fit" between their organization and potential sponsors. Additionally, by understanding why fans desire a finesse game verse a physical and violent style of play at the attachment and allegiance levels will help teams pinpoint organizational marketability toward their fan base and specific fan groups. Finally, teams will be able to recognize whether the playing style of star players influences or effects fan and team culture. This is significant for management, with the manipulation of brand associations in mind (Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008), when considering the signing, re-signing, or trade of a franchise player.

Post-presentation peer discussion will assist in shaping the methodologies and operationalization of measures for future research in this area. Relevant literature will be discussed in relation to the appropriate theoretical underpinnings. Practical implications relative to marketing, endorsements, and related areas will also be addressed through the presentation and discussion. In addition, parallels to other sport industries will be explored, as any potential similarities (and more importantly differences) will be critical in uncovering the uniqueness of marketing to the ice hockey fan.