A STUDY ON FAN SEGMENTATION AND PROFILING

Munehiko Harada, Waseda University, Japan, haradamunehiko@waseda.jp
Kazuyoshi Takada, Japan Volleyball League, Japan

INTRODUCTION

Japan has professional sports in baseball, soccer and sumo. Other than that, there are many top-level leagues such as basketball, volleyball and rugby. Many of the teams that belong to these leagues are "corporate sports" owned by companies. In the 1970s and 1980s, they supported Japan's top level of sports and produced many Olympic athletes.

However, because of the recession that struck Japan in the 1990s and the corporate restructuring that it triggered, many of the teams whose media exposure value to the company had dwindled were abolished. As a result, more than 300 companies that owned sports teams in top-level leagues either suspended or disbanded their teams, hence the number of corporate teams greatly decreased. On the other hand, many teams spun off from their parent companies, acquired local sponsors in their area and were reborn as local clubs that manage the team as a community business supported by individual members. In response to the increase in this type of business oriented team, league organizations have started to manage operations with an emphasis on drawing fans. Resultantly, in recent years, league management has become an important issue of league organizations in terms of how to activate their leagues, enhance popularity and brand strength, and improve competitive performance; therefore it is urgent to understand the behavioural and psychological characteristics of fans in order to establish a basis for fan marketing.

This study focuses on fans of top-level leagues in Japan and aims to (1) segment the fans of these leagues by spectator motivation to identify fan characteristics by profiling each segment, and (2) identify the similarities and differences of fan characteristics through a comparison of leagues.

METHODS

Of the top-level leagues in Japan, six were chosen: the Japan Basketball League, Women's Japan Basketball League, Japan Handball League, Japan Rugby Top League, Asia League Ice Hockey, and Women's Japan Softball League. Two games in each league were selected and fans at those games were surveyed. The survey period was from October 1 to December 2, 2006, during which questionnaires were passed out to 2,864 persons at venues. Some 2,272 usable responses were received, giving a response rate of 79.3%.

There have been several attempts to identify the spectator motivation of sports fans. Research trends can be roughly divided into three categories: development of measuring scales for fan motivation (Wann, 1995; Trail & James, 2001; Funk et al., 2001) comparison of fan motivation between differing sports using developed scales (James & Ross, 2004; Robinson & Trail, 2005) and segmentation by fan characteristics and comparisons of fan motivation between segments (James & Ringer, 2002).

This study translated into Japanese the 14 factors and 42 categories of the Sports Interest Inventory (SII) developed by Funk et. al. (2001) and edited some of the wording. Additionally, it set 4 demographic variables, 6 behavioural variables and 2 socio-psychological variables.

RESULTS

In order to determine fan motivation categories, fan motivation categories were carefully selected by factorial analysis and reorganized into a motivation structure. As a result, ten motivation factors were extracted:

"sports space", "team achievements", "interaction", "competitiveness", "attachment to local area", "family", "dramaticism", " athletes", "role models", and "corporate sports support".

After that, a cluster analysis was done of large files using averaged scores of the extracted motivation factors. Investigations into the number of clusters based on "cluster size" and the "distance between clusters" found that, when five clusters were set, cluster size was consistent and the distance between clusters was longer.

To identify the characteristics of each cluster, the clusters were profiled based on score tendencies for fan motivation and demographics. The fans of the first cluster were interpreted to be "avid sports watchers with an established style of watching sports", and were thus named "fixed fans". The fans of the second cluster "find sports as a fun means for interacting with others", and were thus named "social fans". The fans of the third cluster "are mostly young people who play sports and are the most likely to be fans depending on the strategies though currently are not avid watchers" They were thus named "potential fans". The fans of the fourth cluster were interpreted as "initially having a team that they support, but being more interested in the dramaticism, atmosphere and competition itself of sports than specific teams and players". These fans were thus named "normal spectators". The fans of the final and fifth cluster "are mainly aged persons who support corporate mobilization, aggressively follow sports and function as the core of the fan base". They were thus named "active fans".

Next, in order to identify the similarities and differences in fan structure between leagues, cluster makeup was compared between leagues. As a result, the similarities of primary fan segments were confirmed for the Japan Rugby Top League, Japan Handball League and Women's Japan Softball League. Moreover, the characteristic trends of other leagues were identified as well.

DISCUSSION

As the paradigm of corporate sports crumbles in Japan, how to boost popularity and maintain competitiveness are key management issues for league organizations. In this study, top-level league fans were divided into five segments and the segment structure of each league identified. In the future, it will be necessary to think of ways to activate the individual leagues and build strategies for drawing spectators, but it will have to be the decision of the individual leagues whether to take a strategy that enhances the loyalty of core fans in the company or select a strategy that increases the share of the pie occupied by fans from the general public. Whichever the case, league organizations will have to select a target market that offers the best support and develop strategies for drawing fans in line with the respective segment structures.

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