

IMPROVING ONLINE MARKETING IN THE SPORT INDUSTRY: A LOOK AT NBA FANS' SATISFACTION CRITERIA

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Abstract

Sport marketing and sport quality researchers have generally focused on customer satisfaction in the stadium (Yoshida & James, 2010; Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008; Greenwell & al, 2002) in order to enhance service quality, as the satisfaction of the customer is strongly correlated to enhanced loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, improved profits and lower marketing expenditures (Anderson & al., 1994; Olivier, 1999; Palmentier & al., 2006). However, within the last 50 years multiple alternatives to physical attendance have emerged. Moreover, one-way communication channels have been replaced by interactive media and the Internet 2.0 now introduces new opportunities (and challenges) to enhance fans' experience. Among these new channels: extended browsing capabilities and internet applications ("apps" and "widgets"). Moreover, such new channels emerge on the Internet, and also on 3G and 4G networks (Smartphone, and the like), allowing users to access the information almost everywhere and at anytime. These innovations dramatically impact consumer behavior. Two-way communication and mobility deeply transform the market and its segmentation and the change grows fast. Thus, innovation leads the way to more complex marketing approaches from players, teams and leagues. Now involved in multichannel communication strategies, they connect with the fans via their website, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and so on. Then, each channel becomes a potential source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction for the customers and impacts their loyalty. But as the industry quickly evolves, little time is given to researchers to adapt their models.

As a gap exists in the literature, this first approach brings together contributions in sporting event satisfaction, website satisfaction and sport communication in order to build a more specific conceptual framework to explore the dimensions of a "sport online experience". Media users have long been recognized to have an active role when selecting a media to use. Uses and gratification theory suggest that individuals are goal-oriented and seek the source that best addresses their needs (Blumberg & Katz, 1974) and improves their satisfaction, notably in an online environment (Stafford, Stafford & Schkade, 2004). In the sport industry, Pedersen, Miloch and Laucella (2007) introduce a model for online sport communication based on consumer segmentation (involvement with sport entity and user motivations) and companies' products (content, design, performance, usability, commerce). However, the authors don't provide information aiming to determine criteria of satisfaction. Filo, Funk & Hornby (2009) identify 15 information themes which should be accessible on a sport event website to increase consumer satisfaction. But such information is related to the event itself (location, venue, parking, etc.). The website is seen as a means to access information about the sporting event to come and the study aims at assessing the effectiveness of the website to increase the attendance to the event--the website isn't considered as the object of satisfaction for itself. Outside of the sport business, marketing researches synthesized by Khawaja & Bokhari (2010) set up a cross industry typology to study dimensions of websites' quality, but one may wonder if such dimensions strictly apply to the sport industry.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: First, it aims at establishing a conceptual model to assess customer satisfaction in their online experience of the championship and the players. The resulting frame work analyzes such customer satisfaction through 3 dimensions: Website ergonomics and accessibility of the information; Core product satisfaction; and Ancillary services satisfaction. Second, the contribution analyzes the impact of specific variables on the 3 dimensions of satisfaction.

The method used for the study is also two-fold: (1) pre-questionnaires have been submitted to students in the Masters of sport administration at Canisius College (Buffalo, NY) and University of Lille 2 (France). Students were asked to think critically about the topic and provide propositions to enhance such new approach of the topic (in the classroom and online). This preliminary constructive phase was critical in helping researchers to compose with limited scholarship available on the topic and the fast changes of fans' communication capabilities; (2) a broad online study is currently undertaken. The paper will provide an overview of the data collected by a survey in Europe and North America (Canada and USA). Questionnaires are broadcasted on the internet, via various websites and social media, and administrated by Checkbox 4.7. Data is analyzed with SPSS and R. Research findings assess fans' satisfaction criteria and discuss their segmentation. Further discussion will relate to communication strategies and provide directions for future research.

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