Employing Non-Pecuniary Strategies to Stimulate Subsequent Product Consumption: Lessons Learned from an Extensive Field Experiment in the German Bundesliga

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While attending a sporting event such as, e.g., a game in Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer or National Football League, consumers benefit greatly from the presence of other participants with whom they can interact (see e.g., Melnick, 1993; Holt, 1995). For example, spectators may benefit from the specific atmosphere that arises because other spectators decide to wear the colors of their favorite team, to exhibit expressive behavior such as booing, clapping and singing or even to participate in choreographies (Derbaix et al., 2002; Charleston, 2009; Uhrich and Benkenstein, 2010; 2012). Moreover, when supporting their team, spectators may not only affect the events on the field (Greer, 1983; Garicano et al., 2005; Buraimo et al., 2010), but also create eligible themes for external stakeholders such as broadcasters and sponsors (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; McDonald et al., 2013). Therefore, spectators can be considered to become both consumers, and a substantial part of a service offered to the remaining group of spectators, as well as to external stakeholders (Borland and Macdonald; 2003; Woratschek et al., 2014).

In particular, season ticket holders (STH) play a decisive role within this occasionally (but regularly) emerging ecosystem. Accustomed to both the realities of their arena as well as the specific needs and expectations of the team they support, STHs often create crowd chants or choreographies and are thus critical to stadium atmosphere. In the German Bundesliga, the strongest sporting league in the world in terms of live attendances (DFL, 2014), for example, the relative share of tickets bought by STHs accounts for roughly 62 per cent. Although those STHs are often claimed to be particularly loyal (Benz et al., 2009; McDonald, 2010; McDonald et al., 2013), their physical attendance in the stadium is, however, rather expected than secured (Schreyer, 2014). Recently, German professional soccer club Bayern München, for example, announced that 211 STHs will be banned from the stadium because they have failed to turn up to at least eight home games during a season. Similarly, English professional soccer club FC Watford reported a typical no-show rate of 20 percent among its STHs. In this context, the decision to omit consumption, thus being absent, therefore, poses a considerable threat to the business models of professional soccer clubs (Feehan, 2006).

The extant literature on (sports) consumer behavior research, though, has so far directed only little attention to strategies to ensure post-purchase / subsequent product consumption in this particular or comparable (hedonic) group consumption settings. By contrast, research in the field of consumer behavior has increasingly focused on CRM-strategies to either increase customer retention rates (see, e.g., Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984; Henning-Thurau and Kle, 1997; Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003a; 2003b; Verhoeef, 2003; Lewis, 2004; Gustafsson et al., 2005) or to recapture lapsed customers (see, e.g., Stauss and Friege, 1999; Griffin and Lowenstein, 2001; Helfert et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2004; Tokman et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2012). Notwithstanding the importance of this continuing analysis, a better understanding of strategies to stimulate subsequent product consumption per se may represent an appropriate way to increase the former, while decreasing the latter – at least for those providers whose services would otherwise remain (temporarily) unused.

In this article, I address this issue through the lens of sport (cf. Day et al., 2012). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and its subsequent extension (Turner, 1987; 1999), as well as on optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), I design five different treatments in order to investigate whether non-pecuniary approaches hold the potential to manipulate STHs in their subsequent decision to consume, i.e., to attend a home game with an a priori expectable low demand. While two treatments address a STHs presumed need to belong to a personally important group by employing moral appeals of varying degrees, treatment number four and treatment number five, by contrast, address a STHs natural need for distinctiveness by offering the STH the chance to win either an expensive (though acquirable) or an inexpensive (though unique) prize. In addition, treatment number three makes the attempt to balance the two aforementioned needs. More precisely, the STH was thanked for
his (or her) support during the season and informed that he (or she) would be mentioned by name in the stadium magazine – representatively for all fans. Notably, this procedure not only offers individual distinctiveness to the STH through individual social recognition, but, further, also serves the presumed need to belong “through a sense of interconnectedness with all group members and the sense that one is serving the interests of the group as a whole” (Hornsey and Jetten, 2004, p. 255).

Methodology and Data Analysis
The entire field experiment took place in April 2013. More precisely, the extensive experiment was conducted in the run-up to the 14th home game of a professional soccer club from the top tier of the German Bundesliga; i.e., Germany’s primary soccer competition. In this season, the professional sporting club sold a total of 19,390 season tickets. However, in order to examine individual behavioral responses throughout the field experiment, I eliminated business tickets (which are often shared among different employees), as well as several season tickets for club employees, guests of honor (who may differ throughout the season) and also those STHs with missing or unusual data.

The final sample consists of 13,911 STHs. In order to balance unobserved variables across five treatment, as well as one control conditions (List, 2011), I than allocated those STHs randomly into six groups of nearly the same size. Due to the large scale of the sample, I used (pure) single random draw as preferred randomization method (Bruhn and McKenzie, 2009). This was done semi-public.

After randomization was done, I assessed the balance between all six conditions. My analysis shows no significant group differences with regard to either the participants socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and geographic location), ticket classification (e.g., cost of season ticket, distance from field to seat, and number of season tickets bought and row), pre-treatment admission, pre-treatment admission time or resignation and resignation date where applicable.

Three days prior to the home game, a service provider of the sporting club send out personalized letters to a total of 11,599 STHs (while no letter was send to the 2,312 STHs in the control condition). To capture the STHs’ attention all letters were personalized, easy to read, understandable and of adequate length. Moreover, all letters were printed on official stationery, electronically signed by the well-known chairman of the club, and sent in an official envelope, showing the club’s crest. In addition, each letter contained one out of five different treatments.

On game day, admission was recorded with the help of the clubs stadium access system. Applying one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals a significant treatment effect on home game 14, while no significant treatment effect occurs on any of the three subsequent home games. Specifically, I find that STHs react favorably to the prospects of eventually winning an expensive (though acquirable) prize, while being largely unaffected by both the prospects of social recognition and the use of moral suasion manipulations recalling a substantial group norm; that is, the norm to jointly support the home team.

Discussion and Implications
My results thus give reason to presume that a strategy employing probabilistic rewards to alter (unintended) behavior may be a promising one – not only for sport marketers. Complementing findings from, for example, Diamond and Loewy (1991), I find that in particular the prospect of eventually winning an expensive (though acquirable) prize significantly changed STHs behavior. While the overall effectiveness of monetary-based incentives to induce behavioral change has been questioned numerous times, amongst others in the context of customer loyalty programs/schemes (see e.g., O’Malley, 1998), this finding, therefore, indicates that it is rather the amount of a potential win (or reward) than its actual probability of occurrence that customers seem to care about.

For practitioners in the sports business, this finding is equivalent to the assumption that while the introduction of a customer loyalty program for STHs, i.e., rewarding STHs’ frequent admission by providing one (or more) target(s) at which various benefits can be achieved, may not per se induce customer loyalty, the use of appropriate probabilistic rewards within such a program, however, may have the potential to increase its effectiveness; that is, as long as the perceived value of a certain prize is considerably high (enough). Practitioners, however, are well advised to further
examine the varying needs among STHs to avoid crowding-out intrinsic motivation to attend home games (Frey and Oberholzer-Gee, 1997).