Perception of Constraints to National Hockey League Attendance: A Study of Non-Attendees

Jonathan Casper, North Carolina State University
Jung-Hwan Jeon, University of North Carolina Greensboro

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Non-attendees' perceived constraints to sport attendance are worthy of attention. Past research (e.g., Kim & Trail, 2011) categorizes sport spectator constraints into two separate categories: internal and external. Internal constraints are the psychological cognitions that curtail behavior, such as self or significant others having no interest in the sport event. In contrast, external constraints are the social or environmental aspects that deter or even prevent attendance, such as time, location, and parking (Kim & Trail, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceived attendance constraints experienced by sport fans who currently do not attend games of a National Hockey League (NHL) team. The need to increase attendance for the team investigated in this study was especially pertinent as they have been near the bottom of NHL attendance since 2014 (NHL, 2018).

Data for this study was part of a consulting project by the lead author and approved by University IRB. The first set of participants (n =178) were a Qualtrics panel of respondents residing within 20 miles of the arena, self-identified sport fans, and had never attended a game for the team under study. The second set of participants (n = 397) were non-returners based on Ticketmaster records and later self-reported in the survey. The respondents were representative of NHL attendees based on demographics (age, gender, and income; Sport Business Analytics, 2018) and were a valid sample of sport fans in the local city vicinity (margin of error of 4%).

Twelve constraint items were created by team management. Exploratory Factor Analysis extracted four constructs, Personal Interest (PI: Internal), Interpersonal Commitments (IC: Internal), Price (PRI: External), and Game Entertainment (ENT: External) that explained 65.8% of the total variance and showed acceptable internal reliability.

A logistic regression examining non-attendees and non-returners found an insignificant value (p = .723) of the -2 Log Likelihood and Hosmer, indicating that the model was a good fit to the data and all constructs were significant (p < .05). The results revealed that PRI (OR = 1.424) and ENT (OR = 1.624) were significant constraints for non-returners while PI (OR = .471) and IC (OR = .751) were more associated with non-attendees.

It is five to 25 times more expensive to acquire a new customer than to retain an existing one (Gallo, 2014), thus recognizing significant constraints helps with minimizing marketing costs. Our findings add to sport spectator constraint theory by showing how those who have not attended perceived significant internal constraints, while non-returners experienced significant external constraints. While both groups were non-consumers, their constraints to attendance were very different. Research (Pritchard, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009; Trail & Kim, 2011) has found that external constraints may be easier to overcome as they can changed or manipulated, therefore, non-returners may be the best to target with marketing efforts. Marketing strategy and implications will be discussed in the presentation.