

Is "Going Green" Worth It? Assessing Fan Engagement and Perceptions of Athletic Department Environmental Efforts

Jonathan Casper, North Carolina State University

Dave Newport, University of Colorado Boulder

Michael Pfahl, Ohio University

Marketing

Thursday, June 4, 2015

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

Abstract 2015-005

8:30 AM

(Joliet)

Collegiate athletic programs in the U.S. have incorporated environmental initiatives at their events as a way to account for their environmental footprint (Casper, Pfahl, & McSherry, 2012). While there are many successful cases (Natural Resource Defense Council, 2014), little is known of the impact collegiate sport environmental efforts have on their fan base. To justify actions beyond protecting the environment, collegiate administrators seek to understand fan engagement activities as a way to enhance fan experience and increase sponsor inventory (IEG Sponsors Report, 2013). It has been documented that CSR efforts influence organizational value. Within major non-sport organizations 13 cents out of every dollar of brand value are associated with CSR efforts (Silverman, 2012); sustainability-related CSR has been found to influence brand strength (Gidwani, 2012); and CSR is viewed favorability by a majority of sport fans (Walker & Kent, 2009).

To-date no empirical research sought to understand if event-based environmental efforts are warranted and meet desired objectives. This study looked beyond the environmental impact of environmental-sustainability efforts, which are important, and focused on how well these efforts meet fan expectations, help with positive perceptions of the athletic program, and change or influence behaviors (at events and in everyday lives).

Both theoretical/academic inquiry and practical athletic department (AD) problems related to effectiveness/need of environmental efforts guided this study. Specific research questions were: 1) What extent do fans expect environmental actions by ADs?, 2) How do AD environmental efforts relate to perceptions about the AD as a leader and enhancing the university/AD profile?, 3) Do environmental efforts affect future ticket purchasing and environmental behavior at events and at home?, and 4) Are there significant differences based on demographic information?

The theoretical framework that guided this study was based on two theories. First, Value Congruence Theory (Brown & Trevino, 2006), which, when applied to environmental efforts, suggests that fans replicate behaviors modeled by sport organizations if they match fan values. Second, Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Stern & Dietz, 1994) helps contextualize that environmental efforts conducted by sport organizations may change personal norms and ascription of responsibility, which directly relate (or influence) fan behavior.

A Division I athletics department (AD) in the western US conducted eight "Sustainable Gamedays" (4 Men's Basketball; 4 Women's Basketball). Game day efforts included zero-waste signage and videos, zero-waste stations and "goalies" (student volunteers at each station), in-game PSAs, in-game Twitter contests, and environmental product giveaways (Kitchen Composters). The program was funded through a sponsorship with an environmental-focused corporation.

One week after the promotion, a web-based survey was sent to ticketholders who attended at least one of the games in the AD database. The survey was 33-items and for this study included demographics (4 items), environmental values (4 items), athletic program identification (3 items), fan expectations for environmental activities (3 items), current (4 items) and future (4 items) environmental behaviors at AD events and at home, and perceptions as environmental leaders (3 items) and perceptions of enhanced AD/University profile (3 items) based on AD environmental actions.

A total of 662 fans responded to the survey during a one-week time frame. After data cleaning a total of 577 were

2015 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2015)

deemed usable for analysis (27% response rate). To test the sample for generalizability to the Men's and Women's basketball fan base, the demographics were compared to an AD-funded survey of the fan base in 2013 (Turnkey Intelligence). The demographic data closely matched (ours study v. Turnkey data) for gender (69% v. 70% male), income (largest category percentage between 75K and 125K), and age (48.0 v. 47.7 years old); therefore it appeared we had a demographically representative sample. To test internal validity and create constructs, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. The factor analysis found items loaded strong (factor loadings $>.50$) for each of the posited variables and internal reliability was high ($\alpha > .80$), therefore constructs based on variable averages were used for further analysis. A simultaneous regression was used to predict future ticket purchasing and environmental behaviors based on athletic program identification, perceptions of leadership and profile based on AD environmental actions. MANCOVA, controlling for environmental values, identified significant differences based on demographics and the constructs under study.

Results found that over 70% of the respondents stated that environmental efforts were important or very important in relation to their fandom of the athletics program. Due to AD environmental efforts, 73% of the fans were at least somewhat likely to undertake environmental activities at events and 56% at home. Only 34% indicated that the activities had an impact on attendance/ticket purchasing. More than 83% of all fans believed, at least somewhat strongly, that the AD was a leader in environmental efforts and the efforts helped with enhancement of University and AD profile.

Regression analysis found that perceptions of leadership and enhanced AD/University profile were significant ($p < .05$) in predicting intentions of future ticket purchases ($B = .32$; $B = .27$), future environmental behavior at events ($B = .47$; $B = .24$), and future environmental behavior at home ($B = .32$; $B = .27$). Athletic program identification was a non-significant predictor of all future behavioral intention constructs.

Segmentation analysis found some significant differences among the variables based on gender and age, but income and attendance frequency were non-significant. Most notable were gender differences. Females were significantly more likely to purchase tickets and undertake environmental activities at events and at home. Females believed environmental initiatives increased university profile and believed environmental initiatives increased AD profile significantly more than males.

The results show the environmental efforts by athletic departments are warranted and have an impact on behaviors. While the efforts weakly impact ticketing, they add value to the sport product and create a point of difference that is viewed favorably by the fan base. Following value congruence and VBN theory, it appears that AD environmental actions help with replication behavior and even behavior change. This study also shows that these efforts are important to the female fan base. Further findings, limitations, and future research directions will be discussed in the presentation.