

3.2 Sports Sales and Engaging Fans

Sponsors are an important relationship that sports organizations must manage, but individuals are another important focus area in sports sales. Whereas corporate sponsors contribute significant financial resources to the sports organization, individual fans are often the ones who create the energy, atmosphere, and culture associated with a sports organization. Consequently, sports organizations must find meaningful ways to engage fans to both attract new fans and maintain the fan base the organization currently possesses. Additionally, sponsorships in large part take place because corporations are trying to reach the sports organization's audience, and if the sport organization cannot provide the audience, then sponsorship relationships suffer. There is a variety of approaches that sports organizations can and do to take sales and marketing to fans. For example, sports organizations might feature a ticket sale as part of an in-game promotion, create a YouTube video focusing on the venue atmosphere to encourage fans to come out for games, and account executives may cold-call individuals in efforts to persuade them to purchase tickets. Like many functional areas, sports organizations need to tailor their approaches to the audience they are trying to reach, which likely involves treating sales as a relational process, rather than one that is solely focused on marketing. Certainly, getting people to purchase is the end-goal, but results will be hard to achieve if the sports organization does not convey some relational qualities, such as empathy and listening during the process. Moreover, sports organizations need to be mindful of evolving technology and cultural shifts, and as appropriate, implement these into their sales approaches. For instance, given the cultural dominance of mobile technology, sports organizations should be looking at how they can implement mobile into their sales approaches.

As sports organizations take a relational approach to sales, they will see results. However, just as with other functional areas, the sales operations must be evaluated and assessed. In these efforts, analytics play a very important role in helping sports organizations ensure that they are maximizing their marketing and sales efforts. Are fans responding to a particular campaign more than another? If so, what are the

demographics of the people responding to the campaign? Sports organizations can then use that information to tailor messages that enhance relevancy which help the sports organization attain its goals. Remember that sports are an industry in flux, and while sports organizations should not be rush to judgement, there does need to be a commitment to adapting and evolving as audience preferences and cultural trends shift.

3.2.1 Sports Marketing and Sales

Sales is a central part of sports marketing and is the means through which a sports organization generates revenue. McCormack (1996) suggested that the sales process consisted of the following elements: (a) identifying customer; (b) getting through to them; (c) increasing their awareness and interest in the organization's product or service; and (d) persuading them to act on that interest (p. 7). Mullin et al. (2014) observed that sales is a form of customer performance as the customer undergoes or acts through a purchase. Within sport, Mullin et al. (2014) identified four factors that identify why customers do not perform, or make the purchase:

- Quality – quality is often directly related to the performance of the organization. If the organization is experiencing competitive success, quality is often seen as being high. Conversely, if the organization is in a performance downturn, the perception is that the organization has low quality, and sales may be difficult.
- Quantity – here, flexibility is important. If sports organizations are not offering the right quantity to a purchaser, the sale can be inhibited. As Mullin et al. (2014) note, this factor has led to flexible ticket pricing plans.
- Time – is the sports organization targeting people who have time to consume the product? Time is a precious commodity for many people, and regardless of how much investment a person has, if they don't have time to consume the product, they cannot. This area is one to watch, as more sports programming is aired via streaming, making it more convenient for the customer, how might this trend affect ticket sales?
- Cost – similar to time, if a person cannot afford a product, this is a significant inhibitor to consumption. Here, sports organizations may need to provide flexibility in pricing, and/or use creative ways to communicate the pricing to particular groups.

Whereas sales are greatly affected by the relationship between people within and without the organization, organizational culture also plays a significant role in sales processes for sports organizations. Mullin et al. (2014) characterized the following elements as important structures for sports sales:

- Reporting structure – there should be clear reporting structures within the sales operation.
- Relationships between departments – sports organizations must have strong relationship within its organization. Thus, sales personnel need to have positive relationships with ticketing, marketing, and public relations personnel, as the actions of one unit affects another and each functional area needs the other to be successful.
- Organizational philosophy on materials – sports organizations must have a clear philosophy to produce materials such as brochures, in-game announcements, and Internet and social media content that promotes a consistent message.
- Development process – sports organizations must have a plan in place to develop sales talent, which includes mentoring and coaching from senior employees. Sports organizations that invest in their sales personnel will have more a more stable environment within which these individuals can thrive.

Thus, sales processes need to identify both internal and external opportunities and challenges. Sales professionals should be constantly evaluating barriers with customers and identifying solutions to those barriers (e.g., flexible price plans and ticket plans). Additionally, this same assessment should also occur within the organization to ensure that structures conducive to mentoring and growth are present in the sales operations.

3.2.2 Sales Approaches in Sport

Sales is a multi-faceted process. That is, it must be tailored and adapted to the person the organization is trying to reach. For example, many younger people are resistant to telemarketing calls, whereas older individuals are more accustomed to this form of sale contact. Consequently, a sport organization may determine that a sales approach focused on social media is a better way to engage younger individuals,

while they may rely on traditional sales methods such as telephone calls with older audiences. Sports organizations that try and use a *one size fits all* approach to sales are likely to see subpar results. Mullin et al. (2014) identified the following approaches for sports sales:

- Telemarketing – while telemarketing is often considered to consist of only outbound calling, this can also involve responding to phone calls and other forms of contact initiated by a prospective customer. Sports organizations can also opt to outsource telemarketing, and while that may be more efficient, it does bring risk of comprising authenticity.
- Direct Mail – organizations can use direct mail to target specific audiences based on demographic or interest-based characteristics, and direct mail, while perhaps fading away as a marketing strategy, may hold some value for sports organizations as it is cost-effective and measurable, provided a call to action is listed in the mailing piece.
- E-mail Marketing – e-mail is a viable way for sports organizations to perform sales, and sports organizations have a variety of information associated with actual and potential customers that can be used to tailor messages. E-mail also provides valuable data such as open rates and click-throughs or conversions that can help assess return-on-investment.
- Personal Selling – sports organizations can use personal contact to sale and while perhaps face-to-face interaction is becoming diminished in culture, this form of contact illustrates the relational process in sales. Here sales professionals can spend time with actual or potential customers and learn things that they may not learn from other sources (e.g., e-mail marketing) that can be used in the sales process.
- Relationship Marketing – somewhat related to personal selling is the concept of relationship marketing, or the notion that for marketing to be effective there must be a relational element to it. Here, sports sales professionals are looking for ways to integrate customers into the organization. Gronroos (1990) observed the following elements must be present for relationship marketing to be successful: (a) the customer has an ongoing desire for service; (b) the customer of the service controls the service supplier; and (c) alternative service suppliers are available. The more sports organizations work at building relationships with customer, the more successful their sales will be.

- **Benefit Selling** – with benefit selling, customers are provided with benefits to their purchase that are designed to counteract barriers. Here, sports organizations can look for ways to promote flexibility (as with ticketing and dates) to help a customer see benefits.

Each of these approaches has advantages, and keeping in mind that sports organizations need to tailor their approaches to their unique situations, organizations who integrate data, relationship marketing, and benefit selling into personal selling approaches often achieve highly successful results (Mullin et al., 2014).

3.2.3 Managing Relationships between Sponsors and Fans

Sales is a relational process and as sports organizations must manage individual relationships with sponsors and fans, they must also facilitate relationships between these two entities. Remember that one of the reasons corporations engage in sports sponsorships is to reach the audience of the sports organization and see the positive perception of the sports organization transfer to it. Additionally, sports organizations must work to entice and engage fans to be interested in the sponsor without being perceived as being too aggressive or intrusive. Planning is a vital step that can help sports organizations manage these relationships. Some questions that sports sales and marketing personnel can ask in the planning phase include:

- What intersections exist between sponsors and fans?
- What needs and wants of fans match with sponsors line of business?
- What messaging will be most effective to facilitate relationships between fans and sponsors?
- What potential barriers or threats exist to relationships between fans and sponsors?
- To what extent can the sports organization's social and digital media resources be used to facilitate the fan-sponsor relationship?

Whereas planning is central, so is listening and evaluation. Sports organizations need to obtain feedback from both fans and sponsors to

identify areas of strength and areas of improvement. This step is vital as sports organizations may have a different perception of relationship strength. Additionally, evaluating efforts to facilitate these relationships is important endeavors as well. Using metrics to assess what messaging and campaigns are most effective will help sports organizations ensure they are using the most relevant means possible to connect sponsors and fans.

3.2.4 Analytics and Technology in Sports Sales and Marketing

As with many areas of sport, analytics and technology are playing a major role in sports sales and marketing. One of the chief concern in sports sales and marketing is return-on-investment, and analytics help assess that variable. For example, many sports organizations use customer relationship management (CRM) software programs, and these programs often have a variety of data analytic tools that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of sales and marketing efforts. Additionally, for media and social media efforts here, sports organizations can obtain data on how many people saw a message and how many acted on it (e.g., clicking through to purchase a ticket or team merchandise). Certainly, for metrics and analytics to be useful, they must be associated with goals. Thus, sports organizations need to define goals for their sales and marketing efforts, so there is a baseline against which performance can be measured. In formulating goals, sports organizations should ensure that goals are both (a) reasonable and (b) measurable. While lofty goals can be a good endeavor, setting unrealistic expectations only sets the organization up for failure and can significantly impact morale and employee retention. If goals are vague, then employees have little idea of what they are supposed to be accomplishing and it will be difficult to make any meaningful comparisons.

Data analytics are an important part of the sales and marketing process, but sports organizations must also ensure they are staying up to date on changing technological trends, and as applicable, incorporate these into their sales and marketing efforts. For instance, sports organizations must be aware of changing preferences for media consumption, as many people now prefer mobile devices for viewing entertainment, and sports organizations need to be creating messages for these platforms. Additionally, the emergence of technology like virtual reality can be used as a marketing tool to create fan experiences and provide activation

opportunities for sponsors. Sports sales and marketing is most successful when sports organizations are willing to adapt to change and respond to changing consumer preferences. Staying static and being unwilling to change will only hinder the success of sales and marketing for the organization as fans and other consumers will buy from the organization that is meeting their needs.

References

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