Understanding Quality Attributes that Predict Service Value and Word-of-Mouth for Two Minor-League Sports

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Minor league teams face a distinct set of challenges not faced by their major league counterparts. Primarily, minor league teams cannot rely on team quality or star power to attract consumers. To compensate, they often rely more on product extensions or overall experience to add value to their product and differentiate themselves from competitors (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, & Greenwell, 2011; Greenwell, Lee, & Naeger, 2007). Further, minor league sports typically receive a fraction of the media attention major league teams receive. As such, niche sports count on word-of-mouth (WOM) more than other outlets to communicate with their customers (Greenwell & Andrew, 2007).

For these reasons, it is important to assess what aspects of the minor-league experience contribute to increased value in the mind of the consumer and generate positive WOM. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand which quality attributes contribute to service value and word-of-mouth for minor league sport teams.

Traditional marketing exchanges are transactional in which money is exchanged for goods or services. In many service industries, there has been a shift from the traditional marketing paradigm to a relationship paradigm in which emphasis is placed on building mutually satisfying, long-term relationships with key parties (Kim & Trail, 2011). Due to the realization of the value of customers on organizations, a greater focus has been placed on service value in marketing research (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). According to Ruiz, Gremler, Washburn, and Carrion (2008), “service value describes the focus on the role of various service components in shaping customers’ perceptions of value” (p. 1280). As such, when conceptualizing the concept of service marketing, researchers must include benefits and sacrifices of the experience (Ruiz et al., 2008). In the present study, potential antecedents of service value were examined to see which elements of the game day experience influence service value the most.

Research in the marketing domain has suggested that WOM, or the sharing of personal knowledge and experiences about a company with other people in a consumer-to-consumer format (Sernovitz, 2009), is the missing link between satisfaction and repurchase behavior (Eiseingerich, Auh, & Merlo, 2014). Many benefits of WOM have been identified by researchers. For instance, Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels (2009) found that WOM is perceived to be more trustworthy and relevant to consumers than traditional marketing techniques, as it generates empathy and overcomes consumer resistance. Similarly, Bickart and Schindler (2001) asserted that consumer-created product information is deemed more credible than seller-generated information because the consumer does not have a selling intent. Given the fact that minor league teams cannot rely on team quality or star power to attract consumers, the present study examined which elements of the game day experience influence WOM the most.

Method

The current study consisted of two samples of customers, each attending a different minor-league sporting event held in the same Midwestern United States city and the same facility: baseball and soccer. Using teams from the same city competing in the same facility allowed the ability to control for issues related to facility quality and age. At games selected to best represent each team’s average customer base, research assistants approached subjects to self-complete a short questionnaire. In order to eliminate response biases stemming from favorable or unfavorable game outcomes, spectators were approached no later than midway through the game to complete the questionnaire. Spectators were asked to rate on a 7-point scale (poor to excellent) a series of 16 quality attributes in relationship to their experience attending a game. The 16 quality attributes were drawn from Greenwell et al.’s (2007) examination of critical aspects of minor league spectators’ experience. A total of seven items were modified from the work of Ruiz et al. (2008) to measure service value. These items were chosen for inclusion as they are essential in forming consumer perceptions of value. For instance, participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statement, “The value I receive from this company’s services is worth the time, effort, and money I have spent.”
items used to measure positive WOM were derived from the work of Kuenzel and Yassim (2007). These items were included to assess whether or not participants are referring the organizations to others.

Results

Subjects completed 577 questionnaires: 348 at the minor-league baseball game and 229 at the minor-league soccer game with a return rate of over 85%. For the baseball sample, subjects were 61.3% male, 19.3% had season tickets, and 59.8% attended 5 or fewer games each season. For the soccer sample, subjects were 64.0% male, 38.8% had season tickets, and 50.5% attended 5 or fewer games each season.

Using stepwise regression with a Bonferroni correction, service value was regressed on the 16 quality attributes for each sample. In the soccer sample, the regression equation was significant \[ F (3,169) = 30.162, p < .001, \text{adjusted } r^2 = .341. \] Ticket price (\( \beta = .492, p < .001 \)) and stadium atmosphere (\( \beta = .247, p < .001 \)) each significantly predicted service value. In the baseball sample, the regression equation was significant \[ F (4,299) = 74.409, p < .001, \text{adjusted } r^2 = .492. \] Ticket price (\( \beta = .376, p < .001 \)), ticket staff (\( \beta = .195, p < .001 \)), and stadium atmosphere (\( \beta = .175, p = .001 \)) each significantly predicted service value.

Using stepwise regression with a Bonferroni correction, word-of-mouth was regressed on the 16 quality attributes for each sample. In the soccer sample, the regression equation was significant \[ F (5,168) = 22.141, p < .001, \text{adjusted } r^2 = .379. \] Stadium atmosphere (\( \beta = .295, p < .001 \)) and cleanliness (\( \beta = .288, p = .001 \)) each significantly predicted word-of-mouth. In the baseball sample, the regression equation was significant \[ F (3,301) = 43.193, p < .001, \text{adjusted } r^2 = .294. \] Stadium atmosphere (\( \beta = .331, p < .001 \)) and ticket staff (\( \beta = .246, p < .001 \)) each significantly predicted service value.

Discussion

This study aimed to gain a better understanding of which attributes contribute to service value and WOM for minor-league sports teams. Three main findings emerged from the analysis. First, stadium atmosphere significantly contributed to both service value and WOM for each sport suggesting this attribute may be the most important quality attribute for minor league teams. Secondly, quality attributes differ across sports as ticket staff was an important attribute for baseball and cleanliness was important for soccer fans. This finding suggests quality may be context specific. Third, quality attributes that predict service value and WOM are often different. Ticket price was a significant predictor of service value but did not contribute to WOM.

References


