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Enhancing service quality for spectators of professional sport - can this directly lead to increasing attendances? An ongoing exploratory study

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Revenues generated directly from spectators at sports events have become increasingly important to the financial success of a sports organisation. Indeed, in the current economic climate, it could be deemed as being critical to the operating future of the club.

Over the last decade most professional sports organisations have either relocated to new state of the art, multi-functional arenas, or have majorly renovated their existing venues. This could be to increase capacity, meet more rigorous health and safety standards, embrace more corporate hospitality opportunities, but one thing for certain would be the that the organisation needed to increase the spectator's experience in attending the sport event.

There are many different reasons why the average sporting fan continually attends sporting events. A number of discoveries imply the average fan relates to the encounter as a personal attachment between themselves and the club or in some cases the community. Some fans have a strong emotional attachment to their team and can be highly involved in their team's performance (Kahle, Kambara, & Rose1996). Existing studies tend to show that a team's performance is the primary determinant of fan behaviour. (Cialdini et al 1976, 1999), however, Fisher & Wakefield 1998) suggest that fan motivation and subsequent behaviour goes beyond the record of teams and, at times, seem unrelated to performance. This may be where service quality and customer satisfaction enter the race.

Mullin (2007) stated that the sport product is a hugely complex package of tangible and intangible elements -with every game, every event having its own uniqueness. No longer can a club rely upon on field success to maximise revenue from gate receipts and sell out matches. There is more to the complete sport product than just the game and the result, other factors, which the organisation has control over, adds to the overall experience of each match.

The core element of the sport event is the game itself, and this can be categorised as an uncontrollable variable (Palmer 2007, Lovelock 2005). Mullin (2007) and Sullivan (2004) realised that the whole product of the sporting organisation offered meets the spectators' needs and provides benefits. This refers to being able to offer service quality to the spectators on a regular basis and is finally being evidenced in the service industry.

Efforts in defining and measuring quality have come largely from the goods sector. (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Leonard, 1985). To achieve competitiveness, companies today strive to understand customer needs, and strive to provide services in an effective and efficient manner that satisfies these needs (Harris and Harrington, 2000). To evaluate how well their companies are meeting customer needs, service managers often use measurements of services quality and customer satisfaction (Dabholkar, 1995). Therefore, service quality and customer satisfaction have received much attention from service marketers and academic researchers (Spreng and Mackoy, 1996). There is now considerable emphasis placed on the importance of service quality and customer satisfaction for all professional sports organisations. Current trends show it has become an extremely crucial aspect for low market based sports, such as ice hockey, where attendance and awareness for a sport are extremely low.

In order to apply service quality to sport spectators many authors have attempted to categorize or segment spectators that typify their behaviour, justification for attending matches, and more importantly, reasons for them to continue attending (e.g Tapp and Clowes, 2000; Quick and Van Leuwen, 1998).

This study has used both qualitative and quantitative research methods to gain an insight into spectators' views on quality issues surrounding their experience and reasoning for attending (and not attending) matches. This has taken place in sports including football, rugby, cricket and ice hockey both within the UK, in Europe and in the US and is an ongoing study towards the author's doctoral thesis.