

Are Fans and NBA Marketing Directors on the Same Page? A Comparison of Value of Marketing Techniques

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Abstract

NBA teams use a variety of marketing techniques to try to increase game attendance. However, few research studies have compared their effectiveness. More importantly, no study to date has compared the perceptions of NBA marketing directors and ticket holders with regard to currently used marketing techniques. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to determine whether the marketing techniques that NBA marketing directors viewed as valuable and useful were viewed in a similar fashion by attendees at NBA games. A questionnaire containing the 20 most used marketing techniques—based on items by Dick and Sack (2003)—was completed by all NBA directors of marketing ($n = 29$) and by randomly selected ticket holders ($n = 200$) at two separate NBA games. Results of the study showed that NBA marketing directors and ticket holders significantly disagreed on the effectiveness of 15 of the 20 marketing techniques examined, with the directors rating each of the 15 higher than the ticket holders.

Are Fans and NBA Marketing Directors on the Same Page? A Comparison of Value of Marketing Techniques

Due to increasing competition within the entertainment industry (including sports entertainment), professional sports teams are using a variety of marketing techniques to increase home game attendance (Burton & Cornilles, 1998). While there are many contracted fixed revenue streams for these professional sports

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“Although NBA teams are spending more than \$1 million a year in marketing their product to potential fans and ... until recently, NBA marketing directors have continued to value and use techniques similar to those used almost 30 years ago ... These techniques may now be obsolete, and although some marketers have tried new techniques, no one has thoroughly assessed whether they work.”

teams (e.g., television and radio), tickets sales for most NBA basketball organizations are a variable source of income that can be affected by marketing techniques. More importantly, the size of the crowd will directly determine other revenue streams such as parking, concessions, merchandise sales, and the value of sponsorship signage. Because the size of the crowd is important to the NBA (and other sport organizations), sport marketers must have a full understanding of marketing strategies used to attract that crowd

The importance of sport marketing in general, and NBA marketing in particular, was highlighted through the works of Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2000), Schlossberg (1996), and Spoelstra (1997). According to Mullin et al., the NBA evolved into the envy of all professional sports leagues in the world. Under the leadership of David Stern, commissioner of the NBA, the league's marketing efforts expanded greatly. Schlossberg explained in detail the NBA marketing plan, which included sponsorship deals, promoting star players, and globalization of the league. Finally, Spoelstra (1993) identified a number of other marketing strategies and techniques successfully utilized by the NBA, including various game plans, the escalator theory, name capture, music concerts, theme evenings, and exchange games. Marketing techniques that were successful for an individual NBA team soon became the standard league-wide.

Although NBA teams are spending more than \$1 million a year in marketing their product to potential fans and spectators (J. Van Stone, personal communication, June 12, 2005), until recently, NBA marketing directors have continued to value and use techniques

similar to those used almost 30 years ago by the “grandfather” of sport marketing, Bill Veeck, former owner of the Chicago White Sox. These techniques may now be obsolete, and although some marketers have tried new techniques, no one has thoroughly assessed whether they work.

Mawson and Coan (1994) found that NBA marketers thought that various techniques were valuable in engendering attendance. These authors surveyed 22 NBA marketing directors using the Marketing Technique Questionnaire (MTQ) model from the Hambleton (1987) study, an instrument that included 21 marketing techniques. In their study, Mawson and Coan examined a) the 1988-1989 NBA home season attendance records; b) the priority ranking of the marketing techniques for all NBA teams; c) the priority ranking of marketing techniques for NBA teams with high attendance; and d) the priority ranking of marketing techniques for NBA teams with low attendance. The authors had each NBA marketing director rank the strategies in their perceived effectiveness by using a five-point Likert scale. The only significant difference between the high and low attendance groups was newspaper advertising and strategic planning (both had higher means for low attendance teams).

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In a follow-up and extension of the Mawson and Coan (1994) research, Dick and Sack (2003) surveyed NBA marketing directors during the 1997-98 season. Examining the same 21 techniques as Mawson and Coan, Dick and Sack found significant differences in the perceived effectiveness of eight techniques. Interestingly, the top three items from Mawson and Coan (television advertising, pricing strategy, and radio advertising) were only ranked 10th, 13th, and 17th respectively in Dick and Sack. In addition to examining the 21 items from Mawson and Coan, Dick and Sack asked the marketing directors to add currently used techniques that were not previously listed, resulting in an additional 33 techniques. The authors then mailed these 54 items to the NBA marketing directors, again asking them to rate the effectiveness of each technique. The top two items from this second mailing (group ticket sales and community service projects) were not on the original 21 items from Mawson and Coan. Furthermore, 11 new items were listed in the 25 highest ranking techniques.

Although valuable, the above research still does not determine whether attendees see any relevance in advertising and promotions. There has been some research that examines these elements to some extent. Hill, Madura, and Zuber (1982) and Siegfried and Eisenberg (1980) have included promotional strategies as independent variables affecting attendance, concluding that promotions do have an impact. In two separate studies on the effect of promotions on Major League Baseball attendance (MLB), McDonald and Rascher (2000) found that promotions increased single-game attendance by 14%, while Boyd and Krehbiel (2003) determined promotions increased attendance by 19.6%. In addition, they found that increasing the number of promotions had a negative effect on the marginal impact of each promotion. Examining advertising techniques (television, radio, newspaper, and billboards), Fink, Trail, and Anderson (2002) found that these techniques had little, if any, effect on NCAA men’s and women’s basketball attendance.

Although we know which marketing techniques are preferred by NBA marketers (based on Dick & Sack, 2003), and we know attendees are influenced by promotions and advertising (Hill et al., 1982; Siegfried & Eisenberg, 1980), no one to date has attempted to compare the views of the two groups. From a practical standpoint, if NBA marketing directors are using techniques that spectators feel are ineffective in increasing their desire to attend games, teams are not optimizing their marketing resources. Furthermore, misconceptions by marketing directors could cause their team to not fully realize its revenue potential. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine if the marketing techniques that NBA marketing directors viewed as valuable and useful were viewed in a similar manner by attendees at NBA games.

Method

In order to determine the best marketing techniques used during the 2003-2004 NBA season, an expert panel of five individuals in the area of sports sales and marketing was asked to examine the 54 marketing techniques that were used in the Dick and Sack (2003) article. The subjects that were chosen because of their expertise were: John Nash, general manager of the Portland Trail Blazers; Jim Kahler, former vice president of the Cleveland Cavaliers and Rockers; Pat Williams, vice president of the Orlando Magic; Jim Van Stone, vice president of sales for the Phoenix Coyotes; and Scott Loft, executive director of sales and marketing for the Jacksonville Jaguars. All five members of the panel agreed that there was some confusion and duplication of the 54 marketing techniques. As a result, the panel fine-tuned the list down to 20.

Table 1.
Demographic Profile of Ticket Holders

| | | N | % |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|-------|
| Gender (<i>n</i> = 193) | Male | 130 | 67.4% |
| | Female | 63 | 32.6% |
| Age (<i>n</i> = 196) | 14-20 years old | 48 | 24.5% |
| | 21-29 years old | 40 | 20.4% |
| | 30-39 years old | 27 | 13.8% |
| | 40-49 years old | 52 | 26.5% |
| | 50-59 years old | 20 | 10.2% |
| | 60+ years old | 9 | 4.6% |
| Ethnicity (<i>n</i> = 199) | African-American | 37 | 18.6% |
| | Caucasian | 134 | 67.3% |
| | Hispanic | 14 | 7.0% |
| | Other | 14 | 7.0% |
| Household Income (<i>n</i> = 186) | < \$30,000 | 28 | 15.1% |
| | \$30,001 - \$49,999 | 27 | 14.5% |
| | \$50,000 - \$74,999 | 26 | 14.0% |
| | \$75,000 - \$99,999 | 23 | 12.4% |
| | \$100,000 - \$149,999 | 42 | 22.6% |
| | \$150,000 - \$199,999 | 18 | 9.7% |
| | \$200,000+ | 22 | 11.8% |
| Educational Level (<i>n</i> = 200) | < HS Degree | 28 | 14.0% |
| | HS Degree | 82 | 41.0% |
| | College Degree | 48 | 24.0% |
| | Graduate Degree | 42 | 21.0% |

These 20 techniques were sent to the NBA marketing directors who were asked to rate each one on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very ineffective to 5 = very effective) in terms of the effectiveness of each technique in increasing NBA home game attendance. The response rate was 100%, with all 29 NBA teams responding (the Charlotte Bobcats were not in the NBA during data collection). All of the panelists agreed that each used these 20 techniques to increase home game attendance at NBA games to some extent.

To ensure reliability, the instrument was pilot tested with a group of undergraduate students at a university near the NBA team used in this study. These students were asked to comment on the clarity of the instrument and to make suggestions when items were unclear.

Data was then collected from attendees at two separate home games of an NBA team. This team played in a larger market and had been near the top of NBA attendance leaders for the past several seasons.

Research assistants randomly handed out questionnaires to every 25th person entering the door at five separate entrances throughout the arena. In addition to asking about the perceptions of the 20 marketing techniques, demographic questions (i.e., age, income, ethnicity, gender, and educational level; see Table 1) were asked. Of the 250 NBA questionnaires distributed, 200 usable questionnaires were returned, for a return rate of 80%.

Because the primary purpose of this paper was to determine differences in perceptions of marketing techniques between NBA directors of marketing and ticket holders, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the data. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), MANOVAs are more advantageous than running separate ANOVAs when there are several dependent variables (in our case, the 20 marketing techniques) that are likely correlated. Using MANOVAs helps control familywise Type I errors.

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if there were significant differences in the perceived importance of marketing techniques between the ticket holders at NBA games and directors of marketing. Using a MANOVA with the 20 marketing techniques examined in this study as the dependent variable, ticket holders and directors of marketing significantly disagreed on the importance of 15 of these techniques (see Table 2; listed in descending order based on the *F*-statistic): a) telemarketing with up selling, $F(1, 228) = 45.196, p < .001$; b) select a target market with a strategic and marketing research plan, $F(1, 228) = 36.947, p < .001$; c) face to face meeting with business sponsorships and corporate ticket programs, $F(1, 228) =$

25.908, $p < .001$; d) referrals and word of mouth, $F(1, 228) = 24.026, p < .001$; e) mini-packs (partial season ticket plans), $F(1, 228) = 21.260, p < .001$; f) e-mail offers via the internet and website, $F(1, 228) = 18.648, p < .001$; g) implement good public relations, $F(1, 228) = 16.060, p < .001$; h) grassroots marketing with community service projects, $F(1, 228) = 15.919, p < .001$; i) group sales with discounted pricing strategies (i.e., fundraisers), $F(1, 228) = 14.374, p < .001$; j) civic groups, $F(1, 228) = 12.918, p < .001$; k) employee incentives with theme nights, $F(1, 228) = 9.427, p = .002$; l) direct mail, $F(1, 228) = 7.435, p = .007$; m) newspaper advertising, $F(1, 228) = 5.400, p = .021$; n) in-arena messages and public address announcements, $F(1, 228) = 5.145, p = .024$; and o) preliminary and

Table 2.
Differences in Perceptions of Importance of Marketing Techniques between Spectators and NBA Marketing Directors

| Marketing Technique | Ticket Holders (<i>n</i> = 200) | | Marketing Directors (<i>n</i> = 29) | | F |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------|---|-------------|-----------|
| | Rank | Mean (SD) | Rank | Mean (SD) | |
| Promotional premium or giveaway items at the door | 1 | 4.01 (1.16) | 13 | 3.79 (1.01) | 0.924 |
| Promoting star players on all NBA teams | 2 | 3.75 (1.21) | 10 | 4.03 (.68) | 1.518 |
| Group sales with discounted pricing strategies (e.g., fundraisers) | 3 | 3.60 (1.36) | 3 | 4.59 (.83) | 14.374*** |
| Implement good public relations | 4^ | 3.58 (1.14) | 4 | 4.45 (.69) | 16.060*** |
| Mini packs (partial season ticket plans) | 5 | 3.58 (1.20) | 1 | 4.62 (.56) | 21.260*** |
| Radio advertising | 6 | 3.44 (1.21) | 15 | 3.69 (1.00) | 1.160 |
| Newspaper advertising | 7 | 3.35 (1.24) | 12 | 3.90 (.82) | 5.400* |
| E-mail offer via internet and website | 8 | 3.33 (1.28) | 6 | 4.38 (.78) | 18.648*** |
| Direct mail | 9 | 3.31 (1.26) | 11 | 3.97 (.87) | 7.435** |
| Referrals and word of mouth | 10 | 3.29 (1.21) | 2 | 4.41 (.63) | 24.026*** |
| Outdoor advertising (e.g., billboards) | 11 | 3.20 (1.33) | 18 | 3.38 (1.05) | 0.483 |
| Grassroot marketing with community service projects | 12 | 3.16 (1.24) | 9 | 4.10 (.86) | 15.919*** |
| Face to face meetings with business sponsorships and corporate ticket programs | 13 | 3.15 (1.16) | 8 | 4.28 (.75) | 25.908*** |
| Preliminary and post-game special events (i.e., games and tailgating) | 14 | 3.11 (1.32) | 16 | 3.66 (.77) | 4.763* |
| Select a target market with a strategic and marketing research plan | 15 | 3.08 (1.15) | 5 | 4.41 (.78) | 36.947*** |
| Employee incentives with theme nights | 16 | 3.00 (1.23) | 14 | 3.72 (.84) | 9.427** |
| Booster and special membership clubs | 17 | 2.94 (1.29) | 20 | 3.14 (1.06) | 0.624 |
| In-arena messages and public address announcements | 18 | 2.80 (1.15) | 19 | 3.31 (1.11) | 5.145* |
| Civic groups such as Rotary club, Chamber of Commerce, and local leaders | 19 | 2.65 (1.24) | 17 | 3.52 (1.06) | 12.918*** |
| Telemarketing with up-selling | 20 | 2.61 (1.31) | 7 | 4.31 (.93) | 45.196*** |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Means with smaller standard deviations ranked higher when there was a tie.

post-game special events (i.e., games and tailgating), $F(1, 228) = 4.763, p = .030$.). Furthermore, directors of marketing rated each of the preceding techniques higher than ticket holders.

The discrepancy in rankings between marketing directors and ticket holders should also be noted. While the lowest rated item by directors of marketing (booster and special membership clubs) had a mean score of 3.14 ($SD = 1.06$), ticket holders had seven items below this mean score. Similarly, the highest rated item for ticket holders (promotional premium or give away items at the door) had a mean score of 4.01 ($SD = 1.16$); directors of marketing had 10 techniques above this mean score. Finally, the lowest rated item for ticket holders (telemarketing with up selling) was rated as the 7th most effective technique by marketing directors. Conversely, the highest rated item for ticket holders (promotional premium or give away items at the door) was only rated 13th by the directors.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of the top 20 marketing techniques used by NBA marketing directors and to compare them with the perceptions of NBA ticket holders. Overall, marketers perceived marketing techniques to be more effective than consumers. As an example, an interesting finding from this study dealt with telemarketing and up selling; this marketing technique showed the greatest difference between the directors and ticket holders. Ticket holders rated telemarketing and up selling as the least effective technique, while the directors rated it the 7th most effective technique. When asked about this discrepancy, Scott Loft, executive director of the Jacksonville Jaguars, stated, "Despite the fact that many consumers from many industries say they don't like telemarketing, it is one of the few techniques that can be measured as a technique" (personal communication, June 12, 2005). This opinion is congruent to the findings of Sweeney (2004), who concluded that telemarketing is still the most cost-effective method to reach and sell to consumers, with Americans spending \$654 billion purchasing goods in services over the telephone in 2003. One possible reason (as suggested by Loft) that teams still use telemarketing is they can calculate concrete numbers for their return on investment (ROI). Marketers may feel they have to justify spending money on their marketing techniques; telemarketing is one of the few techniques where results can be quantified and reported to the directors' supervisors. However, with ticket holders strongly questioning the effectiveness of this technique, teams should attempt to develop new methods of measuring ROI on techniques tickets holders felt were more effective. Although

beyond the scope of the current study, another reason for the discrepancy regarding telemarketing could be that ticket holders just do not like the technique (regardless of its effectiveness) based on prior experiences with other companies. Respondents could have felt that by rating telemarketing ineffective on the questionnaire, teams would not call them in the future.

Although there was no statistical difference in the perceived effectiveness of premiums and giveaways, ticket holders ranked this technique the highest, while NBA marketers ranked it as the 13th most effective technique. As with telemarketing, it again appears to be an issue with ROI. According to Jim Van Stone, vice president of sales for the Phoenix Coyotes and former vice president of sales for the Philadelphia 76ers and Cleveland Cavaliers, "A premium giveaway item is effective for individual and group sales, but there are some real costs involved with the item" (personal communication, June 12, 2005). However, teams might be underestimating the potential gains in attendance by using premiums and giveaways. Research on MLB showed that games with giveaways increased attendance 21.9% over those without giveaways (Boyd & Krehbiel, 2003). While cost the cost of premiums and give aways must be considered, based on the perceptions of ticket holders, teams should work hard at securing sponsorships to have as many "giveaway nights" as possible.

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Similar to the previous possible explanation as to why telemarketing was rated so ineffective, it could be that ticket holders rated this item high because they like the idea (of receiving free items) regardless of the technique's effectiveness in increasing the number of games they attend. Additionally, they may feel that it is in their best interest to rate this item as the most effective technique because it may lead their team to start giving away more items at games.

Suggestions for Sport Marketers

Overall, the findings from this study suggest NBA marketing directors should re-evaluate the techniques they currently use to increase attendance. Specifically, NBA teams might be using resources on techniques that ticket holders feel are not effective. Traditional techniques such as newspaper advertising and direct mailings can be very expensive for teams; with the concern for ROI, resources would be better spent on radio and

outdoor advertising (because ticket holders rated their effectiveness the same as marketing directors). Even a “free” technique, such as word-of-mouth advertising, can be depended upon too heavily by marketing directors; they rated the technique as the 2nd most effective, while ticket holders felt it was significantly less effective, rating it 10th.

While NBA marketing directors were asked to give their perceptions of effectiveness in this study, they were not asked the extent to which they still used the 20 techniques (i.e., they might perceive a technique as effective but might not have used it in their current position). A complete examination of the prevalence of each of these techniques should be undertaken by each marketing director, with an analysis (to the greatest extent possible) of the effect each one has on actual game attendance. For the techniques that they use frequently, marketers should look at changing the perceptions of ticket holders, especially those rated low by ticket holders. Although respondents may be aware of a technique, they may not fully realize all of the benefits that the technique provides. For example, marketing directors rated partial season plans as the best technique; ticket holders rated it significantly higher. The ticket holders probably know the basics of partial plans (i.e., they can purchase a partial plan and get tickets to 5, 10, or 20 games), but may fail to recognize that they could also receive discounts on each ticket purchased, giveaways for buying a plan, priority to purchase playoff and future season tickets, and/or priority parking as part of the plan. Marketers need to make sure they educate potential ticket purchasers on the advantages they could receive for each technique that their team uses.

NBA marketing directors could also look at combining some of the techniques in this study. For example, both ticket holders and the directors agreed that promoting star players was an effective technique. Teams could devise a partial season ticket plan that included games against NBA All-Star players from the previous season, or games against members of the Olympic or World Championship teams. Marketers could also take advantage of the perceived effectiveness of radio advertisements by promoting and explaining some of the other techniques that they use (e.g., group sales, mini plans, and grassroots marketing efforts).

Finally, marketing directors should extend the scope of this study. While this study examined ticket holders at an NBA game and could be useful for retaining current users, directors of marketing should also try to secure information from those who have never attended an NBA game (or, at a minimum, those who have not attended a game in a few years) to see if similar discrepancies exist. Those already in attendance could

have very different perceptions of marketing techniques than those of non-attendees. In fact, it is possible that ticket holders could attend games “in spite of” a team’s marketing efforts. Their desire to attend NBA games could bias their perceptions of the techniques used in this study (i.e., they could have rated items low because the techniques did not increase their desire to attend). Teams could survey former ticket holders and set up community intercepts or focus groups to gather perceptions of non-attendees. This information could be invaluable in attracting new customers.

Limitations/Future Research

The major limitation of this study was that only spectators from one NBA arena were surveyed. Spectators from other NBA arenas might be different than those in this study. In addition, questionnaires were collected at only two early season home games. Several factors (home team standing, opponent played, weather, etc.) could have affected the type of spectators attending these particular games, thus influencing the results of this study. Future studies should examine spectators at multiple arenas on multiple dates during the season. Finally, as mentioned above, the perceptions of non-attendees should be examined to determine if similar discrepancies exist between marketing directors.

While this study exposed differences between NBA marketing directors and spectators, future research should look at why these differences exist, and especially why marketing directors generally rated specific techniques higher. Of particular interest was the large discrepancy between marketing directors and ticket holders with regards to the effectiveness of telemarketing. A couple of possible reasons were suggested in this study, but a detailed examination of why attendees rated this technique the lowest (and marketing directors rated it the 7th most effective) should be undertaken. In addition, although ticket holders rated promotional premiums and giveaway items the highest, this study did not examine whether this technique actually resulted in higher attendance. Even though they felt the technique was effective, it might actually lead them to “cherry pick”, i.e., only attend games in which there is a promotion (Mullin et al., 2000). If the technique just makes them attend one specific game over another game they intended on attending anyway, its effectiveness is basically nil. Furthermore, while McDonald and Rascher (2000) and Boyd and Krehbiel (2003) found that promotions increased attendance at MLB games, no study has examined the effectiveness of promotions and giveaways in the NBA.

Future research should also examine differences in ticket holders’ perceptions based on how many games they attend each year. In other words, do season ticket

holders have the same perceptions as those who attend only one game a year? It would also be interesting to conduct this study at the end of a season to see if ticket holders' perceptions would change from the beginning of the season.

Because this study was exploratory, we only determined that differences between marketing directors and ticket holders exist. However, future research studies should address the next logical question—why are there differences between marketing directors and ticket holders? Are marketing directors “out of touch” with their consumers? Or, are ticket holders uninformed or biased against some techniques, even though they in fact influence their game attendance? It could also be that both groups just want to “be in charge” and “control their world” (i.e., marketing directors rate the techniques higher because they want to believe what they do has an impact on attendance, while spectators rate them lower because they want to believe that their decision to attend the game was of their own volition and not influenced by the actions of marketers). Future studies should examine this possibility. Ultimately, future research studies should attempt to quantify the effectiveness of each of the techniques used in this study (along with any other techniques used by NBA teams). That is, how does each technique affect individuals' game attendance? In the end, it is the game attendance that determines the success of a marketing plan.

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