ABSTRACT: This article emphasizes the importance of marketing research in sport marketing. It is not a “how to” article; rather, it discusses what marketing research is in sport marketing, why it is needed, and who should do the research.

The article should be valuable to sport marketing management who wants a better conceptual understanding of marketing research. It should also help management who wonders whether their organization should do research and how it would be beneficial.

The day was almost over. Lee Donovan sank into the chair at his desk following a seemingly endless sales call. He had attempted to sell a sponsorship for a major promotion. The call had been difficult because of the questions he had been asked ... and could not answer.

Even though this was only his second week as Promotions Director for State’s athletic program and he was not an alumnus of the school, he knew its football, basketball, and baseball records and team highlights for the past four years. He could converse easily about its present and former star performers.
He was knowledgeable about State’s nonrevenue as well as revenue sports. In essence, he could carry on an entertaining, intelligent conversation concerning the school’s athletic performance and performers. But this afternoon, that was not enough ... a big sponsorship was at stake.

Once he had completed discussing the athletic prowess of State with Anne Allen, the Director of Marketing at the New Horizons Company, and Larry Smith, the Advertising Manager, Lee turned the conversation to the sponsorship proposal he had brought along. Anne and Lee read the clearly written, concise piece with interest and had few questions about it.

Their questions mainly dealt with the demographics and geographics of the fans who attended home football and basketball games at State. What percentage of them were students? What percentage were nonstudent adults? What geographic areas within the state or outside the state had high concentrations of fans who attended State games? What was the male/female ratio of fans? What was the average income of nonstudent adults at games? How often did fans report buying products they saw advertised in connection with State games in print, radio, or television advertising? How many fans had children 18 years old or younger living in their homes? There were a few more questions about demographics and geographics, but Lee could not remember them. He just knew he did not have a clue about accurate, quantitative answers for the ones he recalled.

As he looked at the filing cabinet across from his desk, he wondered if it held the needed information. Maybe his predecessor had captured some data regarding fans. But, try as he might, he could not remember seeing anything pertinent in the files. If the answers were not already available, he would have to spearhead some marketing research himself. New Horizons wanted answers to its questions before investing thousands of dollars in a promotional sponsorship at State, and New Horizons offered too much potential as a sponsor to disregard its request. Marketing research, whether his own or someone else’s, was the answer.

**What Is Marketing Research?**

The American Marketing Association (1961) has defined marketing research as the systematic gathering, recording, and analyzing of data about problems relating to the marketing of goods and services. To rephrase this definition in reference to sport marketing, one would define marketing research as “the systematic gathering, recording, and analyzing of data about problems relating to the marketing of a sport.” Since a sport is generally marketed to those who attend it, hear it, or see it via electronic media, participate in it, or sponsor it or advertise via it, the data collected usually relate to the demographics, geographics, attitudes, interests, opinions, and purchasing patterns of these groups.

The data can be secondary or primary. Secondary data comes from existing sources, often internal ones such as mailing lists. For example, one can examine the ZIP codes on a season ticket-holders’ list to determine where they live. Primary data is the result of direct contact with those from whom it is sought. It can be acquired in person, or via telephone or mail. This data can be quantitative via close-ended questions on survey forms, i.e., multiple-choice questions, or qualitative via open-ended questions. In addition to surveys, small discussion groups call focus groups can be good sources of qualitative information.

Though somewhat new to sport marketing, marketing research has been used for several decades in other industries. It resulted primarily from America’s shift from a product-oriented to a consumer-oriented economy at the end of World War II. However, marketing research was done before the war. There is even evidence that it was carried out as early as 1879 for a manufacturer of agricultural equipment (Churchill, 1983).

Marketing research is now widely used by a variety of companies including consumer and industrial product firms, financial services firms, and advertising agencies. It began to grow when firms found they could not sell all they could produce, but rather had to research market demand and produce accordingly. Additional impetus was added to its growth as firms became more conscious of the need to learn what products or product features their customers wanted. The success of firms with market-
Why Do Marketing Research in Sport Marketing?

The principal focus of the marketing function in a sport is not so much to be skillful in making sport fans or participants do what suits the interest of the sport as to be skillful in conceiving and doing what suits the interests of the fans or participants without changing the sport itself. Since the marketing function's task is to satisfy these people, sport marketing management needs to know all it can about them. This makes knowing whom these people are in terms of demographics--educational background, sex, age, occupation, income, disposable income, household size, etc.--important. It also produces a need to know geographics of potential and existing fans or participants--where they live, what travel routes they take, what types of transportation they most often use, etc.

Not only does marketing management need to know demographic and geographic information concerning fans or participants, but it also needs information on their attitudes, interest, and opinions (A/I/O information). For example, what is the preferred starting time for games, matches, meets, races, etc.; what type of pre-game or half-time music is preferred; what would get participants to play the sport more often or get fans to attend more games, and the like.

Acquiring the needed information on fan or participant demographics, geographics, and A/I/O begins with a plan to collect either secondary or primary data. This plan should be designed to ensure that accurate, unbiased data is gathered. It should make sure that the data acquired is useful in solving problems that have been carefully defined or answering questions that have been carefully specified. In addition, the marketing research plan should consider what tabulation and/or analysis techniques are desired so that data is collected in a manner that facilitates these techniques. Once market research is complete, information from it can be used to develop a strategic plan for advertising, promotion, pricing, and scheduling to reach prospective fans or participants and to increase repeat business from existing ones.

If used properly, marketing research can remove much of the "guess work" from strategic planning. One can make decisions based on up-to-date, accurate information rather than speculating on who fans or participants are, where they come from, and what they prefer.

The marketing management of a spectator sport needs to know who its fans are not only to appeal to them but also to select and to appeal to potential sponsors and advertisers. With a good understanding of its fans, marketing management can target sponsors and advertisers whose products are likely to appeal to its clientele. For example, a sport with upper-middle class/wealth demographics should seek sponsors and advertisers with products that appeal to those with above-average incomes. A sport that appeals primarily to women would want to seek sponsors and advertisers selling either products that appeal to women or products that are unisex.

Fan geographics, as well as demographics, can be useful in targeting sponsors and advertisers. If marketing research show that most fans come from a particular part of the city, county, state, or region of the country, companies that are strong in that geographic area or want to be strong there should be...
person, as well as other marketing department professionals and management, needs to know the basic marketing research techniques applicable in sport marketing so that he or she can either execute research in-house or direct that done by an outside firm. Department management needs to ensure that sufficient resources in staffing, finances, etc., are available for marketing research projects to be carried out at least on an annual basis.

Marketing research is sometimes carried out entirely by in-house marketing staff. Doing marketing research in-house has two key advantages. It is less expensive. Time and energy do not have to be expended with outsiders who may need to gain an understanding of the sport itself before addressing the questions or problems at hand. But just as carrying out research in-house has advantages, it also has disadvantages. Marketing staff members may bring serious biases to the effort preventing them from planning and executing research that gives accurate, unbiased information. There may not be enough staff members to carry out the needed research. Existing staff may lack the necessary skills for the various steps in a marketing research project—designing the research, carrying it out, analyzing the data, and drawing valid conclusions. Even if staffing is appropriate, computer hardware and software and other equipment resources could be inadequate for carrying out a research project.

When in-house resources are not available or appropriate, outside help needs to be secured in the form of a marketing research consultant or firm. A good source of marketing research consultants is often faculty members of a college or university business or sport management program. A faculty member/consultant usually designs the research and perhaps assists in the data analysis while leaving the other steps to the client. Marketing research firms vary in the services they provide. Some only collect data and return the data-collection instrument to the marketing staff contracting their service. Others not only collect data but also analyze them for the client. Still others are full-service firms that help the client design the research, collect the data, and then analyze them.

In many cases, a combination of in-house and out-of-house efforts produces the best results at the lowest cost. At the beginning of the project, a careful analysis should be made to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the marketing department, from personnel to equipment in light of the proposed research. Efforts then need to be made to shore up the weaknesses with outside resources.

Conclusion

Though somewhat new to sport marketing, marketing research techniques have been used for several decades in other industries including consumer and industrial product firms, financial services, firm, and advertising agencies. Good marketing research, used properly, can remove much of the "guess work" from developing marketing strategy. It gives the marketing management of a sport the knowledge to best serve its existing fan or participant base and attract new fans or participants. It also provides information useful for identifying likely advertisers and sponsors and making sales to them. Sport organizations, not currently doing marketing research, need to reconsider their position.

References