

The Football Fan Card: A New Management Tool for Sport Venues

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Abstract

Background and Aim of the Paper

The places (stadiums, arenas, ballparks, outdoor facilities, etc.) where people attend live events are strategic locations. Supporters and season ticket holders are a significant source of revenues for sport clubs (tickets, merchandising, etc.). Currently in Italy many live football events are less frequented because of the:

- ever-increasing “virtual” choices for enjoying sports events (digital television, Broadband Internet, cell phones, etc);
- change in schedule of games imposed by the media – thus “modifying” the possibility for spectators to attend live sports events;
- increase in average ticket prices;
- recent episodes of violence occurring inside and outside stadiums.

Live audience development has therefore become a priority for professional football clubs. In order to make football more secure, safe and qualified, the Italian “Osservatorio Nazionale sulle Manifestazioni Sportive” of the Interior Ministry launched the proposal of a “fan card” in 2005, electing Florence as a favorite setting where the project might be tried out on a pilot basis. Since the latest approval of new guidelines and regulations by sport and government institutions, football leagues and federations, and Fiscal Agencies, starting with the 2008/2009 Italian football season the fan card will be implemented in pilot clubs. Then with the 2009/2010 championship it will be extended to a national level.

This paper highlights that the adoption of a fan card is not just a tool for managing security and preventing sports fans from engaging in violent behavior. In addition to security opportunities, the research work explores a wide range of potential social marketing dimensions, CRM services and marketing applications emerging from case-implementation of a football fan card in Italy.

Methods

Both a qualitative and quantitative approach was used to explore the opportunities provided by fan card introduction. Analytical categories extrapolated to base the

analysis on a theoretical framework were obtained from a social marketing approach (Kotler, Zaltman, 1971; Kotler, 2002), sports events crisis management literature (Chappelet, 2001; Fink, 1986) and customer relationship management (Kotler, 2003; Ziliani, 2001). Information and data were collected through multiple sources, including:

- Interviews with owners and managers of professional football clubs;
- Focus groups of football supporters and season ticket-holders;
- Brain storming among key executives of the automatic ticket companies (e.g. Lottomatica, Ticketone, etc);
- Participation at official technical meetings involving community police headquarters, municipality, fire department, stewards' coordinators, football club managers, etc.;
- Analysis of the Fiorentina team ticket holders.

Results and Discussion

The “fan smartcard” is primarily a tool for preventing and controlling violence during sporting events (Chappelet, 2001) which enables football spectators to enjoy and celebrate rituals involving their favorite team within a safe environment. The contactless card, outfitted with Radio Frequency (RFid) technology, can provide significant security and safety benefits for football events including (Wyld, 2006):

- fast and safe in-stadium access of crowd flow;
- prevention of fraud and counterfeiting;
- provision of pertinent information in real time (e.g. name of customer, seat number, date of event, etc.) to stadium staff and police department allowing identification and isolation of dangerous spectators more efficiently.

To deter violence during sporting events, the fan card should be just a “piece” of a broad socio-cultural program aimed at diffusing legal behavior throughout society. Therefore, its introduction requires a strategic institutional policy addressed to a wider consensus, engaging citizens, schools, neighborhood organizations, and the supporters' clubs to implement this endeavor. In this way the smartcard might be an effective tool of social marketing (Kotler, 2002) and not only a means for sport and government institutions for managing critical situations (Gilardoni, 1994; Fink, 1986; Lester, 1989). The sport sector is rooted in society as a whole and should be a strong emblematic context for spreading social attitudes and behavior through a positive sense of participation.

The fan “smartcard” can be a useful platform for creating both marketing opportunities to professional football clubs and sponsors, and useful potential services to spectators such as:

- providing sport clubs and their sponsors (suppliers) with vital data regarding live audience (demographics, life style, etc.) that can be used not just to understand fan behavior but even to customize product purchasing through sport experience;

- reaching each spectator (user) it is possible to offer several logistical facilities (parking, pre-paid local transport, etc.) and other value-added services (buying tickets on-line, in-stadium “cashless” purchasing, “last minute” selling of seats, etc.).

A Customer Relationship Management (CRM) approach (Kotler, 2003; Ziliani, 2001), supported by the use of this innovative wireless and RFid-enabled card may also reinforce supporters' loyalty toward their sport team. Since the smart card contains purchasing details and relevant ID information - which are instantly updated as the fan passes through the turnstile- the club can build the fans' life cycle and segment the supporters base to offer products and services tailored to fit them (personalized merchandise, birthday celebrations, meeting with star athletes, co-creation of services with fans, etc.).

The fan card has a huge potential as not just an electronic control device for managing security at sporting events but also a useful management and value diffusion tool.

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