

Experience Effects On Perceptions Of Sport: A Comparison Of Sport Associations Of Participants And Non-Participants

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Aim of the research

The purpose of this research is to identify participants' and non-participants' perceptions of three sports: (1) diving, (2) track and field, and (3) their own favorite participant sport.

Theoretical background and context for the study

Attracting new participants is a common challenge for sport clubs. The growth and development of sports depends on attracting and retaining participants. The challenge is particularly acute in sports that lack strong cultural penetration, so the knowledge and expectations of future participants may be limited. In fact, it is well understood that knowledge, interpretation, and understanding of a product or product category grow through experience of it (Carr, 2010; Goldstone, 1998). Consequently, people with experience of a product category, particularly one that has a substantial aesthetic aspect, appreciate and interpret it quite differently than do those who are less familiar with it (Augustin & Leder, 2006; Lindell & Mueller, 2011). The difference is pivotal for building sport participation because potential new participants can be expected to perceive the sport quite differently than those who are already in the sport. As a consequence, those who are doing the recruiting may not communicate in a manner that is most meaningful to the inexperienced. This has been found to be a challenge when marketing arts experiences for adults (Deeth, 2012) and children (Sayers, 2011), and its more general relevance to consumer marketing has been demonstrated in models of consumer choice (Allen, 2002) and loyalty (de Groot, Antonides, Read, & van Raaij, 2009). Thus, a necessary first step for marketing to build participation in a sport is to understand how it is perceived by those who are not yet involved, and to contrast that with how those who are involved perceive it. This study undertakes that task for two sports — diving and track & field — and participants' own favourite sport.

Method

Data were collected from non-participants through street surveys, and from participants through an online survey.

Selection of the sports

Diving and track and field were chosen as the two sports. A local diving club provided a unique context for the study as this was a new club, which came into existence because of the organization of four FINA World Diving series in the city. Track and field was chosen as a comparison sport, based on previous work in this sport. Each participant was also asked about his or her favourite participation sport.

Street surveys with non-participants

A total of 192 community members (ages 11 years and up) were randomly intercepted (50% female; 11 ≤ 15 = 46%, 16+ = 54%). Participants were asked to mention five words that came to mind for each of the sports. Verbal responses were recorded. The survey took 3–5 minutes to complete.

Online survey with participants

Twelve diving clubs and 12 track and field clubs were asked to send out an e-mail to their club members inviting them to participate in a short 3- to 5-minute online survey. Respondents were asked to provide 5 words they would use to describe their own sport to others, to complete 4 sentences about sport, and to report their age, gender, length and level of participation in the sport. Data were collected from 126 divers; data collection for track and field will be completed in June.

Data analyses

First, a frequency analysis was done for all words associated with each sport ($n = 3$), and by each group ($n = 2$). Words were grouped together if deemed synonymous, when sharing the same root word, or having similar meaning/intent. Second order concepts (e.g., Blaike, 2007) were subsequently generated independently by two different research teams. Next, the words for the two groups within each sport were compared and screened for associations, dissociations, and oppositions (e.g., Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012).

Results, discussion, and implications/conclusions

Data analysis is in progress, thus results will be available at the time of presentation, and will determine the unique image of each of those sports. Combined, the street survey and online survey results will identify the potential associations and/or dissociations in perceived benefits between sport and non-sport participants. Initial results suggest that current participants have more elaborated views of their sport than do non-participants.

The known valued benefits inform the aspirational messages to parents that show what their children can actually experience and achieve through participation in a particular sport. The “hooks” identified here, can be incorporated into the marketing communications, and bridge any gap between potential sport participants’ images and participants’ images of the sport. The outcome of this study is an important step to recruit new participants in LSOs.

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