An Examination of Box Office Relationship Quality and Relationship Selling in Division I College Athletics

James Weiner, University of Tampa
Chris Greenwell (Advisor), University of Louisville
Megan Shreffler (Advisor), University of Louisville

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College athletics departments have experienced unprecedented growth. However, expenses have risen even faster (Fulks, 2016), and university athletics departments have relied on increased subsidies from host institutions and donations to make ends meet (Fulks, 2016). Considering revenues from multimedia and broadcast contracts are usually locked in for many years (Sherman, 2016), ticket sales remain as one of the few controllable revenues a school may use to manipulate their bottom line and increase profitability.

Further investigation into box office sales trends are concerning. Attendance has flatlined or decreased in many Division I conferences (Kahn, 2018), and literature highlights inefficient box office operations as a possible cause (Bouchet et al., 2011). Research suggests improving relationship quality between the customer and the box office may yield positive outcomes (Smith & Roy, 2011). However, the degree to which relationship quality effects purchase behaviors is still unknown. While the business literature has highlighted the importance of relationship selling behaviors in services industries (Crosby et al., 1990; Avila & Inks, 2017) relationship selling effectiveness has not yet been examined in a sport context. Thus, the purpose of this study was to measure relationship quality and relationship selling techniques on consumer behavior in Division I college football.

The current study utilized a sample of 520 participants representing over 90 Division I FBS schools. Data were collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk and analyzed using a series of hierarchical linear regressions. Relationship quality was measured using the Sport Consumer Team Relationship Quality Scale developed by Kim et al., (2011) while relationship selling was measured using a modified version of Crosby et al.’s (1990) instrument, adapted to fit a sport context. To determine the effects of relationship-based practices on consumer behavior, interaction intensity, agent disclosure, customer disclosure, cooperative intentions, trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity were regressed against season ticket renewals, upsell intentions, add-on intentions, and cross-sell intentions. Results showed commitment and customer disclosure as the most predictive variables for football-related consumer behaviors (renewals, add-on, and upsell intentions), while trust, reciprocity, agent disclosure, and cooperative intentions significantly predicted the customer’s intentions to cross-sell to a sport other than football.

Findings suggest commitment resembles team identification in its ability to predict consumer behavior, and customer disclosure as an important variable in sales exchanges. Sales training should emphasize the fan’s commitment to increase the likelihood of “new” sales (add-on, upsell), and sales representatives should take care to find out as much about the customer as possible. Additionally, findings suggest cross-sell pitches should vary from football-specific sales, as the consumers behave differently to different aspects of relationship-based sales pitches in these situations. By leveraging findings regarding increasing relationship quality and relationship selling, athletics departments may be able to increase ticket sales and become more self-sufficient.