

MAKING IT IN THE MINORS: AN INTEGRATED STRATEGY TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINED FINANCIAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

As competition for the entertainment dollar increases, sport managers must become increasingly aware of the intangibles associated with marketing the sport product as well as factors affecting fan retention and loyalty. While most major league teams can rely on revenue sharing and large television contracts to boost the bottom line, minor league teams must rely on season ticket sales, gate receipts, and sponsorship dollars. Thus, the purpose of this paper was to develop an integrated strategy for minor league franchises through identification and recognition of factors affecting sport consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

As competition for the entertainment dollar increases, sport managers must become increasingly aware of the intangibles associated with marketing the sport product as well as factors affecting fan retention and loyalty. While most major league teams can rely on revenue sharing and large television contracts to boost the bottom line, minor league teams must rely on season ticket sales, gate receipts, and sponsorship dollars. Although minor league sports constitute a significant and growing segment of the sport industry, little research exists in this area. Thus, the purpose of this paper was to develop an integrated strategy for minor league franchises through identification and recognition of factors affecting sport consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

A review of attendance figures spanning the last ten years at the minor league level indicate that

the large majority of franchises struggle each year to retain fans. Several teams experience attendance drops by as many as 1,000 fans while other teams see reductions as few as 25. In contrast to their major league counterparts, these figures pose dramatic threats to the sustained success of a minor league franchise. Ticket sales are the lifeblood of the minor league sport organization, and with an average ticket price of \$7 fan retention is of primary concern. As such, these franchises must develop an integrated marketing strategy that will not only attract fans to the venue but also provide a high quality fan experience, since it is often the quality of the experience that will determine if the fan becomes a repeat consumer.

Achieving sustained financial success at the minor league level poses unique and distinct challenges. To formulate the most effective strategies, sport managers must possess an awareness and understanding of the interrelationships of factors affecting fan loyalty at the minor league level. An assessment of purchase motivators as well as factors that may affect consumers' desire and

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ability to purchase the sport product should be paramount (Berry, Parasuraman, & Zeithaml, 1994). Oftentimes, it is consumers' expectations that determine their perception of the sport fan experience, which in turn determines their level of satisfaction. Since the intangibles associated with sport make it challenging for sport managers to identify consumer expectations, it is imperative that marketing strategies include a significant emphasis on customer satisfaction and fan identification with the sport entity (Arnett & Laverie, 2000; Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2000; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Kelley & Turley, 2001; Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003). Since satisfaction level and identification are major reinforcement tools for repeat purchasing, such a significant emphasis is warranted.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAN LOYALTY

To understand the benefits of an integrated approach to fan retention, one must first understand the importance of fan loyalty. Loyalty refers to an entity's ability to attract and retain customers and is grounded in consumer commitment to the sport product (Berry, 1999; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000). Most importantly, loyalty and commitment focus on the frequency, duration and intensity of an individual's involvement with sport and that individual's ability and desire to spend money, time, and energy on that involvement (Berry, 1999; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000). Nowhere is fan loyalty and commitment more important than at the minor league level where resources are often limited and lucrative broadcast opportunities are minimal.

Stimulating strong consumer loyalty is beneficial for sport entities because loyal customer bases provide protection against aggressive competitors and insure a consistent and predictable level of sales (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Madrigal, 1995; Shocker, Srivastava, & Ruekert, 1994). Loyal consumers typically spend more, refer new customers, and cost less to do business with than the average consumer (Boone, Kochunny, &

Wilkins, 1995; Kuo, Chang, & Cheng, 2004). A loyal fan base at the minor league level may also prove advantageous to management when soliciting, negotiating, and retaining local and regional corporate partners. Even when small in number, loyal fan bases can increase product sales and boost revenue for the corporate partner. Building strong and consistent corporate relationships provide additional revenue sources.

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

To achieve long-term success, minor league sport managers must focus on developing integrated marketing strategies that recognize the multi-faceted and unique nature of the sport product. Multiple factors have been suggested to affect fan loyalty including motives for attendance, the quality of the entertainment experience, fan satisfaction, and fan identification (Berry, 1999; Bristow & Sebastian, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002; Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2002; Kelley & Turley, 1999; Arnett & Laverie, 2000; Madrigal, 1995; Tomlinson, Buttle, & Moores, 1995; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003; & Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2002). These factors are examined here and used in formulation of seven-step integrated fan retention strategy specifically for minor league sport organizations. The seven steps suggest that minor league sport managers formulate core values, educate employees on service quality and organizational policies, communicate and encourage fan feedback, entertain and enhance service quality through the fan experience, reward loyalty, research consumption habits and patterns, and foster relationships with out-groups. The seven steps are designed to add value to the sport fan while ultimately leading to franchise stability and sustained financial health.

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DEVELOP A SET OF CORE VALUES

Researchers have consistently examined management's core values as key to success in business and industry, yet an exploration of the relationship between management's core values and the sustained success of sport organizations is virtually non-existent. It is suggested in this strategy that the core values of management and the infusion of those values among the organization's employees plays a central role in cultivating fan satisfaction, identification, and loyalty.

The core values of top level management often make the greatest impact on the culture and climate of the sport organization. The beliefs and philosophies of management set the tone for employee and customer relations and dictate the quality and meaning of those relationships. Further, trusting relationships between managers and employees have been linked to increased sales performance (Sallee and Flaherty, 2004). In service delivery organizations like the minor league sport franchise, these relationships will determine the sustained success of the organization (Berry, 1999). As such, management must value high level customer service as well as providing a quality experience for the fan (Kennet, Sneath, & Henson, 2001; Passikoff, 2000; Schiffman, 2003; Tomlinson, Buttle, & Moores, 1995). Although management cannot control on-field performance, it can dictate employee interaction with fans as well as the quality of the fan experience (Kelly & Turley, 2000). Failure to recognize the importance of values as influential on fan loyalty puts the sport organization at a disadvantage, especially at the minor league level where interaction with the fans is commonplace. Mike Veeck and his staff of the St. Paul Saints are guided by "fun is good" as a key core value. This value guides the staff when formulating short and long-term marketing strategies. Adhering to this core value has aided the franchise in maintaining profitability since its inception while selling out all home games (Berry, 1999).

EDUCATE EMPLOYEES REGARDING SERVICE QUALITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

Sport managers should place great emphasis regarding educating employees on the policies and procedures of the organization. In small sport organizations like the minor league franchise, all employees will at some point encounter the casual fan who attends one or two games a season as well as the loyal season ticket holder. These interactions can greatly impact the fan's experience and perception of the organization. Employees should be well-versed and trained in providing quality customer service to the fan. Quality customer service has proven highly influential in cultivating consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Berry, 1999; Ruyter, Bloemer, & Peeters, 1997; Tomlinson, Buttle, & Moores, 1995; Westerbeek & Shilbury, 2003).

It is beneficial for the sport organization to align its employee relation strategies with those strategies designed to attract and retain fans (Iverson, McLeod, & Erwin, 1996). An alignment of these strategies has proven advantageous for many service delivery organizations. A level of employee interaction that creates internal relationships and adds value to external relations with current and potential fans will provide a competitive advantage to the sport organization. Front office staff with the St. Paul Saints consistently expresses a love and passion for their jobs. The staff was allowed great freedom in developing strategies to sell tickets and enhance the entertainment value and experience for the fans. This freedom cultivated a sense of ownership among the staff and has created a fan-oriented team (Berry, 1999).

Management's focus on employee relations is warranted given that employee commitment and trust are predictors of organizational performance (Iverson, McLeod, & Erwin, 1996). Since fewer than 24% of employees plan to stay with an organization for more than two years, designing appropriate employee benefits and rewards systems to attract and retain employees are essential to creating a values-driven organization (Berry, 1999). It is imperative for sport managers to recognize the impact of employee retention on the productivity and sustained success of the organization not only in cultivating employee

relations but also during the hiring process. Hiring individuals who possess similar values to that of the organization and fit well within the current organizational culture will likely prove most profitable and rewarding.

COMMUNICATE AND ENCOURAGE FAN FEEDBACK

It is essential for minor league sport managers to communicate early and often with the casual fan and the more loyal season ticket holder. The casual fan who attends a few games each season and the season ticket holder will likely have different motives for attending the event and thus provide management with different feedback. Although the casual fan may not be as loyal as the season ticket holder, they are just as important. Casual fans represent individuals who are currently consuming the minor league sport product and as such represent an effective target market. Current consumers represent the most cost effective way to increase sales, and it has been suggested that fans who attend several games per season tend to be more satisfied and identified with the sport product and are typically easier to reach than fans who attend infrequently (Arnett & Laverie, 2000; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000). With feedback from the casual fans, management can increase their frequency and duration of consumption and in turn increase revenues. It is important to understand the attendance motivations and perceptions of the casual fan in order to formulate the appropriate strategies to not only retain them but to increase the frequency with which they consume the minor league sport product.

While the casual fan represents the most cost effective way to increase revenues, the season ticket holder's value is in their commitment to the minor league sport product. The manner in which the season ticket packages are serviced is integral in the renewal process and in cultivating loyalty. To encourage satisfaction among season ticket holders, packages should be value driven and provide unique benefits. Ticket sales staff should clearly communicate the benefits of the season ticket package to facilitate maximum value and to avoid any confusion regarding policies. Staff

should also develop relationships with season ticket holders in order to adequately address their needs. Channels of communication should be open early in the season and continue well into the renewal period.

Management should actively seek feedback from fans in all aspects of the event experience. Fan Service Booths should be available on site during the event, and fans should be encouraged to submit comments regarding their experience. In order to encourage fan feedback, sport managers should consider centralizing the fan service booth and place it in an area of high visibility. Fans should be directed to the fan service booth for general and specific questions or comments.

The respective team website should also serve as a primary area for gauging fan feedback. Teams should utilize the features of the website to encourage fan feedback through providing contact information and a message board. Management can often gauge fan opinion by simply reading the fan message board.

Management must be willing to encourage feedback, even when feedback is negative. When handled properly, consumer complaints can greatly benefit the organization. Negative feedback allows sport managers to understand why fans are not relating or are not satisfied with the sport product. This feedback should be used in improving the service quality of the fan experience. Complaints from fans should be viewed as avenues to increase satisfaction and cultivate loyalty (Davis & Halligan, 2002; Halstead, 2002). More than half of the consumers who share negative feedback with the organization will remain loyal. However, if this feedback is not communicated, fewer than 10% will continue to consume the product (Halstead, 2002; Neuborne, 2003). Sport managers should work to satisfy the complaints of fans given that complainers typically consume the product more frequently and if unsatisfied will generate significant negative word of mouth advertising (Halstead, 2002; Neuborne, 2003).

ENTERTAIN AND ENHANCE SERVICE QUALITY THROUGH THE FAN EXPERIENCE

Equally important as attracting fans to the venue is providing a high quality entertainment experience. The entertainment element of the sport product has been linked with satisfaction and repeat attendance (Zhang, Lam & Connaughton, 2003). Given this, minor league sport managers should develop marketing strategies to enhance the quality of the entertainment presentation. Pre and post game activities can add to the fan experience and enhance corporate partnerships as added pieces of inventory. Fan focused activities should be designed to cultivate a sense of identification with the minor league sport franchise since highly identified consumers tend to be more loyal to the sport product (Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Typically, service quality is categorized in two main areas, technical and functional with technical quality referring to the core service and functional referring to the quality of the service delivery (Gronroos, 1991; Kelley & Turley, 2000). As illustrated by Kelley & Turley (2001), sport managers possess minimal ability to control and influence technical quality of team performance but can have a great impact on functional quality in regards to the event experience. The functional quality of minor league sport involves the fan's perceptions of all facets of the event experience including accessibility to parking, pre and post game activities, arena and on-field promotions, concessions and merchandise, public address announcements and musical selections during the game, interaction with game operations staff, amenities of the venue, and other aspects of the event experience (Kelley & Turley, 2001; Westerbeek & Shilbury, 2003). Most of these aspects fall into Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan's (1996) "sportscape" and are suggested to add value to the fan's entertainment experience (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Church, Javitch, & Burke, 1995). The intimacy of minor league venues provides a unique opportunity for a heightened event experience. The Frisco RoughRiders implemented an internal strategy designed to add value to the entertainment experience by focusing on superior customer service with a personal touch. The

strategy highlighted the franchise's 100% access program allowing fans to make requests of the franchise via email. Requests have ranged from trips to the press box to providing "special guests" of fans with tours of the park and taking on-field pictures of fans for keepsakes. Staff estimates the 100% access strategy has positively influenced more than 20% of season ticket holders to renew their packages. Staff firmly believes that increasing the value of the ticket with a personal touch is essential in cultivating fan retention and loyalty (Migala, 2005a)

Ushers and event staff play a key role in the entertainment experience through their interactions with fans. Ushers and event staff should be easily identifiable, informative, and courteous. They should be active in maintaining proper crowd control and diligent in preventing fans from roaming to other sections of the venue. Roaming fans may obstruct views and detract from the experience.

In arena and on-field promotions should be designed for optimal enjoyment for fans. Promotions that at times involve the entire audience can generate a high level excitement among the crowd and enhance the experience for all attendees. Prizes and awards for promotions should meet quality standards and have value for the fan. If possible, awards should expose fans to various corporate partner products while also cultivating identification with the minor league sport product. For example, the Birmingham Barons partnered with a local plumbing company and distributed 1,500 plungers to fans. The plungers included the team's logo and the logo and phone number of the plumbing company (Lieberman, 2004). Similarly, the Memphis Redbirds and a home developer gave away a \$150,000 home at the end of its season (Lieberman, 2004). These promotions provided value for the fan while also creating a lasting link between the fan and the respective company's products and services.

REWARD LOYALTY

Minor league sport managers should strive to encourage repeat attendance through developing

reward systems for both the casual fan and the season ticket holder. Attendance of casual fans should be encouraged through utilization of a reward system based on number of games attended. Given that resources at the minor league level are limited, the sophistication of the reward system should be at management's discretion. A simple fan loyalty card may prove useful. Fan loyalty cards may allow fans to earn merchandise discounts or team merchandise and ultimately facilitate the expansion of management's database for marketing and research purposes.

When pitching the minor league sport product, marketers should focus on the benefits to the fan, especially when selling season tickets. Season ticket packages require a significant time commitment from the fan and should be created with appropriate incentives to warrant such a commitment. Season ticket holders are the most loyal and arguably the most highly identified with the respective minor league franchise. As such, they should be rewarded for their loyalty through the benefits provided in the package. Season ticket holders should be granted special access to certain areas of the venue as well as to selected franchise activities and events. Free or reserved parking, discounts on team merchandise, and special commemorative items also add benefit to season ticket packages. Given that season ticket holders represent a significant and constant revenue source for minor league franchises, special strategies should be developed to retain them. Benefits should include special parking, special access to certain areas in the venue, special access to franchise events, merchandise discounts, and other benefits which add value for the season ticket holder.

Management should work with its corporate partners when creating added value to the season ticket package and as an incentive for renewal. As part of their package, season ticket holders may enjoy trials or discounts on corporate partner products. This will create added value to the season ticket package while also driving sales for the corporate partner. While season tickets are included as inventory in most sponsorship

packages, incorporating the corporate partner's product as part of a comprehensive benefit package afford unique opportunities for the corporate partner while adding value for the season ticket holder. The Beloit Snappers open the VIP deck to season ticket holders toward the end of each season. Season ticket holders enjoy free food and drink as well as premium giveaways from corporate partners. Similarly, the Macon Knights invite season ticket holders to pre-game scrimmages via a media release. Knights' corporate partners cater the event and season ticket holders are allowed to pick up their season tickets while socializing with friends and players (Migala, 2005c).

When designing season ticket packages, management should seek to provide benefits that will not only increase the value of the package but will also create a sense of identification with the minor league sport product. This could include a weekly online season ticket holder newsletter which incorporates feature articles on players, staff, and coaches as well as highlights of franchise activities within the community to provide season ticket holders with a feel for the organization. Increasing fans' exposure to the franchise assists in promoting fan identify to the minor league sport product (Arnett & Laverie, 2000). The Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins implemented a phone system with the explicit purpose of programming the database to increase interactivity with their fans. The franchise will call fans and leave them messages from front office personnel and players to notify them of schedule changes, game cancellations or to simply wish them happy birthdays or a happy holiday (Migala 2005d).

Although season ticket packages at the minor league level are priced significantly lower than at the major league level, payment options for season ticket packages should be considered. While most season ticket packages are affordable, many fans may be deterred from purchasing season tickets due to financial constraints. Minor league sport managers may generate greater season ticket sales by allowing season ticket holders to make a series of payments prior to the season. In turn,

incentives should be developed to encourage payment in full at the time of purchase. Some minor league franchises have also implemented multi-year plans for season ticket holders. The Grand Rapids Griffins have renewed 43% of its season ticket base to multi-year season ticket packages. Griffins management views this as an integral reward strategy for its most loyal and valuable customers (Migala, 2005b).

Season ticket holders should also be provided with an opportunity to either exchange or donate individual game tickets when unable to attend various games throughout the season. The inability to attend one or two games per season is not unusual for a season ticket holder but could provide them with an incentive to not renew their season ticket package. Minor league sport managers should recognize this and develop a means to add value to the season ticket package. Examples of adding value include permitting season ticket holders to submit unused tickets prior to game day that can be donated to charitable organizations or to exchange the tickets for additional tickets to another game.

Minor league sport managers should provide multiple opportunities to cultivate social relationships among season ticket holders (Melnick, 1993). The sport venue provides an appropriate setting for casual socialization among fans which enhances the fan experience (Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003). The opportunity to socialize will create a fun and rewarding environment for season ticket holders and provide them with a sense of fanship and psychic income.

BUILD DATABASES AND CONDUCT RESEARCH

Since ticket sales are the lifeblood of the minor league franchise, databases are paramount to its success. Sport managers are at a distinct advantage when building databases. Oftentimes, fans will contact the organization via telephone or the franchise web-site to obtain information regarding game time or opponent and in doing so are identifying themselves as fans of the franchise. Minor league sport managers should recognize this and facilitate the acquisition of the fan's

contact information. Team personnel should be creative and capitalize on multiple opportunities when building their databases. Examples include cross-promotional activities with corporate partners and the acquisition of contact information from fans who win prizes through game promotions.

Databases must be well maintained, comprehensive, and conducive to conducting research. The minor league sport manager should not overlook the value of fan research. Even the results of a simple fan survey may help the franchise improve the experience for the fan. Minor league sport managers should know the demographic breakdown of the fan base and strive to obtain baseline figures on fan satisfaction and identification with the franchise. Databases should also be used as a research tool to track the consumption habits of fans. Fans attending several games per season may be targeted for mini season ticket packages while season ticket holders may be encouraged to "refer a friend" or increase expenditures of merchandise and souvenir items. This type of research and information will assist the franchise in developing more appropriate marketing strategies and prove advantageous when negotiating corporate partnerships.

FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUT-GROUPS

Minor league sport managers should strive to foster positive relationships with members of the media as well as members of their respective communities. The media's perception of the minor league sport organization is often the public's perception since the media create and reinforce images within the local, regional, and national communities (Wenner, 1998). Minor league sport managers should be well-versed in media relations and communicate in a timely manner with the media. Fostering positive relationships with the media will prove beneficial to the minor league sport entity in creating a sense of identification to the franchise (Funk, 2002; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003).

Cultivating relationships with members of the business community will prove beneficial when

developing community oriented programs as well as when negotiating corporate partnerships. Franchises should engage in mutually advantageous partnerships with members of the business community (Kolbe & James, 2000; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003). This assists in encouraging positive word of mouth and in marketing the franchise to business leaders as well as the public. Strong relationships with the business community will facilitate opportunities for the franchise to be highly visible and to solidify corporate partner activities. In the small markets that host minor league franchises, relationships such as these must not be overlooked or undervalued.

CONCLUSION

Achieving sustained financial success at the minor league level poses unique and distinct challenges to sport managers. To formulate effective strategies, sport managers must possess an awareness and understanding of the interrelationships of factors affecting fan commitment and loyalty at the minor league level. The purpose of this paper was to develop an integrated strategy for minor league franchises through identification and recognition of factors affecting sport consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

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