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Savannah Hockey Classic: An Evaluation of Event Personality and Economic Impact

by

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Abstract

In 2009, the Savannah Sports Council hosted its 11th annual Savannah Hockey Classic. In order to assist the future marketing of this event, a study was undertaken to assist the Savannah Sports Council in 3 major ways: (1) To obtain a consumer profile of spectators, (2) to explore the economic impact of the event on the city of Savannah, and (3) to discover the perceived personality of the event (assist in sponsor recruitment). To reach the objectives of the study, a survey was conducted with 267 spectators of the Savannah Hockey Classic. The survey consisted of four sections: (1) Economic impact (2) Consumer behavior & preferences, (3) Attitude and image perceptions of the event and organizing body, and (4) Consumer demographic characteristics. The majority of respondents were male (62%) and Caucasian (95%). While their average age was 36, 78% of respondents were between the ages of 25 to 59. Spectators tended to be educated (61% with a college degree of some sort) and affluent (63% earn > \$50,000). Just over half (56%) of the spectators traveled to Savannah to attend the event. Eighty-one of the eighty-three out-of-town respondents reported spending at least 1 night in Savannah. However, 50% of out-of-town respondents said they would have come to Savannah even if the Hockey Classic was not taking place. Eighty-two percent said they would be visiting Savannah at some point in the following 3 months. This suggests that while the Hockey Classic is a popular event, most of the visitors would travel to Savannah even if the event did not take place. Spectators appear to have developed very positive feelings about the Savannah Hockey Classic. On a 7-point scale, respondents reported the following scores on a variety of items: Gratitude toward the Savannah Sports Council for organizing the event was very high 6.5, attitude regarding the success and quality of the hockey event itself was 6.4, and fan identification with the event was reported at 6.1. With regard to the image/brand of the event, respondents perceive the Hockey Classic to be: An exciting event (6.4 out of 7), a sincere/wholesome event (6.3 out of 7), and a competent and successful event (6.3 out of 7).

Introduction

In the past, visitors to a new city or region traveled primarily for the purpose of exploring new scenery, cultures, religions, or for conducting various business ventures (Kotze, 2006). Today, tourists are adding another pleasurable component to their travel agendas - attending sporting events (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008). Moreover, sports enthusiasts are traveling to specific destinations to attend sporting events and scheduling tours or creating vacations around the athletic contests. Regardless of what attraction is at the center of their travel plans, more tourists today are spending time in sports stadiums, parks, and arenas for entertainment purposes while away from home (Kotze, 2006).

According to Shonk and Chelladurai (2008; Gibson, 1998a, p.49), sport tourism is defined as "leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical

activities, to watch physical activities, or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities," and it has become a \$27 billion per year industry in the United States. The Travel Industry Association estimated in 1998 that 38% of adults in the U.S. travel to sporting events each year. Today, that number is likely much higher. Due to the trend in increased sport tourism and the positive economic impact it has on local and regional economies, many cities have begun to place greater emphasis on generating sport-related travel (Kotze, 2006).

Savannah, Georgia, a popular tourist destination not typically recognized for its sports offerings, has slowly emerged as a sports town in Southeast Georgia. Rated as "One of America's Prettiest Towns" by Forbes Traveler and one of the "Top Ten Cities in the US and Canada" by Travel and Leisure Magazine in 2009 (<http://www.savannahvisit.com/media>), the coastal city attracts roughly 6.85 million visitors per year to Chatham County (Savannah Convention & Visitors Bureau, 2006). Tourism industries such as lodging, dining, entertainment, and

visitor-related transportation account for over \$2 billion in visitors' spending per year and employ over 17,000 people (Savannah Convention & Visitors Bureau, 2006). Savannah also boasts many sports entertainment options for visitors to this beautiful and historic area. The Greater Savannah Sports Council (GSSC) is an organization that seeks to increase sports activity and spending in the area by marketing and promoting many of the local sporting teams and events such as the Savannah Sand Gnats, Enmark Bridge Run, and Savannah Hockey Classic. The purpose of this study was to assist the Savannah Sports Council with their marketing and promotional efforts for the Savannah Hockey Classic (SHC). An evaluation of the event's personality and local economic impact was conducted in order to aid SHC event coordinators in creating future marketing strategies aimed at generating increased attendance and revenue via the sport tourism industry. The objective of the study was threefold: (1) To obtain a consumer profile of spectators, (2) to explore the economic impact of the event on the city of Savannah, and (3) to discover the perceived personality of the event (assist in sponsor recruitment).

Savannah Hockey Classic Background

In 2009, the Savannah Sports Council hosted its 11th annual Savannah Hockey Classic. The SHC has been a prominent winter event that has grown in size and popularity every year since its inception. Aside from the inaugural tournament, held in 1999, the four teams participating in the event have included the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, University of Florida, and Florida State University. Typically, the opening night of the tournament (Friday) showcases the conference rivalries with Georgia competing against Florida and Georgia Tech facing off against Florida State. The home state rivalries are saved for the second night (Saturday) of the event. The Georgia schools have experienced a great deal of success since the tournament's creation. Only in 2008 did one of the Florida schools win the SHC tournament (FSU).

According to WTOC11 (2010) in Savannah:

Twelve years this has been going on. And in each of those years, it has grown, including this year [2010] when a third night was added and two more teams brought in to further build on the rivalries that are the heart of the event. But now the Hockey Classic's growth is evident beyond Savannah, the event's identity at least partly responsible for the formation of a new league for SEC

teams, the Southeastern Collegiate Hockey Conference. "I think this tournament had a big impact because of the popularity of it," said SECCH commissioner Ken Day, who was part of the Hockey Classic for 11 years as a coach with Georgia Tech.

The SHC was held in January, 2009 at the Savannah Civic Center in the heart of downtown Savannah, Georgia. According to their website (Savannah Civic Center, 2010), the Savannah Civic Center is responsible for providing a wide spectrum of entertainment and cultural activities while also hosting conventions, exhibit shows, and social events. The Civic Center currently employs 20 full-time and more than 300 event labor staff. The venue plays host to approximately 900 events annually with a wide variety of entertainment experiences including: WWE & ECW Wrestling, Figure Skating Champions on Ice, Walt Disney on Ice, Ringling Brothers Circus, Best of Broadway Series, concerts and ballet. The Martin Luther King Arena has seating arrangements ranging from 3,500 to 9,600 while the Johnny Mercer Theatre seats 2,506, boasting one of the largest prosceniums in the Southeast. The SHC attracts roughly 10,000 spectators each year to the Savannah Civic Center (9,731 in 2009 and 10,290 in 2010, personal communication from Ben Wilder).

Literature Review

Economic Impact

From the practical standpoint of sport event management, organizers can be concerned with achieving several goals or objectives. From a financial perspective, weighing revenues against expenses can be a determining factor in measuring the success of any sport event. However, sport events can, and often do, contribute to a community from the broad perspectives of the local economy and marketing appeal (Ritchie, 2004). In fact, Eschenfelder and Li (2007) stated that local and regional sport commissions such as the GSSC generally serve one or more of the following three basic functions: (1) promote and support the sport industry in the designated area, (2) serve the sporting needs of the residents of the designated area, and/or (3) use sports to boost economic development in the region. As such, the GSSC states specifically in its mission statement that they "support a wide arrange of events that offer diverse opportunity to athletes of all ages and all sports; creating increased economic impact to the City of Savannah" (GSSC, 2010). The GSSC attempts to increase economic impact, which is defined as "the net

economic change in the incomes of host residents that results from spending attributed to a sport event or facility” (Howard & Crompton, p. 105), by playing a dual role of owning and managing several sporting events such as the SHC and the Savannah River Bridge Run, while continually seeking to attract additional location-revolving events.

Given the mission to have a positive impact on the local community through sporting events, it was important for the GSSC to expand their understanding of how many local and out-of-town fans were attending the SHC. Armed with such information, the GSSC could potentially alter marketing communication strategies. This knowledge may lead them to pursue corporate partnerships with those companies benefiting most from the sport tourists, or it may lead the GSSC to increase the reach of their communications to attract more travelers.

Event Personality

As businesses struggle to differentiate themselves in fiercely competitive markets and are forced to contend for the same consumer dollars, they rely heavily on the brand equity of their products and services to keep them financially viable. One way marketers have found to increase brand equity is to create and maintain a distinct brand personality for their products. “A distinctive brand personality can help to create a set of unique and favorable associations in consumer memory, and thus build and enhance brand equity” (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006, p.127). Brand personality is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997). This means that brands, through marketing communication and advertising activities, take on perceived personalities in the minds of consumers. Brands, much like people, are perceived as having certain descriptive characteristics like “reliable,” “fun,” “All-American,” or “conservative.” In Aaker’s (1997) study of consumer products, it was suggested that when individuals ascribe personality traits to brands that they fall into five overarching dimensions: 1) sincerity, 2) excitement, 3) competence, 4) sophistication, and 5) ruggedness. Marketers and advertisers purposefully attempt to humanize or anthropomorphize brands in order to help consumers relate more easily to them. When consumers view products and services like they would a friend or family member, they can more easily remember qualities about the brand and often develop stronger emotional ties to the product (Biel, 1993). Brand personality affects consumers in many different ways including how well they remember brands (Keller, 1993), their brand preferences, purchase

behaviors, and perceived images of the brands (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006).

It has been suggested that sporting events, like brands, may also take on human characteristics in the minds of consumers. Drawing from the Aaker (1997) definition of brand personality, it could be inferred that event personality would be the set of human characteristics associated with an event. According to Lee and Cho (2009, p.44), “the vast majority of sporting event personality is inferred from consumer’s vicarious interaction with players or their performances.” In the case of the SHC, the personality characteristics that fans ascribe to the event would likely come from their perceptions of the arena atmosphere, action during the hockey games, as well as player performances.

Sporting event organizers could benefit greatly from determining what type of “personality” their event holds in the minds of the consumers. Sporting events that solicit congruent, or matching, brand personalities to sponsor their activities may be more likely to produce positive overall results. According to recent research (Lee & Cho, 2009), event personality dimensions were related to attitudes toward the event, and ultimately, positive sponsorship evaluation of the sporting event and favorable evaluation of the brands sponsoring the sporting event. A major goal of the GSSC was to evaluate consumers’ perceptions of the SHC and determine which personality dimensions best described the tournament. Once an event personality was ascertained for the SHC, this information could be utilized for future sponsorship recruitment.

Methodology

A cross sectional, descriptive study was conducted at the 2009 Savannah Hockey Classic. To reach the objectives of the study, a convenience sample was collected from a population of 9,731 spectators over the course of the two-day tournament. Fifteen students from an undergraduate Sport Marketing course distributed surveys to willing participants inside the hockey arena as the games were being played. Three hundred surveys were distributed and 267 useable surveys were returned and recorded (124 on Friday and 143 on Saturday). Incentives (free tournament t-shirts and a chance to win four 2010 Savannah Hockey Classic VIP tickets) were used as a means to facilitate participation in the study. The data analyses conducted in this study were descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, and standard deviations.

The survey consisted of four sections: 1) economic impact, 2) consumer behavior & preferences, 3) attitude and image perceptions of the event and organizing body, and 4) consumer demographic characteristics. Some of the measures of the constructs were modified or adapted from previous studies through a review of the relevant literature. The questions measuring economic impact were selected from Howard and Crompton (2004). Items asking the fans to rate their consumer behavior and preferences were developed in conjunction with SHC organizers. Items relating to consumers' attitudes toward the event organizers were adapted from Quester and Thompson's (2001) study of sponsorship effectiveness, and items relating to consumers' event involvement were derived from Madrigal's (2001) study of the belief-attitude-intentions hierarchy. Brand personality measures were taken from the Aaker (1997) study of brand personality dimensions. Five demographic profile items measuring age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, and household income were placed at the end of the survey for a total of 29 survey items.

Findings

Consumer Profile

Results of the study were positive for the SHC and its constituents. A consumer demographic profile was created that could assist Classic organizers in future marketing efforts. Fans responding to the questionnaire regarding the SHC ranged from 14 to 69 years of age, were predominately male (62%), Caucasian (95%), well-educated and affluent. Most of the survey respondents claim to be hockey fans. Of the various reasons noted for attending the tournament, 71% listed hockey as the primary reason for watching, while the social scene (12%) and college affiliation (10%) were distant secondary & tertiary reasons for attending. Perhaps not surprisingly, Georgia (60%) and Georgia Tech (21%) fans outnumbered support from the neighboring state significantly with Florida at 10% and FSU at 9%. Even though visitors from the state of Florida were few, it may still be beneficial to market the tournament on the campuses of the two Florida schools. Ways in which this might be accomplished are discussed later in this section. Word-of-mouth advertising appeared to be the most significant source of learning about the SHC. Sixty-four percent of respondents claim to have learned about the event from friends. Television, newspaper, and radio advertising were also noted as sources of information respectively by 23%, 17%, and 11% of respondents. Fans used a variety of websites to

learn about the Classic without an apparent preference or web leader.

Economic Impact

The City of Savannah should look fondly on the Hockey Classic in terms of the economic impact it seems to have had on the local region. According to the survey, just over half (56%) of the spectators traveled to Savannah to attend the event. Attendees of the SHC traveled from as far north as Atlanta (5.2%) and as far south as Florida (2.2%). Most of the surrounding rural regions of Savannah were also represented including: Pooler (7.9%), Rincon (7.1%), Richmond Hill (6.7%), Hinesville (5.6%), and Statesboro (3.4%). Of these visitors, 98% reported spending at least one night in Savannah. Although we do not have data on how many of these visitors stayed in a hotel and how many did not, it is useful to note that spectators are staying overnight. In the future, the GSSC and the SHC may want to partner with local hotels to provide discounts to attendees of the event in order to entice more fans to stay in the Savannah area overnight. Fifty percent of out-of-town respondents, however, said they would have come to Savannah even if the Hockey Classic was not taking place. This statistic may sound grim for Classic organizers, but when combined with the fact that 98% of attendees stated they intended to return next year, this seems to be a moot issue. Additionally, Savannah is the closest metropolitan area to many of the rural visitors, and they likely spend weekends in the area for shopping, dining, and entertainment. Eighty-two percent of respondents said they would be visiting Savannah again at some point in the following three months. Once again, this reiterates that while the SHC is a popular event, most of the visitors would travel to Savannah even if the event did not take place. Just under half of the respondents (46%) reported attending the Classic for the first time, while the vast majority (98%) stated they intend to attend the event again next year. This is outstanding news for Classic organizers, as it indicates the satisfaction fans have with the tournament, and they should be commended on providing such a well-liked event. A notable and positive statistic resulting from the study was that visiting groups were comprised of almost six people and spent an average of two nights in the city. The tournament began on Friday night, however, because of the state rivalry game between University of Georgia and Georgia Tech, Saturday night's pairing was the big event. Forty percent of the respondents attended the hockey tournament only on Saturday night, while the remaining 60% was almost evenly split between

attending only Friday night (31%), or attending both nights (29%).

Consumer Behavior and Event Personality

As the organizing body of the SHC, the GSSC was interested in uncovering information regarding the attitudes and behaviors of spectators at the event. In particular, the GSSC sought to understand how the fans felt about the Hockey Classic overall as well as their feelings regarding the GSSC for organizing and promoting the event. Spectators appear to have developed very positive feelings about the SHC. On a 7-point scale, respondents reported the following scores on a variety of items: a) Gratitude toward the Savannah Sports Council for organizing the event was very high (6.5), b) attitude regarding the success and quality of the hockey event itself was 6.4, and c) fan identification with the event was reported at 6.1. With regard to the brand personality (image) of the event, respondents perceive the SHC to be: a) An exciting event (6.4 out of 7), b) a sincere/wholesome event (6.3 out of 7), and c) a competent and successful event (6.3 out of 7).

Conclusions

Overall, the results of the study appear to be extremely positive for the GSSC and the future of the SHC. With high retention rates (98% of the respondents stated an intention to attend the event again next year), it would be beneficial for the GSSC to gather contact information from attendees in the future. This could include, but not be limited to: 1) An independent direct mail campaign, 2) a direct collaboration with etix (the Savannah Civic Center's online ticket broker; this information will have already been gathered for those who purchased tickets online), and 3) a collaboration with respective athletic departments regarding donor and/or alumni databases. Collecting contact information would assist the SHC by allowing them to begin some database marketing efforts. Former attendees could be contacted in advance to remind them of tournament dates/times and provide discounts or incentives to purchase tickets early. For fans who buy tickets in advance, a player appearance event could be scheduled prior to the games for them to attend.

In a metropolitan area consisting of a diverse ethnic population, it is surprising to realize such a homogenous group of fans attending the tournament. Special efforts could be made to reach a wider variety of fans. A proactive group sales approach, wherein boys and

girls clubs, church groups, and other ethnic groups receive special group discounts would be favorable. Considering that respondents on average attended in groups of six, discounts should be considered to facilitate more group ticket purchases. Preferential seating could be implemented to encourage groups to book in advance. The arena has an upper and lower seating arrangement, so lower sections could be easily reserved for large groups; this would also make the atmosphere exciting if rink-side seats were full of large groups of fanatical hockey fans. Word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising has been the most effective method of disseminating information. This is potentially good news for the GSSC, as funds allocated for more expensive forms of communication could be reduced or possibly eliminated. Grassroots methods of marketing could be employed to increase word-of-mouth (WOM) communication and reach more diverse demographic groups of consumers. The GSSC could bring in members of the teams for autograph sessions at a local mall, schools, or the Civic Center during skating times the week before the tournament. These types of appearances and activities would not only create a "buzz" around the city leading up to the event, but would also generate positive publicity for the teams and organizers.

The timeline to communicate through local media needs to be expanded (should start toward the end of the holiday season). If more than half of the attendees are traveling to the event from out-of-town and staying overnight, they need to have additional time to plan their trip. Even locals who have more advanced notice of the hockey tournament may be more likely to purchase tickets and attend, than those who hear about it last-minute. A detailed, professional website should be developed as the key source of knowledge and information regarding the Savannah Hockey Classic. Currently, the site is very simplistic and does little more than post the dates/times of the games. The site could include schedules, roster information, tournament history, and photos/results from previous years. The website could also provide links to places in Savannah for lodging, food, and other entertainment for SHC visitors. A tournament website also provides a platform to communicate sponsor information. As the SHC generates more sponsor involvement, the website becomes another vehicle to communicate sponsorship affiliation and advertising messages. Lastly, a link to the Civic Center and etix so fans can purchase tickets easily, is another recommendation for the future website.

As more than half of the spectators surveyed traveled from out of town, this means certain local businesses stand to prosper from the event. Specifically, these traveling guests are in need of food and lodging services. The GSSC could approach such businesses to partner/sponsor the Hockey Classic. Benefits to the partners of this program could include exposure in printed programs, a website presence, official partner status, in-game PA announcements, opportunities to create and/or participate in in-game promotions, etc. Benefits to the GSSC would include increased marketing/promotion with the assistance of corporate partners, an enhanced image due to affiliation with successful local businesses, and most importantly, additional revenue streams to supplement ticket sales.

One way to add value for corporate partners and increase entertainment for spectators is to administer in-game promotions. Fans get a chance to show their enthusiasm for their teams, while sponsors have the opportunity to be recognized in a favorable environment. The GSSC could collaborate (outsource) with Grand Slam Marketing to develop and implement such in-game promotions. Students with Grand Slam Marketing are currently performing such activities with the Georgia Southern University baseball program and volunteer at numerous sporting events free of charge. As all four games are played during the evening hours, the GSSC can take advantage of the mid-day hours (especially on Saturday) to generate greater awareness of the Hockey Classic. Partnering with various city attractions or corporate partners, the GSSC could arrange for members of the hockey teams to be at various locations around the city participating in autograph signings and/or skills clinics for teaching younger children. The Savannah Civic Center hosts several other events “on ice” throughout the year. The GSSC may find it beneficial to promote the SHC to individuals and families who have purchased tickets to these events as well, by conducting a direct mail campaign or simply e-mailing a promotional message.

Previous research has demonstrated that event personality (image) and target market fit are two important factors influencing the success of corporate relationships (Lee & Cho, 2009). Sporting event organizers who have a true understanding of the personality dimensions which represent their event can more affectively recruit local sponsors who are marketing products with similar brand personalities. According to the study conducted by Lee and Cho (2007), sporting events with sponsoring brands

that demonstrated close personality fit generated positive evaluations from consumers with regard to the sponsorship of the event and the overall brands themselves. Therefore, our final recommendation to the GSSC would be to seek out businesses that are perceived to have a congruent personality with that of the SHC. The SHC was perceived by fans to be a sincere, competent, and exciting event. It was also attended mostly by affluent, middle-aged males. Therefore, it would be logical for the GSSC to solicit sponsorships from sincere, competent, and/or exciting companies or brands, specifically those that cater to a wealthy, male audience.

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