

The Athletic Funding Crisis and Booster Departments: An Examination of Donor Motivations

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Marketing

Friday, May 31, 2013

20-minute oral presentation

(including questions)

Abstract 2013-173

3:35 PM

(Room 410)

In the current intercollegiate athletics environment, the importance of boosters and booster departments to college and university athletic programs cannot be understated. As sources and amounts of public funding to higher education have become proverbial lightning rods within many current political and ideological debates, universities are relying on external grant dollars, eliminating academic majors or entire departments, and freezing or cutting employee salaries and benefits. To mitigate these deficits and quell this growing disquiet, athletic programs are increasingly under pressure to exhibit their financial independence from the parent university. Athletic departments of all sizes are actively engaging in marketing efforts to attract external donations and gifts to limit their reliance on university funding. Many of the nation's largest athletic departments are responsible for raising over one billion dollars in donations each year (Drape & Evans, 2008). At the extreme, donors such as T. Boone Pickens (Oklahoma State) and Phil Knight (Oregon) are well known for their multimillion-dollar gifts to universities.

Despite these various inflows of both large and small gifts, 86 of the 99 public Division 1 schools in Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) conferences operate their athletic departments at a deficit, averaging an annual \$8.4 million shortfall (Denhart & Vedder, 2010). Athletic departments are being forced to fully recognize the importance and necessity of collecting funds, often times described as gifts, from their donor base at a consistent level and pace. Colorado State President Tony Frank has argued that all universities would like to have successful athletic programs but funding is the major challenge standing in the way of achieving that goal (Frank, 2011).

One avenue to increase booster donations is through an improved understanding of the motivations for entering, maintaining, and ending a booster membership with an athletic program. A lion's share of previous research has specifically focused on current donors of collegiate athletics programs. Specifically, these studies have examined the giving patterns of athletic donors (Stinson & Howard, 2004; 2008), the relationship between athletic success and donations (Frank, 2004; Humphreys & Mondello, 2007), and the impact of athletic donations on university giving (Stinson & Howard, 2004). Although these studies have added considerably to the body of knowledge, a consistent limitation in the fundraising realm is the lack of empirical examination of non-renewed boosters.

Akin to the sport marketing context, gaining an in-depth understanding of "lost" consumers is of significant practical importance to the organization and has been consistently neglected by previous literature in sport management. We would argue that the same tenet holds true in the context of collegiate athletic fundraising with "lost" donors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate several facets of non-renewed boosters to better understand their cessation of support with the boosters department. Specifically, we endeavored to determine their motives as it related to their membership, their perceptions of being a booster, and what would entice them to renew their membership with the booster department.

In this vein, we emailed an online questionnaire to every non-renewed booster for the 2012 football season at a major Division 1 boosters department. Respondents were asked six open-ended questions about (1) their original motivations for joining the booster department, (2) how those motivations have changed over time, (3) what they liked most about being a booster, (4) what they did not like about being a booster, (5) what benefits would entice them to renew their membership, and (6) any other general comments they had about their booster membership. Nine quantitative questions were used to measure awareness of benefits provided by the booster department. Finally, demographic data including age, gender, location, and length and level of membership were collected. The quantitative data was used to provide context to the qualitative responses received from the boosters. Responses to the qualitative questions are presented through both identification of themes and verbatims. Through the use of low-inference descriptors, readers can "experience the participants' actual language, dialect, and personal meanings" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 277).

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

A sample of fifty-nine respondents was collected. The average age of the sample was 45 years old and predominately male (70 percent). Additionally, 70 percent of the sample lived in the state in which the university is located. In terms of level of membership, the respondents were spread out relatively even across the five lowest membership levels with those donating \$300 a year (the third-lowest tier) the most represented. Similarly, 43 percent of the sample had been a booster for over five years, 33 percent between two and five years, and 24 percent for one year. On a whole, respondents exhibited a high rate of awareness on seven of the nine prompts. The two new initiatives started by the department in the current year, a membership card and transitioning to a department controlled regional booster club conglomerate, were the two items in which less than 50 percent of the sample showed awareness. These results, while limited in number, indicate the department had done a poor job of communicating the existence of new benefits, specifically among members who elected not to renew their booster membership.

In the presentation, themes from each open-ended question will be identified and summarized. As an example, we have provided a sampling of the responses to the prompt asking about the original motivations for booster membership. A wide range of reasons were given for making the initial booster donation. Multiple respondents identified a connection with the university athletics programs as a motivation for donation. A 45-year old woman stated she joined because she “loves and wants to support Big South athletics.” Similarly, a 70-year old male joined “to be a member of the Big South family.” Finally, a 29-year old male joined out of “love for the school and a passion for the football team.” Parents with children enrolled at Big South University were also prevalent in the sample. A 78-year old male and his wife became Big South boosters to “share experiences with our daughters attending Big South.” One parent stated he was “proud to say that both of my daughters are graduates of Big South.” Other themes that were identified include becoming a booster to get better football seats, to give back to the Big South athletic program, and simply because they were “big fans” of Big South Athletics.

This study presented fundraising professionals with several practical implications. First, in a similar vein to how sport marketers utilize tactics to deepen identification among fans, fundraising practitioners should utilize tactics to maintain and strengthen booster members’ connection with the athletics program. As the results indicate, this can be achieved by offering boosters tangible benefits in exchange for their donation. There benefits may include social interaction opportunities with athletes and coaches, premium seating at games, and exclusive parking at athletics events. Further, positioning boosters as “members” of the athletic program through relationship marketing techniques may further their identification with the athletics program and enhance the likelihood that they maintain their relationship with the booster organization.