Exploring the Connections between Grassroots Football and the Canadian Football League: A Customer Equity Perspective

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Management of organizations seek to understand a customer’s perceptions of their products, organization, and brand. By gaining this knowledge, brand managers are able to facilitate and/or enhance the relationship between the organization and the customer, which can ultimately have a number of different outcomes that includes customer loyalty, a willingness to pay more for a product, responding externally to a problem (e.g., negative word-of-mouth communication), and internal responses to a problem (e.g., customer compliant; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Yoshida and Gordon (2012) indicated that “it is important for sport marketers to know which consumers they can rely on through specific customer equity drivers” (p.390). Professional sports leagues often look to grassroots sports participants when trying to create and maintain loyal fan bases. Thus, the purpose of this research was to explore connections that exist between grassroots sports (i.e., amateur football participants/parents) and professional sports (i.e., the Canadian Football League) through a Customer Equity (CE) perspective. Specifically, the following two research questions were posed: 1) What are the football experiences and perceptions amongst those participants of grassroots football in Canada, and with respect to the CFL; and, 2) How are those participant experiences and perceptions reflected within a CE perspective?

Rust, Zeithaml, and Lemon, (2000) defined CE as “the total of the discounted lifetime values of all its customers” (p.4). CE can be used as an indicator “of the expected future behaviour of a firm’s customers, and is a key strategic asset that must be monitored and nurtured by firms to maximize long-term performance” (Vogel, Evanschitzky, & Ramasreshan, 2008, p.98). In order to determine CE, specific drivers need to be present: Value, Brand, and Relationship equity. “Value equity is defined as the customer's objective assessment of the utility of a brand, based on perceptions of what is given up for what is received” (Lemon et al., 2001, p.1) through price, quality, and convenience. Brand equity, on the other hand, is built through image and meaning; where the strength of the brand can attract new customers, create an emotional tie to the organization, and be a reminder to the customer of the potential products and services offered by the organization. Thus, Lemon et al. (2001) further explained that brand equity is more narrowly “the customer's subjective and intangible assessment of the brand, above and beyond its objectively perceived value” (p.2). Finally, Relationship equity “is defined as the tendency of the customer to stick with the brand, above and beyond the customer's objective and subjective assessment of the brand” (Lemon et al., 2001, p.2). In the field of sport management, CE and its drivers are a relatively underutilized to understand customers.

A mixed-method case study approach was used to explore the experiences of grassroots football participants/parents in Canada and their perceptions of the CFL. Data was gathered through a bilingual (French and English) national amateur football survey that was administered through a survey website (Qualitrics) between March 24, 2015 and May 1, 2015. There was a combination of open-ended (qualitative) and closed-ended (quantitative) question posed. Four different web-based surveys were developed targeting the following: 1) Participants under the age of 19 (survey completed by parents; n= 2,059 respondents); 2) Participants over the age of 19 (n=408 respondents); 3) Coaches (n=794 respondents); and, 4) Officials (n=394 respondents). For the purpose of this study we have focused on the data collected from the participants under the age of 19, which consisted of 37 survey questions, and participants over the age of 19, which consisted of 47 survey questions.

Qualitative data was analyzed using NVivo and used a text frequency count to determine themes that were present in the study’s participant responses; while the quantitative data used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), where descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages) were used in the initial data analysis process. Based on this process, common themes were identified that were linked to the survey
questions and responses. These themes consisted of: motivations, aspirations and satisfaction; fan relationships; CFL opinions; and football association program awareness and value. Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) explained that, “concepts [i.e., themes] are precursors to constructs in making sense of organizational worlds” (p. 16). Through matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994), a deeper analysis was pursued where we explored these themes further and from a CE perspective.

The results revealed that the themes of: motivations, aspirations and satisfaction related to Value equity; fan relationships related to Relationship equity; CFL opinions related to Brand equity; and football association program awareness and value related to Value and Relationship equity. Some of the examples of our initial findings are presented below. The participant responses regarding the motivations, aspirations, and satisfaction were that the parents or guardians were found to enroll their children into football because of the physical activity benefits (79%), social “team” benefits (75%), and fun and exciting to play (78%). Furthermore, 62% of the study participants aspired to play in the CFL and 62% enrolled in amateur football because it was fun and exciting to play. The study participant responses regarding their opinion of the CFL indicated that 89% to 91% agreed that a strong CFL is important to amateur football in Canada is also reflected by one of the study participants who stated, “The fact in Canada we have our own league, it gives Canadians a better chance at making it to the pro level.” The findings also revealed that there was a relationship between the CFL and the study participants as 43% to 58% visited CFL and/or team websites, and 19% to 39% followed the CFL and/or teams on Facebook. The findings also revealed that there is poor awareness of programs offered by amateur sport groups among football households with participants under the age of 19 years. Only 18% were aware of programs and services offered by Football Canada, and 31% were aware of programs and services offered by a football provincial sport governing body.

Based on a CE perspective, we conclude that amateur football participants at the grassroots level have very strong affinity for the CFL and are highly engaged with the CFL as fans; the league’s Canadian identity and local engagement of football stakeholders in CFL communities are both factors related to this affinity between participants, coaches, officials and the CFL. “If the firm’s products and services do not meet the customer’s needs and expectations, the best brand strategy and the strongest retention and relationship marketing strategies will be insufficient” (Lemon et al., 2001, p.1). Furthermore, Lemon et al. (2001) also explained that, “Customers will often continue to purchase from the firm to maintain ‘membership’ in the community” (p.4). In the case of this research, CFL marketers need to recognize these drivers within their environment, which can be considered as part of a new strategic approach that allows them to maximize their performance on elements of importance to fans.