Defining the Season Ticket Holder: A Value-Based Ticket Sales Framework

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Marketing and selling season ticket packages has become one of the most popular manners by which spectator sport organizations work to guarantee revenue streams year in and year out. In general, season ticket purchases represent a significant portion of team revenues (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002), and successfully selling season ticket products ensures a team’s venue will boost strong attendance figures on game days. While approximately one-third of team revenue comes directly from season ticket sales (Wakefield, 2006), almost all other team revenue streams are contingent upon success at the gate. Current ticket sales training programs focus on the development of customer-focused techniques that ask salespeople to take a consultative role in helping individuals accomplish specific objectives (Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2008). This approach allows a ticket sales representative the direct ability to understand the individual value proposition for a season ticket holder. This is consistent with the argument that the sales function is a key component of creating value in business-to-business relationships (Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2011). The customer-focused sales paradigm allows for as much flexibility as necessary to customize and position the value of purchasing season tickets to any type of ticket buyer. However, the ticket sales and marketing literature has been slow in recognizing the importance of treating and examining existing and potential season ticket holders as potential business markets rather than simply sport fans.

Season ticket holders are widely viewed as fans. McDonald (2010) describes season ticket holders as highly involved consumers who attend games in an effort to express themselves and their core values. Additionally, season ticket holder research has indicated the motivation to purchase season tickets may come from a desire to feel tangibly connected to success, to obtain post-season game access, to feel a personal connection to the team, or to help a team survive financially (Cialdini, et al., 1976; Deserpa, 1994; and McDonald & Stavros, 2007). It is quite likely that these purchase motivations are typical of fans who buy season tickets. However, this description fails to address the non-fan buyers and attendees.

As season ticket sales training and strategies have begun addressing the cultivation of business-to-business (B2B) relationships it is prudent to apply a conceptual framework which recognizes the critical differences between typical business-to-consumer (B2C) season ticket holders and B2B season ticket holders. The main objective of this study is to advocate for a new conceptual foundation on which future research and practical season ticket sales strategies can be built. This study asserts that the starting point for developing season ticket customer profiles begins with determining the value proposition season tickets present an individual account holder who purchases his, her, or their ticket package. To accomplish this goal, and examination of what constitutes a customer, consumer, and fan is required.

Often, the terms customer and consumer are treated as synonymous with one another in marketing literature (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000). Further, in sport marketing literature the term fan is a regularly utilized third term that is similarly activated when discussing ticket buyers. Specifically, the word fan is often used to describe a person who attends a sporting event or buys season tickets (e.g. McDonald, 2010; Irwin, et al., 2008; Uhlman & Trail, 2012). This has resulted in a very sharp focus on understanding the motives of consumption for fan buyers. However, to fully develop a framework for segmenting B2B and B2C markets for season tickets, a general examination of the definitions of customer, consumer, and fan is appropriate. First, a consumer is a person who uses a product or service while a customer is the individual or entity that purchases a product or service (Webster, 2000). While in many service settings this distinction may be of little consequence, it is of critical importance in appropriately discussing season ticket holders. It is clear in a typical service exchange that the consumer and customer is often the same individual. A season ticket account holder may be both the customer who purchases the ticket from a sales representative and the consumer who attends the subsequent games. Yet, it is also possible that the person who purchases the tickets from a sales representative never attends a game all season. Instead, this customer may distribute the tickets in an effort to reward employees or accomplish some other corporate objective. This type of arrangement fits the American Marketing Association’s definition of B2B marketing and illustrates the first two layers in this paper’s categorization of season ticket account holders.
In most service settings, a focused description of the distinction between customers and consumers would be sufficient to begin describing the supply chain and relationship building process involved in selling a service to B2C and B2B markets. However, the common usage and application of the term fan to describe season ticket account holders requires the addition of a third layer to the analysis. A fan is defined as a person with an overwhelming liking or interest in a particular person, group, or idea (Thorne & Bruner, 2006). An individual’s team identification may range from low to high, and a number of consumption related characteristics are often attributed to higher levels of team identification. However, while individuals higher in team identification typically indicate heightened level of intention to purchase products and services the term fan does not indicate required spectator attendance. In fact, many fans consume the majority of their team related media through television. Yet, the term fan is commonly invoked when discussing spectators or consumers. This confusion suggests clarity is needed. Much like a customer who may not be a consumer, a fan is not necessarily a customer or a consumer. Yet, it is possible for a fan to be both a customer and a consumer. Ultimately, customer, consumer, and fan are three distinct terms; however, there is the potential for any one individual to fit one, two, or all three of these designations.

Drawing a distinction between customers, consumers, and fans creates a need for future research analyzing value proposition differences among the three foundational groups and the subsequent overlapping groups created by this conceptual approach. Current industry sales training allows account executives to develop these type of consumer profiles organically. However, extant literature has yet to recognize B2B ticket markets as viable sales prospects that come as a result of the specifically defined role of a season ticket customer. This framework will allow sales rep training and sport management curricula to integrate educational programming that streamlines the understanding of the value proposition for season tickets across consumer types thus softening the learning curve.