

Marketing College Sports using a Segmented Game Plan

Lisa Spiller, lspiller@cnu.edu*

Dae-Hee Kim, daehee.kim@cnu.edu

Matthew Hettche, hettche@cnu.edu

Abstract

The success of most sport events is often measured by two distinct criteria: game statistics—win or lose; and ticket sales—the number of spectators and fans in attendance at the game. Relationship marketing has played an increasing role in the marketing strategies of sports organizations over the past few decades. This phenomenon has extended to college-level sports programs. Regardless of the division level, all college sports programs are eagerly embracing promotional activities that can create relationships with spectators and fans to fill their stands, stadiums, rinks, and arenas on a regular basis

This research explores the opportunity and importance of relationship marketing for college sports, overviews the literature currently available on sports marketing, and presents the findings of an exploratory empirical research study conducted for a Division III college sports team. Survey data was collected using a quota sampling method to ensure a cross representation of 600 students at a Division III school. The twofold purpose of the survey was to investigate what motivates students to attend college basketball games and how to increase the level of excitement at the game. Survey results yield insight on what types of segmented promotional strategies are likely to improve sports marketing programs and enhance relationships with spectators and fans at colleges and universities.

Fans and spectators of sports and athletics are perennially motivated to visit arenas, stadiums, fields and rinks to cheer on their favorite teams. However, recent years have posed a number of challenges for sport organizations, including a greater number of entertainment options and higher ticket prices.

At the collegiate level, a primary goal of athletic departments is to develop and support marketing initiatives that are conducive to the generation of revenue (Koesters, Brown & Grady, 2015). These revenue-generating activities may include broadcasting rights, multimedia rights, stadium concessions, corporate sponsorships, individual donations, merchandise sales, and ticket sales (Bouchet, Ballouli & Bennett, 2011).

As sports marketers compete for spectators' share of interest and share of wallet, they are quickly realizing that they must adopt a more segmented marketing approach as not all spectators and fans are alike. The bottom line is that attracting attendees to events on a regular basis is vital to the success of sports organizations. Sports marketers are now employing promotional strategies to maximize sport event attendance, build relationships with spectators, and convert spectators into fans in order to secure their future support. In fact, many researchers believe a paradigm shift has occurred in sports marketing, from a traditional exchange model to a relationship marketing model (Kim & Trail, 2011; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008).

Research in the area of sports marketing has been on the rise. Recent college sports marketing studies have concentrated on promotional activities to generate game attendance and cultivating relationships with sports fans, among other related topics.

Recent research explored the use of new team rivalries to both generate competitive enthusiasm and promote sporting event attendance (Hutchinson, Havard, Berg and Ryan, 2016). Peetz (2011) reports on the successful outcome of a student rewards program in marketing college sports. Dixon, Martinez and Martin (2015) examined the use of social media as a marketing strategy in college sports. In summary, there is much to be learned by extending the study of promotional activities of sports teams into an examination of which fans react to the various different types of media, offers and incentives.

Although relationship marketing is a well-researched subject in the general marketing discipline, its application to sports marketing is considerably sparse. The importance of building relationships between sport consumers and

sports organizations is greatly emphasized in both academia and practice (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012); however, there remains a lack of empirical research on the subject (Kim & Trail, 2011). One recent empirical study examined various constructs for enhancing relationships with fans of a college football team (Birim, Anitsal & Anitsal, 2016); while another investigated the effects of trust and commitment on perceived corporate social responsibility and donor behavior in college athletics (Ko, Rhee, Kim & Kim, 2014).

In conclusion, building, enhancing and maintaining good relationships with fans on a segmented basis is critical to the conduct of successful sports marketing activities. Future research on the subject of segmented relationship marketing is needed to shed light on the many variables that affect successful promotional strategies of sport organizations and effective engagement with their respective spectators and fans.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: College-level sport marketers should strive to utilize targeted offers, promotional appeals and communication messages to more effectively connect and resonate with specific student market segments. Empirical research on segmented relationship marketing

strategies can offer valuable insight regarding the use of specific event enhancements, promotional items, and contact preferences designed to increase the effectiveness of customized sports marketing activities.

Author Information:

Lisa Spiller is a Distinguished Professor of Marketing at Christopher Newport University.

Dae-Hee Kim is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Christopher Newport University

Matt Hettche is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Christopher Newport University.

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