



Getting Generation Y to attend: Friends, interactivity and half-time entertainment

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ABSTRACT

People from Generation Y, given their number and stage in the family life-cycle, represent a key emerging audience for major sports. The study focussed on the effect of friends and half time enhancements on likely attendance at matches. The sport domain was the Australian Football League (AFL), the elite Australian rules football competition. The enhancements being tested were half-time entertainments based on performers from well-known television talent shows, Australian Idol and It Takes Two. Scenarios with and without interactive participation, based on short messaging service (SMS) messages, were tested. The study used a general population sample of 909 Generation Y people in a traditional AFL market and one where AFL is not the major winter competition. Previous attendance and sport orientation were the major influences on attendance at major sports, including the AFL. Friends influenced likely attendance at a game, but no effects were found for half-time entertainments. People who attended matches with friends typically had social activities before and after the game. This suggested that one promotional strategy to expand existing markets was to find and engage the social networks of existing fans, making sport attendance a broader part of an overall social event.

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1. Introduction

People from Generation Y represent a key emerging audience for major sports. While there is no formal definition of Generation Y, those born between 1980 and 1994 comprise its core (Schiffman et al., 2008). In terms of the family life-cycle, they are in transition from being a child within a family to having families of their own. This transition coincides with access to car driving and credit cards, the buying of alcohol, enrolment in tertiary studies and taking up part-time work (Business Wire, 2008; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008), which allows them greater mobility, increased financial means and enhanced social freedoms. The patterns of leisure choices they establish at this stage are likely to extend into later life. Thus, Generation Y people are vitally important to the future of major sports given their number and relative affluence (Petrecca, Cuneo, Halliday, & Neff, 2000; Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2005).

Conceptually, two segments within Generation Y are relevant. The first comprises those who grew up with a family who supported a particular team or sport. They are likely to be motivated to continue attending (Funk & James, 2006) so long as they are not diverted by competing entertainments. The second comprises people who did not grow up supporting a particular team or code. They include immigrants and people living in areas where the sport has few fans. If sports events are

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made sufficiently entertaining, they can potentially appeal to both segments of the population. Thus, managers of professional sports leagues need to think beyond the appeal of the sport itself (Anderson, 1991) in attracting both groups to their games. They need to consider the whole environment of the sporting entertainment, including what happens before, during and after the event.

The focus of this paper is on attracting all Generation Y people to sports events, not just about marketing sport to existing fans. The paper proceeds by first establishing where attendance at professional sport fits into Generation Y's repertoire of leisure choices. It then examines the social context of attending, the importance of interactive communications in their leisure activities and the types of enhanced entertainment which might appeal. Building on these views, possible event strategies for increasing Generation Y's sports attendance are suggested and then tested among two samples of consumers. The domain of the study is the Australian Football League (AFL), the elite Australian rules football competition (AFL, 2008). One of the study samples is drawn from a traditional AFL market (AFL, 2008) and the other one from a market where the game has no traditional supporter base. A new team is being established in this market (Teamgws, 2011) where the dominant professional code has been rugby league run by the National Rugby League (NRL, 2011). In this market, Australian rules football has been poorly attended (ABS, 2007). Thus, the AFL is seeking to attract new audiences for new teams and then move them up the psychological continuum of commitment (de Groot & Robinson, 2008; Funk & James, 2001), not just appeal to their current fan base.

2. Leisure choices of Generation Y

Generation Y has grown up with more leisure options available than ever before, and expensive tastes to go with them (Stevens et al., 2005). They tend to spend available funds on leisure and have few savings (Logue, 2009). Even those from Generation Y still at school or college, typically, have part-time jobs in retail or elsewhere (Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2007) and, thus, most have the ability to finance independent leisure choices. For this generation, at their current stage of the family life-cycle, price is therefore not a major deterrent to attending professional sport. As it happens, they are among the most frequent attendees at professional sport in Australia, though males outnumber females (ABS, 2007) at professional events such as Australian rules football and motor sport. Males also appear to enjoy sport more than females do (David, Horton, & German, 2008).

There are traditional ways of explaining attendance at major sports (Hansen & Gauthier, 1989). An interest in sport in general (Pons, Mourali, & Nyeck, 2006), a love of a particular sport (de Groot & Robinson, 2008), on field success (deSchrive & Jensen, 2002), scheduling (Forrest & Simmons, 2006), an affiliation from childhood with a particular team (Funk & James, 2006), an admiration for particular players (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; deSchrive, 2007), family influences (Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008), and the absence of unruly crowd behavior (Westerbeek, 2000) are major motivators.

But Generation Y have multiple alternative leisure options available. Among sporting choices, Generation Y can attend rival sport codes and play traditional or newer action sports (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004). Non-sport alternatives include digital media (Stone, Stanton, Kirkham, & Pyne, 2001), console games (Bennett, Sagas, & Dees, 2006), interactive online games, social networking, on-line entertainment (Hargittai, 2008), shopping malls (Martin & Turley, 2004), clubs and travel (Allon, 2004; Hausteil, Klöchner, & Biöbaum, 2009).

What, then, will persuade Generation Y to spend more of their time and money attending professional sporting events, especially if teams they do not support are playing? This is where the promotion of additional activities or attractions may be enough to tip the balance in favour of attending a sports event over an alternative outing. Given Generation Y's leisure patterns, attendance at a sporting event is likely to involve more than just being at the match itself. Activities before, during and after the game with the friends who attend with them are likely to be incorporated into a broader social event. The tail-gater phenomenon (James, Breezeel, & Ross, 2001; Melnick, 1993) attests to this. This suggests that promoters of professional sport may consider a package of activities aimed at enhancing the appeal of the sport event itself. Three ways of doing this are now discussed.

2.1. The interactive generation

Generation Y has grown up with interactive technologies based on the Web (Hargittai, 2008) and mobile telephony (Carroll, Howard, Peck, & Murphy, 2002). Among mobile technologies, short messaging services (SMS) are constantly used because they are a useful, enjoyable and convenient (Kim, Park, & Oh, 2008) part of everyday social life (Spagnolli & Gamberini, 2007). SMS messaging that comes in a commercial setting is credible to Generation Y if the source is well-known (Nantel & Sekhavat, 2008). In particular, many professional sports offer SMS interactivity at their matches (e.g., Bold, 2004), or use SMS in building relationships with fans (Precision Marketing, 2004). Similarly, many television reality shows provide a means of viewer involvement through SMS voting (Wickhouse, 2003). As a consequence, if a sports event is enhanced by using other entertainments of interest to Generation Y, a form of interactivity should boost spectator involvement (Evans, 2008) in the event.

2.2. Peer groups

From adolescence, peer group influence on leisure choice is strongly evident (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2008). The popularity of social networking software and messaging (Hargittai, 2008) illustrates this. In addition, these media technologies facilitate

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