“I Don’t Want to Work in Sales” - The Impact Emotional Labor Has on Sport Sale Employees

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As the sport industry grows in size, colleges and universities across the United States will continue to offer sport management programs. According to the North American Society for Sport Management website (2016), there are currently 223 sport management programs offered throughout the United States. These programs provide students with coursework and internships related to sport, that ultimately prepare them for entry-level sport positions after graduation. In particular, ticket sales is one area where many sport graduates receive employment because it has been viewed by many as an entry-level position within sport (Smith & Roy, 2011). These entry-level sales positions are not ideal for many graduates, and most new hires will change jobs within a short amount of time. In fact, it is estimated that five out of six people who start in an entry-level position within ticket sales will leave for a different employment opportunity (King, 2010b).

The concept of ticket sales within the sporting industry has been empirically studied, but the connection between why individuals initially avoid and quickly leave the profession is a current void in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to discover the impact emotional labor plays in relation to the ticket sales of sporting events. The authors desire to explore the emotion regulation strategies utilized by ticket sale employees in their everyday encounter with potential customers. The authors also will look for a connection between those emotion regulation strategies and perceived retention for ticket sale employees.

Review of Literature

The current study utilized a theory developed by Hochschild (1983) known as emotional labor. Emotional labor has been described as regulating one’s emotions to comply with occupational or organizational norms (Hochschild, 1983). In relation to the service industry, employees who consistently interact with consumers may display emotions that are not necessarily felt. Empirical evidence from the hospitality industry has shown that display rules may be implemented by an organization to regulate an employees’ behavior (Hei-Lin Chu, 2002). These display rules are classified as societal, occupational, and organizational norms that are created to explain which emotions should be expressed and which should be disguised (Ekman, 1973). Some common display rules displayed in many employee handbooks are, “Energy and enthusiasm are required for every guest interaction, and an upbeat attitude should always be shown” (Hei-Lin Chu, 2002).

Stemming from the emotional labor theory, the authors of the current study have focused on three techniques known as emotion regulation strategies. These strategies have been studied in various industries regarding ‘front line’ service workers who are directly in contact with the consumer (Anderson, Provis, Chappel, 2002). The first strategy, surface acting, involves employees displaying emotions that are not actually felt through changing their outward appearances (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Service industry employees have been shown to exhibit this mechanism by putting on a smile for a customer even if he/she is having a bad day. The second strategy, deep acting, occurs when the feelings of employees do not fit the situation, and in turn they use their training to express appropriate emotions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). The third strategy, genuine acting, occurs when employees are making efforts to actually feel the emotions they are displaying (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983).

Even though the emotional regulation strategies discussed above aid in employee-customer interaction, empirical studies have shown they can impair performance by priming expectations that are difficult to meet (Ashforth & Humphrey). Several negative consequences of performing emotional labor have been discovered because of its effects on employees’ psychological well-being. Employee burnout (Hochschild, 1983; Kahn, 1993) and job dissatisfaction (Morris & Feldman, 1996) are cited outcomes of emotional labor and service employees. These consequences of emotional labor will be vital in identifying the reasons of low retention among sport ticket sale employees.
Methods and Anticipated Contributions
A qualitative research design will be implemented to discover the prevalent themes behind the impact emotional labor plays in sport ticket sale employees. Current employees who work in departments that specialize in ticket sales and retention will be interviewed until data saturation is achieved. Currently, three people have been interviewed. The authors will interview ticket sale employees from a variety of sport settings including the professional level and collegiate level to obtain a representative sample. Social determination theories and emotional labor theories and literature will be utilized as well as previous ticket sale literature to guide the semi-structured interview prompts.

Questions include:
1.) Are there certain emotions or skills that are required for your job position?
2.) Have you ever been in a situation at work where you had to express emotions that were in contrast to your actual feelings?
3.) How often do you find yourself self-monitoring your emotions in order to influence a client’s attitude or behavior?
4.) Do you believe altering your emotions creates deception for the consumer?
5.) Do you believe you would alter your emotions more or less if you were selling products not related to sport?
6.) Would you consider yourself a fan of the sport team you currently sell tickets for? Why or why not?

The results of this study will have practical importance to the emerging line of research on emotional labor within the sport industry. Practically, the results will provide administrators with a possible understanding as to why current graduates try to avoid entry-level ticket sales positions. Also, by connecting the concept of emotional labor to retention in sport ticket sale employees, practitioners can address the issue and create strategies to avoid burnout. Future research opportunities will be discussed regarding emotional labor, emotion regulation strategies, and sport ticket sale employees.