

# ASSESSING CONSUMER RESPONSES TO PROFESSIONAL SPORT CLUB DECISIONS: THE MARKETING IMPLICATIONS OF SACKING A COACH

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## Abstract

For sport managers responsible for consumers such as season ticket holders (STH), satisfaction and renewal represent important measures of service performance (McDonald & Shaw, 2005). Their measurement can be complex given the multidimensional nature of satisfaction (Oliver, 1997) and the high level of uncommon loyalty in sport consumers. This loyalty generates strong emotional responses to on-field performance and can evoke a similar response to important decisions made by club administrators. An example of such a club decision is the sacking of a coach, which is the subject of this paper. Here, we assess the attitudinal responses of club STH directly before and after the replacement of a poor performing coach in the Australian Football League (AFL). The research aims to identify the impact of the change on STH attitudes and explore the presence of a potential halo effect (Thorndike, 1920) across other dimensions of STH satisfaction.

Coaches can be removed for many reasons including political motives or poor performance. While sport-specific literature on succession has presented mixed findings on the impact of coaching changes on on-field performance (Giambatista, Rowe & Riaz, 2005; Kesner & Sebor, 1994), little has addressed the impact of coach succession on other areas of club performance such as the satisfaction of the clubs key consumers. Here, we inspect resultant changes to attitudes, discussing variance in satisfaction and renewal intentions. In this case, the change was a popular decision among supporters, installing a well-respected former player into the coaching position. As such, it was expected that consumer satisfaction may rise in STH attitudes towards the clubs administration. Impacts to other dimensions of STH satisfaction are tested and discussed in the context of a halo effect.

To explore the impact of the coaching succession,

comparisons were undertaken between groups of STHs immediately before and after the change. Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed by email to STH of an AFL club with 4580 responses collected (response rate = 24%). Data collection commenced two weeks after the season - for a week prior, and a week after the coaching change. As such, two groups were established containing responses collected prior to (64%, n=2941) and after the change (36%, n=1639).

The measurement instrument was constructed using established measures of STH satisfaction. In line with other subscription products (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), STH satisfaction is comprised of multiple items (Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002) relating to ticketing, communication, on-field performance, administration, personal involvement and home ground. An overall measure for satisfaction and items measuring the likelihood to renew and recommend the service to friends were also included. Each item was measured on an 11-point scale. Analysis was undertaken by comparing regression models for each group as well as ANOVA tests.

Results showed the post-change group displayed significantly greater overall satisfaction. Significant differences were also seen in specific items within club administration on field performance and personal involvement. While this was in part expected, the changes are wider and stronger than anticipated, suggesting a strong halo effect over attitudes given the coaching change. Item scores for other areas (service, club communications and home ground) also increased significantly, but not to the same extent. Finally, there were significant differences in STH intentions after the change with higher renewal likelihood and a higher likelihood to promote the club to their family and friends.

Overall, we saw large and significant changes to attitudes towards the same offering across the two groups. While halo effects have been evidenced in the case of on-field performance influencing satisfaction towards the sport offering (Lapidus & Schilbrowsky, 1996) the nature of these changes in response to administrative decisions is unique. Past research suggests halo effects impact most greatly elements closest to the core product. Findings here support this with on-field performance and club administration seen to increase the most when examining pre and post change ratings.

In translating managerial implications, fans were 6% more likely to renew and gave a 6% higher satisfaction rating after the coaching change. In a league where clubs boast 50,000 strong STH bases, the benefits and implications of managing such change well is economically imperative. Implications must also be noted for researchers with data integrity dependent on an acute awareness of changes to context when collecting attitudinal data relating to high involvement products or services. Event or match results should be carefully monitored and considered in interpretation, particularly where longitudinal data or industry comparisons are being undertaken.

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