Fans’ Awareness and Effectiveness of Commercial Promotions in NCAA D-II Football Inaugural Season Games

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Commercial promotions are widely used to fulfill a sponsor’s advertising expectations. Sporting events of all types and sizes employ a variety of commercial promotions. Similar commercial promotions are utilized by large events and small events. Large events such as a World Cup soccer match or NCAA D-I football game, with a hundred thousand spectators, utilize similar commercial promotions as small events such as a high school softball game or youth soccer match attended by only a few hundred people. In today’s cluttered marketplace it is essential that corporations seek new and innovative ways to reach their target audience (Walsh, Kim, & Ross, 2008). At the same time, advertising and sponsorship have become major sources of funding for special and on-going sporting events requiring sport marketers to develop effective commercial promotions (McCarville, Flood, & Froats, 1998).

The effectiveness of advertisements and commercial promotions has been assessed in a variety of sport settings, such as major college football games (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008), college women’s basketball games (Maxwell & Lough, 2009), the Super Bowl (O’Rilly, Lyberger, McCarthy, & Seguin, 2008), and some grassroots sport events (Miloch & Lambercht, 2006). However, the efficacy of commercial promotions in NCAA D-II football, or any other sport games, has not been published or disseminated.

The setting for the current study is the inaugural season of a NCAA D-II football team. The setting is also unique because the team’s home games are played in an affiliated minor league baseball park rather than a traditional on-campus football stadium. The research examines the relationship between commercial promotion modalities and spectator’s awareness level. The following research questions are addressed to inform both theoretical knowledge and practical marketing efforts. (1) Are there significant differences in spectator awareness between the types of commercial promotions? (2) Does seat location alter spectators’ awareness of different types of in-game promotions? (3) Are there gender and age differences in level of awareness to the commercial promotions? (4) Are there significant differences between spectators’ level of awareness relative to the number of games the spectators attended? The study specifically fills a void in understanding the efficacy of commercial promotions in a NCAA D-II setting. The research will also contribute to the knowledge base suggested by Turley and Shannon (2000) that frequency of exposure is a critical factor in creating awareness.

The theoretical foundations for this study are market segmentation (Dibb & Simikin, 1996) and spectator-based brand equity (Ross, 2006). In addition, literatures related to the effectiveness of spectator recognition of commercial promotions in sporting events are examined. Pitts & Slattery (2004) found that the time (duration) of exposure to promotional messages positively impacted spectators’ brand recognition. Turley and Shannon (2000) revealed that increase in the frequency of exposure improved spectators’ recall of sponsorship promotions.

The spectator awareness survey was constructed based on the university athletic department’s game promotion sales package. Spectator demographic information was included in the survey and serve as the independent variables, including age, gender, type of ticket holder, their seat location, and their relationship to the university. Spectators were also asked the number of home games they have attended. At the time of completing this abstract, data has been collected from three of five home games. The data was collected via intercept surveys using Turnkeys Surveyor software. Spectators could complete the survey using an iPad or paper/pencil questionnaire. The data collection averages 125 survey respondents with an attendance of 6,500 spectators at each game. The preliminary data analysis reveals no significant differences in spectator awareness between the types of commercial promotions. Mean awareness levels are ranging from 2.5 to 4.5 on a 7-point rating scale. Thus far, seat location had some impact on
spectator awareness to in-game promotions. There is a significant gender difference in spectator awareness level to ticket stub, sponsors display tables, game programs, and public announcement promotions. The number of survey participants by gender is nearly equal. To date, age groups do not appear significantly different in terms of their awareness of different types of promotions. The effect of frequency of exposure (Turley & Shannon, 2000) to promotions will be examined, at the conclusion of the season, based upon the respondents’ number of games attended.