

## **Investigating the Influences on Attendance and Intention to Rejoin with Inaugural Members of a New Football Team**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the effects of factors like member satisfaction and social rituals on desirable outcomes such as attendance, intention to rejoin and merchandise sales. This study focuses on the inaugural members of a new team in Australia's A-League to gain insight into how loyalty develops amongst fans of new sporting organisations. The results show the importance to sports marketers of satisfying members and building ritual behaviour, as both are correlated with all of the positive outcomes investigated here.

### **Introduction**

Marketers of sports teams face an unusual situation. Their teams garner uncommonly high levels of loyalty from fans (Parker & Stuart, 1997), while they exert little influence over the core product (team performance). Perhaps the most important outcome for sports marketers is high attendance at games, as attendance directly and indirectly drives a substantial proportion of overall team revenue (Burton & Cornilles, 1998; Zhang, Smith, & Pease, 1996). Understanding the factors that contribute to attendance, therefore, is important to sports marketers, and perhaps doubly so for marketers of new teams. New teams face some obstacles already overcome by established teams, and they must compete with substitute forms of entertainment as well. This study investigates the factors that best predict attendance for members of a new team in Australia's A-League football (soccer) competition.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Social Rituals**

The roots of rituals lie in religion, yet rituals are pervasive in today's society, even secular Western society (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). Rituals perform many functions. Rituals can both transmit knowledge, and become a vehicle for gaining knowledge (Jennings, 1982), they promote social integration and sense of unity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; d' Aquili & Laughlin, 1975), and they can help build tradition and a sense of history as they are relatively resistant to change (Rappaport, 1996; Tambiah, 1996).

While research on ritual and society is plentiful, relatively little marketing research on ritual and sport has been performed. What sparse literature exists on sport and ritual is mostly concerned with sport in general being described as ritual (Birrell, 1981; Blanchard, 1988), or the ritual nature of individual sports such as karate (Donahue, 1993), triathlon (Granskog, 1993), baseball (Holt, 1992) or professional wrestling (Migliore, 1993). Other sporting related ritual articles focus on sports players and their superstitions (Bagnato, 1997; Bleak &

Frederick, 1998; Fischer, 1997; Todd & Brown, 2003), sport as a cultural phenomenon (Savant, 2003), or the ceremonies that surround sporting events such as the Olympic Games (MacAloon, 1996). These studies and reports are largely anthropological or sociological in nature, and do not consider marketing implications.

There are rich and diverse opportunities for spectators to perform rituals on game day. They can be group behaviours such as tailgating or singing the club song in chorus, or individual behaviours like praying for team success. Sports fan rituals can be complex like creating a large sign or banner to take to the game, or simple like wearing a lucky charm. This study incorporates the social rituals fans perform before or after the game such as going to the pub or dining with friends. Irwin, Sutton and McCarthy (2002) posit ritual as a driver of history/tradition, which in turn drives identification with the team. Muniz and O'Guinn (2002) have suggested that consumers who form "brand communities" with other consumers around a brand or organisation, play important roles in spreading information and building loyalty. Fans gathering pre or post game in a ritualistic way are a good example of brand community behaviour and though this social interaction and increased opportunity to exchange knowledge, could be expected to have higher levels of satisfaction and intention to rejoin.

## **Satisfaction**

In service industries, researchers would contend that satisfaction plays a role in determining re-purchase behaviour (Oliver, 1980). What role, if any, does satisfaction play in fans attending games? For example, is it important that fans are satisfied with the comfort of the stadium seats, or ticket refund policies, or even team performance? Oliver (1999) contends that while satisfaction and loyalty are linked, the relationship is asymmetric. While loyal customers are generally satisfied, satisfied customers are not always loyal.

Under Disconfirmation Theory, customer satisfaction can either be measured by comparing actual performance with expected performance (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver & Bearden, 1983; Oliver & Westbrook, 1982; Tse & Wilton, 1988), or by comparing actual performance with an ideal or norm (Tse & Wilton, 1988). A great example of managing expectations can be seen by observing fans of U.S. baseball's perennially underperforming team, the Chicago Cubs. The unofficial credo of Cubs fans is "Wait 'til next year!", (Bristow & Sebastian, 2001), a slogan that implicitly lowers expectations of having a winning record this year. If expectations are low, fans are less likely to be dissatisfied.

These expectations and evaluations of the performance are made across a number of different attributes (Oliva, Oliver, & MacMillan, 1992; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993). For example, in the sport industry, attendees rate the comfort of the stadium, the services provided to members, on-field performance, ticketing procedures and the quality of membership communications to name a few. These varied attributes have different levels of importance in the overall calculation of the level of satisfaction that customers experience with a service (Carmen, 1990).

Even though the results of sports studies on satisfaction and attendance are somewhat inconclusive, there is enough literature on satisfaction in other fields of marketing to suggest it weighs positively on purchase behaviour. For example, Hill and Green (2000) found that fans' perceptions of the sportscape (stadium environment) was a good predictor of attendance

at three Australian venues, but complicating the conclusions was the fact that different elements of the sportscape were significant in each situation. To increase fan satisfaction, research has shown that newer, more comfortable stadia help to attract larger audiences. Laverie and Arnett (2000) collected data from 190 college students in the United States. Their findings suggest identity salience (the importance of identifying with the team) is a stronger predictor of attendance at basketball games than satisfaction.

## New Teams

Whereas established teams have history, tradition and brand recognition, new teams potentially lack all of these. Some new teams are simply old teams relocated into a new market (e.g. the South Melbourne Swans of the AFL becoming the Sydney Swans), some new teams are amalgamations of older teams (e.g., the Brisbane Bears and the Fitzroy Lions merging to become the Brisbane Lions) and some are new altogether (e.g., the West Coast Eagles). In either of these situations, the marketers of these new teams may face a divided or non-existent membership base, disenfranchised supporters and potential branding problems.

Given these limitations, is it possible for supporters to form a strong psychological connection with their new team? Comparing the passion and commitment of members of new teams versus members of established teams may lead to interesting insights, but certainly members have an interest in affiliating with new teams. While investigating the season ticket holders of a new baseball team in the United States, researchers found not only was it possible for members to hold a strong psychological commitment, but that it was possible even before the new team commenced play in their new market (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002).

## Method

Data were collected in May 2006 via an embedded email questionnaire sent to 2785 members of a new football team in the A-League. The survey was conducted at the completion of the club's inaugural year of existence in what was also the A-League competition's inaugural year. Members had a two week period to return the questionnaire which generated a response rate of 41%, equalling 1142 completed questionnaires. Ritual data were collected by asking members what they usually did before or after a game, with the open text replies alter double-coded (see Table 1). Ritual participants were then dummy coded 0 if they did not participate in a pre or post-game ritual and 1 if they did. Satisfaction data were collected on a 0 – 10 point scale, with members asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their 2005 membership from poor to excellent.

**Table 1: Pre and Post game Ritual Behaviour**

	Ritual	Count	Percent
Pre-Game (n = 728, multiple answers possible)	travel from home*	66	7.1
	travel from work*	36	3.9
	travel not specified*	171	14.8
	Go for a drink/pub	306	32.8
	Go out to eat/dining	156	16.7
	Meet family/friends activities	185	19.8
	Gather team information (check newspaper, internet)	13	1.4
	Nothing specified*	414	

Post-Game (n = 945, multiple response possible)	go home by train*	27	2.8
	go home by car*	50	5.2
	go home (unspecified)*	549	57.5
	go out for drinks	311	32.6
	go out for food	106	11.1
	go out to meet friends	40	4.2
	listen to radio coverage of game	28	2.9
	Nothing specified*	197	

\* These activities were not classified as a “ritual”

The sample was 91% male, with 74.9% of respondents aged 39 or younger. The mean attendance among these members was 7.95 home games (out of 10) during the season while they travelled to only 0.41 away games. Most members (62.3%) arrived at least 30 minutes prior to kick-off, and a surprisingly high 14.6% had never attended a professional soccer game before the 2005 inaugural season. As with most new professional teams, the vast majority of members (95.5%) gave “following the local team” as their reason for choosing the club as their favourite team. Forty one percent of members sampled spent at least \$50 on club merchandise throughout the year. Forty nine percent of respondents reported participating in a pre-game ritual, and 28% participated in a post game ritual.

## Analysis and Results

**Table 2: Comparison of means between those involved in pre-game rituals and those not**

	PRE-GAME					
	No Ritual			Ritual		
	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Mean	N	Std. Dev.
Home games attended in 2005/06?*	7.50	587	3.00	8.43	559	2.54
Away games attended in 2005/06?***	0.36	578	1.15	0.47	553	1.10
Average merchandise expenditure*	1.73	589	1.18	1.89	559	1.17
Likelihood of Rejoining*	8.13	590	2.54	8.61	559	2.29
Overall Satisfaction	6.66	590	1.75	6.52	558	1.83
Overall Expectations (above or below)**	6.05	590	1.79	5.86	559	1.90
Likelihood of Increasing Membership level*	2.81	589	2.90	2.45	559	2.72

\* denotes significant at the 0.05 and \*\* denotes significant at the 0.1 level of probability

In summarising Table 2, it is clear that those involved in pre-game rituals, whilst no more satisfied overall, are more likely to attend, spend on merchandise and rejoin. Similar analysis for those involved in post-game rituals indicated that they also had significantly higher home and away game attendance and likelihood of increasing their membership level. Overall satisfaction, merchandise expenditure and likelihood of rejoining were the same as those who did not participate in post-game rituals. Looking at the correlations between these measures, we see a number of significant relationships (Table 3). There was a significant, but weak, relationship between overall satisfaction with the membership package and home game attendance ( $r = 0.12$ ). The relationship between involvement in pre game rituals and post game rituals is not as strong as may be expected (0.24), indicating that most did one or the other. Attendance at home games and overall satisfaction, as expected, are the strongest correlates of intention to rejoin.

**Table 3: Correlations between Rituals, Satisfaction, Rejoining and Attendance**

		Pre-game Ritual	Post-game Ritual	Home Game attendance	Overall Satisfaction	Rejoin
Pre-game Ritual	Pearson Correlation	1	0.24*	0.16*	-0.04	0.10*
	N	1151	1151	1146	1148	1149
Post-game Ritual	Pearson Correlation	0.24*	1	0.11*	-0.02	0.03
	N	1151	1151	1146	1148	1149
Home Game attendance	Pearson Correlation	0.16*	0.11*	1	0.12*	0.29*
	N	1146	1146	1146	1144	1146
Overall Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	-0.04	-0.02	0.12*	1	0.47*
	N	1148	1148	1144	1148	1147
Rejoin	Pearson Correlation	0.10*	0.03	0.29*	0.47*	1
	N	1149	1149	1146	1147	1149

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Discussion

New teams could be expected to have difficulties in building connections to their fans and developing long-term loyalty. In particular, the social bonds between fans, posited in past research to put pressure on fans to be loyal, could be expected to be slow to develop for a new team. Here, though, we see that the inaugural members of this new team are already heavily active in pre and post game rituals. This involvement in rituals is positively correlated with other positive business outcomes such as merchandise expenditure and game attendance. Involvement in rituals, however, does not directly effect satisfaction with the membership package (as examined here). This may be explained by the fact that these rituals are ad-hoc – established by the fans themselves independently of the team, and therefore not considered to be part of the “membership package”.

The results provide further support for the notion that brand communities play an important role in enhancing customer loyalty. This seems sensible as these ad-hoc groups add functional benefits to the experience of match-day (e.g., entertainment, information) but also add social pressure for members to attend regularly. Some of these groups are more organised than others. The “Blue and White brigade”, for example, is an informal Melbourne Victory “cheer squad” with over 70 members, its own website and unofficial merchandise. This study shows that sports marketers can build attendance and retain members by creating a satisfying membership package, and by fostering and facilitating social rituals for fans on game day. These brand communities and fan rituals, however, often arise in the absence of well organised and appropriate club-sponsored activities.

The benefit for new teams, in particular, in establishing a “home-base” for fans to gather around to raise the level of ritualistic behaviour before and after games are clear. Club support could range from simple, informal arrangements with hotels and restaurants near the match venue, through to creating an exclusive team venue. The correlations between rituals and positive business outcomes such as loyalty and greater game attendance, suggest it is a worthwhile consideration for the club.

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