NASCAR’s “Customer Gap”: Are Fans’ Perceptions Keeping Up With Their Expectations?

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Abstract
While NASCAR is the largest spectator sport in the United States, it faces many challenges as it enters the new millennium. Increasing cost of race attendance, expansion, and a reorganization of corporate leadership are just a few of these challenges. This paper examines the expectations and perceptions of the NASCAR fan in this dynamic industry. Through a series of focus groups, we explore fan expectations and perceptions of both NASCAR and Winston Cup events. We look at how these expectations and perceptions are changing due to several factors, including the increasing cost of event attendance and the increasing corporate influence in the industry. Our results center around the idea that NASCAR’s customer gap—the difference between fans’ expectations and their perceptions of what actually happens—is increasing. We conclude by offering suggestions to close this gap.

Introduction
Three years removed from its “golden anniversary,” NASCAR is bigger than ever. New tracks continue to be added (recent additions have been made in Fort-Worth, Southern California, Las Vegas, Miami, Chicago, and Kansas City) and existing tracks continue to expand seating capacity. NASCAR

Indeed, 14.4 million fans are considered “true believers,” watching 6.5 hours of NASCAR-related television per week and spending $683 annually for souvenirs (King, 2000). These fans have money to spend; 30% having incomes over $50,000 (Hagstrom, 1998).

While NASCAR may be bigger than ever, it faces many meaningful challenges as it enters the new millennium. As existing tracks expand, so does the challenge of filling the new seats. However, the cost of attending the Winston Cup races has risen dramatically over the past several years, making it difficult for fans to attend the number of races they have in the past. Ticket prices, which now exceed $100 at many tracks, are exacerbated by hotels that charge “event weekend” rates (often four times the normal rates) and require 3 to 4 night minimum stays. Many tracks are now finding it difficult to sell out their events, particularly those tracks that host two Winston Cup dates (King, 2000).

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One of the biggest challenges for the marketers of a sport existing in such a dynamic environment, in this case both NASCAR itself and individual tracks on the circuit, is to keep in touch with the expectations and perceptions of the sport's consumers. Consumers of a sport can be viewed as both the sport's sponsors and its fans. While much NASCAR-related attention in sport marketing journals and periodicals has been given to the success that NASCAR has had with sponsorship marketing, the fact is that if NASCAR fails to keep its core fans satisfied, its sponsorship success and television dollars will erode.

Indeed, one of the strongest benefits of a NASCAR-related sponsorship is the fact that the organization enjoys a fan base that is unrivaled in terms of loyalty to sponsors. NASCAR must work to understand its consumers' expectations and perceptions of NASCAR events and the organization itself, as well as continue to satisfy the fans that "brought them to the dance." It is this effort that the current research addresses. Specifically, we seek to shed light on the expectations that fans have when attending Winston Cup races and also to examine how these expectations have changed, if at all, as NASCAR has grown.

Theoretical Framework

We examine the expectations and perceptions of NASCAR fans within the framework of the gaps model of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). NASCAR and individual tracks provide a service,

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There are four service provider gaps that contribute to the customer gap. They include: 1) not knowing what customers expect, 2) not selecting the right service designs and standards to meet these expectations, 3) not delivering to service standards, and 4) not matching the service to promises made to customers (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In order to close the customer gap, service providers must also close each of these provider gaps. Before provider gaps two through four can be closed, a firm must close provider gap one by understanding customer expectations. Firms that do not understand customer expectations by monitoring how and why they change may encounter difficulty in designing services to meet customer expectations and keep customers satisfied. This is an important concept, because if expectations increase, a firm that previously had only satisfied customers may encounter increasing numbers of dissatisfied customers though it continues to offer essentially the same service that customers previously found satisfactory. In short, as the customer gap increases, so does customer/fan dissatisfaction.

Methodology
To examine NASCAR’s customer gap, four focus groups were conducted in conjunction with a NASCAR track that hosts Winston Cup events. Prior to beginning each focus group discussion, participants were assured of complete anonymity and told that the discussion was being videotaped and that the study was being conducted by independent researchers with no NASCAR affiliation. Participants were recruited via telephone from the track database and screened to include only those individuals who (a) identified themselves as NASCAR fans, (b) had previously attended more than one NASCAR race, (c) participated in the decision of which races to attend (if a group decision), and (d) were not or did not work for a sponsor of NASCAR or any organization affiliated with NASCAR.

The focus groups included both bleacher and infield fans and were compensated for their time and for mileage to the research facility. The 31 participants in the study were fans from across the entire state that the raceway was in. The gender breakdown of focus group participants was selected to approximate that of all NASCAR fans. Males comprised 64.5% of the participants (20), while females made up 35.5% (11). Ages of participants ranged from 23 to 70, with the following distribution: 20s – 6.45%; 30s – 32.25%; 40s – 19.35%; 50s – 32.25%; 60s – 6.45%; 70s – 3.25%.

A rolling discussion guide was used throughout the study, meaning that the moderator made sure to revisit issues that had arisen in previous discussions. Each group lasted an average of 2 hours. After the completion of each focus group, the taped discussion was independently reviewed by both researchers, who then analyzed the dialogue for patterns of expectations and perceptions (e.g., content analysis of key words, attitudes, verbal and nonverbal reactions, etc.). Following independent analysis of each videotape, the researchers combined results and identified the common and salient themes across groups. There was strong convergence between independent analyses, and the results reflect only the findings upon which both researchers agreed. As is typically noted with focus group studies, while readers should use extreme caution in generalizing these results to NASCAR fans as a whole (i.e., the results are not empirically verified inferences), they do provide important insight that warrants further examination, study, and thought by sport marketing academics, NASCAR, and track managers.

Results
Fan expectations for a Winston Cup event were found to be rising, primarily as a result of the significant increase in the cost of attending an event, and customer perceptions were found to be diminishing as a result of several factors. NASCAR officials and track marketers must take the first step and seek to understand consumer expectations and perceptions and then design the service delivery such that perceptions will exceed, or at least meet, these expectations.

Race Cost, Attendance, and Fan Expectations
As stated earlier, the cost of attending a NASCAR race has increased dramatically. In a relatively short period of time, fans have been handed dramatic increases in ticket, hotel, concession, and merchandise prices. Two separate effects of these increasing costs emerged from this study. The first is quite simply that many fans are indeed being “priced out.” They can no longer afford to attend as many races as before. The second is that the cost increase has led to an increase in various event-related expectations. As price represents an implicit service promise, NASCAR is now promising Winston Cup spectators more. Are they deliv-
ering? We now discuss these two effects of increasing cost separately.

**Race Cost and Attendance**

A common theme among fans in this study is that they are currently attending fewer races than they have in the past and plan to attend fewer in the future. Clearly, the main reason for this is the increased overall cost of attending the race. Not only do individual fans intend to attend fewer races, but pricing has had a dramatic effect on family attendance as well. Many fans discussed the ability to afford only one race per year, and two races per year was also a common response. Further illuminating this problem, focus group members also discussed the fact that when they do attend races now, they often have to plan their vacation around it due to the added expense. Under the vacation scenario, fans will then choose a track that has other vacation/recreational activities nearby (e.g., the beach at Daytona). This is not good news for relatively isolated tracks on the Winston Cup circuit. A typical exchange illustrates the overall cost issue:

**Len:** “They want $25 for a hat that you can go to Wal-Mart and buy for $10 or $12. You know, they’re scamming the public, and a lot of them are the people who put them where they are.”

**Henry:** “Yeah, they’re the people that supported them year after year after year after year.”

**Liz:** “They have the attitude that if you don’t buy the ticket, somebody else will. You buy a $3 bottle of water, a $4 coke, a $5 hot dog . . . and like you said if you want a shirt, you go to the trailer and you’re paying $25 a shirt. You might as well pack up $500 (for 2 people) or sell one of your kids on the street corner. You’ve got to plan your vacation around it . . . use your vacation money to go or you just can’t do it.”

**Len:** “I watch it at home every weekend, and I’m still going to go to some races, you know, I’m going to take my son to some races; but nothing like I used to because number one, you just can’t afford it. I’m priced out.”

**Liz:** “Yeah, you’re almost to one race a year.”

This was a common theme. Fans are able to afford fewer races, and the cost of attendance has top-of-mind awareness. As the previous exchange also illustrates, while ticket prices are at the forefront of the cost issue, focus group members unequivocally state that concession, merchandise, and hotel prices (particularly the requisite multiple-night stay) seriously compounding the problem. As evidence of this, a common theme among focus group members was that many limit the races they attend to those they are able to travel to and from in one day. By doing this, they eliminate the hotel expenses and the expense of dining out, making the high ticket prices less of a burden.

Many focus group members stated that the cost of attendance is compounded given that they normally attend races with their families. They still desired to go to the races, but they desired to do so with their children and could not afford to make it a family event. Consistent with prior research on fan motivation (e.g., Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000), females in particular said that they were unwilling to go unless they could go as a family. Participants also commonly discussed what they perceived to be the “unfairness” of tracks’ typical policy of charging full price for children:

**Henry:** “The guy (at the ticket booth) made the comment that ‘Where you’re sitting is $30 a head . . . does he (Henry’s son who sat on his lap the entire race) have a head?’”

The reduction in number of races attended applies not only to fans in the stands, but to infield fans as well, as the following comment illustrates:

**Andrew:** “That’s the same reason (price) I haven’t been there in three years. When we started going it was $25 to walk in; when we stopped going it was as high as $65 just to walk into the infield, plus what it costs to put the motor home in there. . . . I would say I’m going to less races in the future, because of price. As price escalates, the less I can afford to do. They keep jacking up the prices and that keeps chopping the amount of races I’m comfortable going to.”

Note that in Andrew’s case, the increasing cost limited his attendance not only because of direct affordability, but also (perhaps mainly) because the additional cost makes him feel uncomfortable attending as many races as before. This was the case with a substantial number of other participants as well.

**The Relationship Between Price and Expectations**

While the increased cost of race attendance has directly influenced attendance, it has an equally important effect (specifically, the ticket prices in this case) on the expectations that fans have for NASCAR and for individual tracks. Increased ticket prices implicitly promise fans a better race experience and thus have led to a substantive increase in fan expectations. This includes expectations related to 1) entertainment surrounding the event, 2) physical facility appearance and functionality, 3) employee courtesy and treatment, and 4) parking and traffic.
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The general relationship between price and expectations is one that individual tracks and NASCAR should keep in mind. This relationship seems obvious, but it is vital given the ever-increasing competition for the entertainment dollars of fans. Race executives must constantly monitor if they are giving fans value. They must ask themselves, "Are we providing levels of entertainment that are increasing at the same rate as the ticket prices, or are we simply increasing prices because we think that is what we can get, and that's the going rate?" Results of this study, to a significant extent, indicate the mindset of the focus groups is that many race executives think the latter, which leads to initial signs of eroding fan relations. Steve succinctly illustrates the expectation issue:

Steve: "If they're going to charge such a high price, then they need to make it more enjoyable. Bigger place to put my butt, a bigger cooler, or else bring the ticket prices down. Make it easy to get in and get out is another way to make it more enjoyable."

The customer gap can be closed by either lowering expectations so that the current offering is satisfactory or by meeting or exceeding the expectations. Steve illustrates this well. If the prices remain as they are, tracks need to meet the resultant increased expectations (better facility appearance, noticeably improved traffic flow, reduced crowding in the seats, more pre-race entertainment, etc.). Alternatively, tracks can lower prices (not necessarily through lower individual ticket prices but potentially through packaged promotions with other tracks, family packages, and the like) and thus bring expectations in line with current fan perceptions. Results indicate that for many races on the Winston Cup circuit, it is clear that at least one of these things must be done. Tyler illustrates this latter strategy:

Tyler: "I don't mind all the undesirables we've been talking about (traffic, cramped seating, etc.) if they bring the ticket prices down."

One focus group member explained the current salience of the price/expectation relationship for Winston Cup races with an insightful analogy. Every other year he attends an away college football game between his hometown college team and a conference opponent seven hours away. He states, "It's hell to get there and back, but I don't mind that." He discusses the difficulty in parking and traffic, combined with the fact that his favorite team loses every year. He then describes how the difficulty experienced in the same manner at Winston Cup events bothers him. He goes on to explain this difference as a function of the difference in ticket prices between the two events. When fans pay $100 to attend an event, they expect to be entertained, to be more comfortable, and to encounter less trouble getting to and from the event than they do for a $25 ticket. Other members of this group reinforced this analogy by comparing the cost of a Winston Cup ticket to the cost of a season ticket for college football. In essence, they commented that they can get many more hours of entertainment for essentially the same price as a 3-hour race.

During the focus groups, detail was sought regarding specific areas where fan expectations have increased. As stated earlier, these areas are entertainment surrounding the event, facility appearance and functionality, employee courtesy and treatment, and parking and traffic. We now address each of these in turn.

Facility appearance and function. Several issues related to the appearance of race facilities arose during the course of the study. Specifically, in return for increasing ticket prices, fans expect generally cleaner, more attractive grounds (e.g., "spruce it up more; make it look good") than they currently find at most tracks; permanent restrooms (as opposed to the portables many racetracks use); relatively new and roomier seating; and showers at racetrack campgrounds. Increased expectations in this category were not limited to fans in the stands but were shared by infield fans as well. Suggestions here included, but were not limited to, items such as better drainage in the infield, more powerful electrical hookups for RVs, and the ability of RV fans to purchase staple items such as bread and soft drinks at the track. In essence, race fans are increasingly expecting a "facility" as opposed to a "racetrack."

Parking/Traffic. The congestion of the parking and traffic situation is one that does not require high ticket prices to frustrate fans. However, it becomes an issue fans are less willing to deal with as the cost of an event increases. Specifically, parking and traffic are perceived as relatively more burdensome given the increasing cost of attending a race. As event cost increases, race fans expect less congestion in parking and traffic areas, more parking and traffic attendants, and multiple exit routes. As race cost increases, tracks need to be aware of these expectations. This situation is contributing significantly to the increasing imbalance seen by fans in terms of what they are giving to attend the race versus what they receive in return.

Employee courtesy and treatment. With the increase in ticket prices, the salience of employee courtesy and helpfulness has increased for the fans in our study. This was evidenced by quotes such as the following:

Henry: (in response to why he now goes to fewer races) "The price increase and the unfriendliness (of employees). The friendliness is being
sapped away from these tracks when you go to 'em' anymore."

Molly: "You've paid a lot for that, you know." . . .

Bill: (finishing for Molly) "Yeah, they (employees) just act like
You're just here."

These quotes are telling. In both of these statements, the reader can clearly see the correlation between the cost to fans and their expectations in terms of employee courtesy and treatment. They do not expect employees to act like they are "just there." For the price that they are paying, they expect to be shown appreciation, even by the volunteer employees that make up much of a race event staff.

Service research has uncovered multiple service quality dimensions related to the performance of employees. For example, "responsiveness" is defined as a willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. A second employee-related dimension is "assurance," defined as the extent to which employees are knowledgeable and engender a customer's trust and confidence. A final employee-related dimension is "empathy," defined as the caring, individualized attention employees provide to customers (e.g., Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996). Our results propose that expectations along each of these dimensions are increasing among NASCAR fans. The nature of large-scale events is such that the major priority in staffing events is to make sure there are sufficient numbers of volunteers. Unfortunately, human resource efforts from event managers often do not go much further. We suggest that event managers must accompany the increase in event cost with extra effort to ensure that standards for these three service quality dimensions are in place and communicated to all employees. They must focus particularly on volunteers, as they have less at stake in the service process than paid employees and, as a result, may feel relatively less inclined toward a proper service orientation.

Fans come to the race to see the drivers and the action, yet it is clear that the event employees also influence their perceptions of the experience. Indeed, these employees can be considered "boundary spanners," in that they are the representatives of the event who have the most physical and verbal contact with the fans (e.g., Hartline & Ferrrell, 1996; Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoads, 1994). Clearly, race event managers need to take bolder steps (e.g., mailed orientation materials, orientation when volunteers pick up credentials, etc.) to educate these boundary-spanning employees in the dimensions of assurance, empathy, and responsiveness. Related to assurance, consider the fan who asks an employee the location of the nearest portable restroom. The fan does not care if the employee is a volunteer who has never been to the track before. That fan's thought is, "I paid $100 for a ticket, and this employee can't even tell me where the nearest restroom is." Related to empathy, consider focus group member Jerry, who stated that an employee would not let him back into a track through an "out" gate, even though his RV was directed next to the gate. The employee insisted that Jerry walk an extremely long distance ("two miles," in his mind) just so that he could go through an "in" gate. This clearly displays a lack of empathy for the customer, who is paying a large sum of money to be there. These "critical incidents" (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000) have a strong effect on fan perceptions and word-of-mouth, particularly given fan expectations.

Racetracks should ensure the education of volunteer employees regarding track layout, location of facilities, and the like. "Soft standards" (e.g., greet customers, thank them for coming to the race, etc.) should be set for employee courtesy, and if these standards are already in place, the reality of rising fan expectations necessitates a renewed commitment to them. For example, volunteer shift length could be limited to a certain number of hours in order to reduce employee irritability. What is clear from this study's results is that the more fans give, the more they expect from employees in terms of courtesy, friendliness, and knowledge regarding the event and the facility.

Entertainment. One fan expressed a common sentiment of the focus groups when he stated, "When I pay that much for a ticket, you better keep me entertained." The general theme here is that the increased cost of race attendance has led to an expectation on the part of the fan for activity surrounding the actual race that will give him or her a more value for the dollar. The fans now expect more of an "event" as opposed to simply a "race." They want to be entertained before the race, during the race, and to some extent, even after the race. Fans mentioned they would like to see a weekend of activities.
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Instead of “sitting around and waiting for the race.” Racetracks must increasingly strive to hold fan attention and interest from the moment that fans arrive at the grounds to the moment they leave. Participants gave examples of entertainment they would welcome, including but not limited to motorcycle jumping, small concerts around the grounds, non-auto-related competition among drivers and crews with proceeds to charity, celebrity appearances, and participatory activities for adults and children (e.g., driving simulator, go-carts, etc.).

With increasing television coverage, increasing cost of event attendance, and the addition of new tracks across the country, NASCAR fans are becoming more geographically localized, meaning that they attend fewer races outside of their locale. Therefore, if tracks want to attract fans from outside of their local geographic market, they need to develop a reputation for both exciting racing and a quality, “overall event experience.” Quality entertainment surrounding the race will aid in this task.

**Fan Perceptions of NASCAR**

Price and its influence on attendance (direct influence as well as indirect influence through increased expectations) is not the only overarching theme in the results. Participants were asked questions designed to gain insight into their perceptions of NASCAR racing and to learn whether a change in these perceptions has influenced attendance. These included questions such as, “Do you feel valued as a NASCAR fan? What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word NASCAR? Describe the relationship between NASCAR and its fans.” Results clearly show that some fans perceive their relationship with NASCAR as increasingly strained. By no means is this strain sufficient to keep the vast majority of them from attending races, but it is enough to reduce their rate of attendance. Results suggest that these fans feel increasingly devalued by NASCAR. We explain this in detail in the paragraphs that follow.

When asked the first thing that came to their mind when they heard the word NASCAR, the most common responses included, “greed,” “money,” “it’s more of a business now instead of a sport,” “corporate takeover by the sponsors,” “declining fan appreciation,” “huge business,” and “a way to make money for the people in it.” Other specific comments included but were not limited to the following:

**Leneau:** “They are continually seeing how much more they can make. There’s nothing wrong with making money, but they are making it at the expense of the little man that can’t afford it. To me it’s just greed. They’ve got more money than they could ever spend right now, every one of them.”

**Henry:** “Don’t shave that fan appreciation crap down my throat with every set of commercials.” (This followed his statement that it no longer exists to the degree that it used to.) They don’t make you feel at home anymore. Before, you felt like they wanted you there and they wanted you to come back. Now, it’s not a relaxed atmosphere anymore.”

**Liz:** “They’re gimmee, gimmee, gimmee. They make you feel like a herd of cattle.”

The perceptions in this regard were almost universal. These fans believe that NASCAR is becoming increasingly greedy and corporate, forgetting about the “fans who got them where they are.” Understanding this perception is valuable to NASCAR and individual tracks in and of itself. However, in order to change the perception, it is necessary to discover the reasons behind its formation. One primary reason, of course, is the previously addressed increasing cost of attendance. However, cost to fans only scratches the surface. Other important factors contributing to this perception are (a) the fans’ belief that NASCAR is increasingly accommodating sponsors at the expense of the fans, and (b) fans’ perception that they have reduced access to the drivers.

With regard to the two issues above, fans increasingly believe that “the little guy is being pushed out.” This can essentially be described as a feeling of “class envy” on the part of these fans, as evidenced by comments such as the following:

**Kevin:** “They are weeding out the poor guys while catering to the rich guys.”

**Steve:** “NASCAR needs to remember the guys who got them there, and I don’t think they’re doing that.”

**Charlie:** “Cut the roots off the tree, the tree is gonna die. That’s the only way you can look at it.”

These feelings are important to recognize and were an overwhelming theme throughout the groups. These fans believe, to a significant degree, that they are becoming less and less
important to NASCAR and the race-tracks. To support this belief, many of the participants discussed the fact that their access to drivers, which is one of the unique aspects of NASCAR that they value relative to other professional sports, is declining, and they see this as at least partially the result of NASCAR’s increasing attention to sponsors at their expense. A quote from Andrew nicely illustrates this common perception:

Andrew: “I think they’re (NASCAR and the fans) drifting apart. When I started going there, it used to be there was no sectioned off area for the drivers. They [the drivers] were more friendly then. Now, with the time put on them from corporate sponsors and the way things are set up, they’re getting more and more isolated from the fans. You can’t go up and talk to a driver anymore as easily as you used to. There’s starting to be more of a separation because the drivers just don’t have the time.”

Fans throughout the group understood the limitations that drivers fact that fans see sponsor demands on drivers increasing, as well as a general increase in “corporate influence”—which heavily contributes to the increase in ticket prices—leads them to believe that corporate influence limits the number of races they can attend and reduces the enjoyment from the races they do attend.

Discussion and Conclusion

The service literature has defined “service recovery” as actions taken by an organization in response to a service failure (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Effectively resolving customer problems has been shown to have a strong effect on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and profit (e.g., Smith & Bolton, 1998; Tax & Brown, 1998). The current study has provided insight into the expectations and perceptions of NASCAR fans by illuminating the areas where NASCAR can engage in service recovery. While our results focus on challenges faced by NASCAR, the underlying theme of the focus groups was the fact that the fans mind as it continues to grow and expand in the months and years ahead. In addition to the recommendations grounded in our results, we propose that NASCAR fans, due to NASCAR’s history of being a “fan-friendly” entity, adopt a relatively heightened sensitivity to the issue of NASCAR remaining “true to its roots” by embracing the fans that have fostered its growth. As indication of this, one can point to the negative publicity NASCAR has received from some for “leaving” CBS and ESPN. Critics of this move argue that these networks helped build NASCAR to what it is today and that NASCAR is being “disloyal” by leaving them for bigger contracts with other networks. It is well established that loyalty is a trait exhibited and valued by NASCAR fans (e.g., Lapi & Speter, 2000; Rufenacht, Groves, & Foster, 1997), and that they expect NASCAR to be loyal to them as well. It seems logical, then, for NASCAR and individual tracks to consider increasing their focus on relationship marketing.

The umbrella encompassing all of our results is that NASCAR must begin to examine and address the notion that some of its core fans feel devalued by the organization. NASCAR must keep this notion in mind as it continues to grow and expand in the months and years ahead. In addition to the recommendations grounded in our results, we propose that NASCAR fans, due to NASCAR’s history of being a “fan-friendly” entity, adopt a relatively heightened sensitivity to the issue of NASCAR remaining “true to its roots” by embracing the fans who have fostered its growth.

had in terms of time, and the fact that the drivers were indeed there to do a job. However, the perception that there could be more driver access for the “true fan” remains, as does the perception that sponsors and others with “connections” increasingly receive NASCAR’s appreciation and attention rather than the fans. These fans truly believe that they are being “pushed aside.” Fans love the drivers and feel valued by the drivers themselves, but they believe changes in the business side of the sport are threatening this relationship. The love racing. They are uniquely attracted to racing, think there is nothing like it, and given the right conditions, desire to be dedicated fans. In addition to describing NASCAR as becoming increasingly corporate and greedy, other common descriptors included “fun,” “speed,” “excitement,” “adrenaline,” and the like.

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Relationship marketing attempts to retain and develop an organization’s best customers (Berry, 1995). While NASCAR has taken significant steps in recent years to develop relationships with sponsors, it must refocus its relationship efforts with its fans. Relationship marketing is becoming increasingly important in sport marketing, where fewer managers are looking toward short-term promotional strategies to fill seats or attract consumers (Johnson, 1997; Shani, 1997). NASCAR must increasingly take note of the lifetime value of a fan (Reichheld &
Sasser, 1990), recognizing fans for their potential financial contribution over a lifetime of event attendance, merchandise purchasing, word-of-mouth advertising, financial support of sponsors, and television viewing. Two components of relationship marketing, financial bonding and social bonding (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991), should be considered. Financial bonding (providing financial and/or material incentives for attendance) could be accomplished through mechanisms such as track fan clubs, where gifts could be given or special events offered to members who attend multiple events. Other financial bonding strategies could include discounted multiple-event ticket packages, either to events at the same track or at commonly owned tracks within close proximity to each other. Social bonding (communicating that the organization values the fan personally) strategies could include utilizing a database to email birthday greetings, anniversary greetings, or to communicate special activities/events for children for households with children, or simply to mail thank-you for continued patronage. With the high cost of attending races and the resultant increased attractiveness of watching races on television, fans need as many reasons as possible to choose to attend an event. Increased financial and social bonding would be a positive step toward this end.

In addition to relationship marketing, NASCAR and racetracks should address the issue of event cost for the average fan. As noted in our results, many fans are reducing, in some cases dramatically, the number of races they attend, due to cost. Fans are well aware of the fact that while tickets to the race are a business expense for the “suits,” they are often a week’s pay for them. Furthermore, in order to maintain on-site spectators for the future, tracks should make a concerted effort to keep existing fans and attract new ones. Consideration should be given to discounted tickets for children and sponsored family ticket packages where they do not already exist. Further attention should be given to lowering concession and parking prices in order to keep total event costs in check. The increase in total event cost combined with the increase in network promotion of televised races (resulting from new television contracts) makes watching televised races a more attractive option for the fan than it has been in the past. Tracks should take note of this and develop relationship and pricing strategies to counterbalance it.

It is important that sport marketers continually monitor fan expectations and perceptions. The largest spectator sport in the United States is no exception. While NASCAR fans fully believe that there is nothing quite like stock car racing, they are increasingly expecting a better overall “event experience” beyond the race itself. It is up to NASCAR and the Winston Cup tracks to accept and address this issue.

References


