

FanScore. Decoding The Drivers Of Football Fan Attendance For Growth In A Rugby-Mad Nation

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In 2014 the New Zealand-based Wellington Phoenix Football Club had the lowest per game average attendance of clubs competing in the Australian A-league competition. With all other nine clubs in the A-league having their licences extended until 2034 increasing game attendance is vital to Phoenix's financial viability and retention of its A-league licence.

In prior years attendance numbers at Phoenix home games have ranged from 3,060 to 32,792; with an average attendance of 7,131 in 2014.

The target attendance of 10,000 per game, represented a 40% increase and had been achieved in 25% of matches overall; but a constrained limited marketing budget as a result of lower gate revenues, unlocking the factors in driving fan attendance was key to maximise marketing impact.

Previous international research on the factors impacting attendance at sports games, contained significant differences that limited their direct application to the Wellington Phoenix.

Indeed studies that have looked at the factors influencing game attendance (Reade, 2007; Simmons, 2004) concluded that in addition to pricing, the factors of game quality, competitive balance, team identification and game experience all have influence.

However, factors identified as relevant to game attendance, but of unknown applicability to the Phoenix context, were:

Market applicability — prior studies on factors influencing football attendance have been based in well-established football (soccer) markets.

Different distance measures — studies have included distance as a factor, however they used different definitions related to domestic competitions. Reade (2007) looked at the distance visiting teams (and hence their fans) travelled to attend an away game, whilst Shackelford and Greenwell (2005) reference distance as number of competing teams within a defined radius. Neither are relevant to the Phoenix given their position as the only team in a competition based in another country. The relevant measure of distance for the Phoenix games as proposed in this study is the distance home fans will travel from their residence to the game venue. No studies have yet been located where specific home residence-venue distance has been evaluated as a factor, with Chen, Chen, Stotlar, and Lin (2009) simply choosing a binary variable of 'from home state' or 'not home state' rather than a continuous variable of distance.

Capacity constraint — As noted by Garcia (2002), if some matches in a study are at maximum capacity seating, the determination of overall factor reliability is compromised and a number of studies did not take this into account or used an adjustment or approximation as a result. For Phoenix, matches have never been close to capacity so opportunity to attend is always available and hence the relative weight of factors can be more reliably determined.

An additional limitation of existing research is that all identified prior studies except Chen et al. (2009) performed their analyses on gross attendance figures only. Basing the analysis on ticket purchasing data allowed modelling of specific individuals behavioural attendance patterns, and hence factors influencing an individual's decision to re-attend. Prior models based on generic attendance only cannot determine factors driving attendance decisions at the individual level.

Method

In increasing home game attendance to secure a stronger financial base for the Club, six measurable factors on driving individuals' attendance were analysed using deidentified ticketing data from the 2011–12 and 2012–13 seasons and matching that to league performance and local factors using logistic regression modelling.

Findings

Competitive Balance was the strongest positive attractor especially when Phoenix were within 4 ladder positions of its opposition; and that increasing Game Quality to a medium to high level can double the likelihood of fans attending.

While weekend scheduled games were more likely to attract fans, differences in regular season or finals was not found to be a significant impact on individuals' game attendance.

Weather was found to be the strongest factor reducing attendance at games (with the likelihood of attending halved when it rains on match days), followed by Distance from the venue is highly significant over 30km but only marginal for distances within this radius.

Two critical findings were that the last game behaviour was a major driver of future behaviour, and using propensity analysis the 15 highest fan potential postcodes within target radius were identified for management to target their marketing investments.

This research adds valuable new insights to the management team and to research on fan attraction to games, but further work is needed in capturing or converting 'at -gate' tickets purchases to ensure the Wellington Phoenix can build a more complete view of all of its fans and the factors driving their attendance.

References

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