Fan Motivation in Losing Teams: Who Keeps Coming Back?

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There are certain factors that marketers in sport cannot change. For example, a marketer has no control over who will be drafted to a team, the athleticism of players, or how successful a team will be in a season; however, sport marketers still need to sell seats in order to generate revenues to continue their programs. If looking at the collegiate level, how then does a marketer still get students, families, and communities to want to purchase tickets to games when a team is unsuccessful? That is the marketer’s goal after all, and sport (at least at the collegiate level or higher) is still a business that needs to generate revenue to survive. Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton (2007) suggest there are two components to sport products, core and supplemental products. The core product in spectator sports includes game-related components that cannot be altered such as the outcome of a game, while the entertainment component and customer satisfaction would be considered a supplemental product (Mullin et al., 2007). However, even when the core product (team wins) is poor, there is never a team that has a completely empty stadium. Whether win or lose, there are the sports fans that continue to support losing teams; but what distinguishes these fans from traditional spectators? What are the supplemental factors of the game that keeps fans coming even when a team is doing so poorly for multiple seasons?

The interest of this proposal for study comes from a recent interaction with a marketing coordinator at the University of Idaho. Since the 2011 season, the University of Idaho’s NCAA Division I Football team (the Vandals) has secured four wins out of thirty-one conference games. From the perspective of the Vandal marketing coordinator, there is low motivation for fan attendance because the football team is suffering in collegiate wins; therefore, Vandal athletics will not be able to generate the revenues needed to put back into their sporting programs. Given his suggested correlation, I propose the following research study using motivation theory to see what factors keep dedicated fans coming to Vandal games in hopes to identify similar traits that could be used in future marketing strategy.

Fan motivation in sport is an area that has had a significant amount of prior research to enhance concepts of sport marketing. Wann (1995) identified eight common fan motivation factors that have been identified in prior literature, and which comprises the Sport Fan Motivation Scale. The eight motives include eustress (a positive, stimulative, energizing stress), self-esteem enhancement (Basking in Reflective Glory), escape, entertainment, economic motivation (gambling opportunity), aesthetic value (beauty of the sport), group affiliation/need for belongingness, and desire for family socialization. Within this, he studied the difference of fan motivation behind aggressive versus nonaggressive sports. Bernthal & Graghm (2003) used these motivation factors to further study the effects of particular sport settings on fan attendance motivation. What has not been specifically addressed is sport fan motivation within teams that have had consistent losing seasons at the collegiate level. Kahle, Kambara, and Rose (1996) found that collegiate football fans were motivated by the desire for a unique, self-expressive experience, internalization (the love of the team), and camaraderie (desire for group affiliation). They note that students and fans in the collegiate community were motivated by group influence, and they felt the need to attend based on obligation of group influence. It would be beneficial then to look at motivational factors for fans that purchase season tickets, as they would not feel some obligation based on student status. I hypothesize that by studying fan motivation for season ticket holders at times of team hardship, sport marketers could use this information to keep revenues consistent even when teams have had consistent low performance outcomes.

This study would use a qualitative approach focusing on motivation of Vandal football fans that are currently participating in attending games while the team is doing poorly. It is important to conduct the study at the current time because fan motivation is more important than ever while the team struggles to gain wins. Specifically, the study would use a focus group interview setting with the addition of field observations. The goal will be to gain an understanding from current fans in attendance and what factors drive their attendance at losing games. Field observations will also be conducted, as it will be important to have an understanding of atmosphere and related concepts gained from the focus group interviews. Requests for participation will be sent to all current season ticket holders as it will be important to have an understanding of atmosphere and related concepts gained from the focus group interviews. Requests for participation will be sent to all current season ticket holders.
holders. Participation from season ticket holders would specifically focus on those who purchase tickets as community members, not as students. Once interested participants have confirmed, purposeful convenience sampling will select ten individuals to participate in a focus group interview for a timeframe of one hour. Interview questions will be delivered in a semi-structured interview process to allow for participants to share in their motivations for attendance and responses will be video-recorded for accuracy of data collection and interpretation. Some questions would include: How long have you been a season ticket holder; how often do you attend games; what are your reasons for attending; and what perceived benefits do you get from attending? Video recording will be transcribed electronically and will allow for proper coding and thematic analysis from the focus group data collection. Hard copy transcripts will be created from the video and stripped of identifying information. The collected data will be analyzed with Krueger’s (1994) framework analysis. In addition, peer debriefing will be conducted between researchers to clarify the emerging themes discovered through the focus group process. For field observation study, the researchers will attend two University of Idaho Vandal Football games, one prior to the study and one post study in aim to remove initial bias of game atmosphere.

The goal of this study is to have a better understanding of the types of fans that continue to purchase season tickets to Division I Collegiate Football games even when the team is doing poorly. If we could better understand this, we may be able to identify new marketing strategies that would increase fan attendance while increasing revenues for athletics even during times of team hardship. Fan motivation for attendance at losing games has not been specifically studied, and yet, these sporting events will always have teams who are doing poorly at different points in time. Some limitations that may occur from this study would be the specific focus on fan motivation in collegiate level football. Past research (Wann et al., 1995) has indicated that fan motivation in attendance does differ specific to types of sport, so the results of this study would need to be further examined in other nonaggressive sports to see if motivation factors change.