



**Industrial Marketing in Sport:
Understanding Season Ticket Renewal Across Account Types**

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Abstract

This paper is the first to extend industrial (or business-to-business) marketing principles to the market for traditional season tickets. In doing so, a three-dimensional characterization of the season ticket holder (STH) is developed and provides a new foundation upon which market segmentation and ticket sales initiatives can be built. This study then uses this new framework to segment and examine the key renewal factor differences across STH account types. Specifically, group differences on perceived venue related and non-venue related barriers to renewal, overall product quality, and account representative relationship quality are analyzed. This study finds business-to-consumer (B2C) accounts are more concerned with product quality and typical barriers to purchase as they consider renewing their account for the following season than business-to-business (B2B) accounts. Additionally, this study finds B2C accounts report higher levels of intention to renew than B2B accounts.

Keywords: business-to-business marketing, season tickets, renewal and retention

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Introduction

Marketing and selling season ticket packages has become one of the most popular manners by which spectator sport organizations work to guarantee revenue streams year in and year out. In general, season ticket purchases represent a significant portion of team revenues (James, Kolbe, and Trail, 2002), and successfully selling season ticket products ensures a team's venue will boast strong attendance figures on game days. While approximately one-third of team revenue comes directly from season ticket sales (Wakefield, 2006), almost all other team revenue streams are contingent upon success at the gate. Potential corporate partners such as sponsors and media companies seek an opportunity to deliver marketing messages or television and radio programming to large audiences. Spectator sport provides an excellent environment to target large homogenous groups of consumers as part of an organization's overall marketing strategy. However, a sport property's ability to capitalize on its position as a purveyor of a target market to a potential corporate partner requires strong viewership. Viewership in the form of game attendance, television ratings, website traffic, or radio listenership all provide useful data as sport properties work to develop corporate partnerships. Further, strong season ticket sales provide a quantifiable audience that, at the very least, provides a baseline in predicting viewership in a coming season (McDonald, 2010). As a result, the sale of season ticket products in the form of any annual seat contract including premium seating sales is a foundational strategy to ensuring strong viewership across all areas.

The season ticket product is unique in that the fundamental purpose of purchase and consumption of season tickets may differ from one account holder to the next. For example, the mother in a family of four may purchase full season tickets from a National Hockey League (NHL) team sales representative and she, her husband, and their two children may then attend every home game as a family. The family is likely to purchase team merchandise, memorabilia, and attend autograph signings of their favourite players. Consumers like these often make their purchase decision as a result of a high degree of social identification to the team or sense of belonging with the broader group of the team's fans. Simply put, they are fans, and the purchase and consumption of the

season ticket product represents an opportunity for them to reap all the social, psychological, and emotional rewards fans seek in this type of exchange. However, this example can be extended to show fans are not the only buyers of season tickets. While this family passionately cheers on their team, two seats over, in the same arena, at the same game, a man and a woman passively take in the hockey game as they discuss the manners by which their respective businesses can help the other achieve a variety of corporate objectives. Neither of these two people paid for their ticket to the game. The tickets were provided to the man at his office as a tool to do business, and he invited a major client to the game in an effort to jumpstart a relationship. The scenario described is commonplace in spectator sport and is generally understood by ticket sales managers and sales personnel. In fact, current industry sales training often focuses on positioning season ticket products as business tools that solve typical problems faced by corporations when soliciting potential corporate accounts.

As a sales paradigm, solution-based sales that trains representatives to discover needs and sell solutions has been the prevailing approach to selling products and services in B2B settings (Adamson, et al., 2012). However, recent research suggests the most effective B2B salespeople are transitioning from simply aligning a product as a solution to a given problem and toward an approach that utilizes an insight about a prospect that alters his/her perception about some facet of his/her business and challenges the prospect to act in a new way (Adamson, et al., 2012). Existing approaches to selling the season ticket product fit the conventional B2B solution selling approach. To effectively move ticket sales staffs toward an insight selling approach an analysis of the STH is needed. Further, ticket marketing strategies and sport marketing research has been slow in recognizing the importance of treating and examining existing and potential season ticket holders as business markets.

Season ticket holders are widely viewed and analysed as fans in the sport marketing literature. McDonald (2010) describes STHs as highly involved consumers who attend games in an effort to express themselves and their core values. Additionally, season ticket holder research has indicated the motivation to purchase season tickets may come from a desire to feel tangibly connected to success, to obtain post-season game access, to feel a personal connection to the team, or to help a team survive financially (Deserpa, 1994; Cialdini, et al., 1976; and McDonald and Stavros, 2007). It is quite likely that these purchase motivations are typical of fans who buy season tickets like the family of four described in the earlier example. However, this application of

existing spectator consumption theory fails to address any non-fan buyers and attendees. Sport marketing literature is beginning to recognize the importance of managing industrial marketing relationships in the premium seating space (Titlebaum, et al., 2013; Titlebaum and Lawrence, 2009; and Lawrence, Contorno, and Steffek, 2007); however, there are no studies to date that directly extend industrial marketing theory to standard season ticket account holders.

Research is now needed to investigate the differences between ticket holders who purchase their tickets for business purposes and those who purchase with other motives in mind. However, to appropriately analyze these differences, it is prudent to apply a conceptual framework which recognizes the critical differences between B2C season ticket holders, B2B season ticket holders, and the role played by fan attachment. Therefore the objective of this study is threefold: 1) To advocate for a new conceptual foundation on which future research and practical season ticket sales and marketing initiatives can be built. 2) To segment season ticket holders based on the resulting STH account types. 3) To analyze differences across account types on critical variables affecting renewal intention.

Industrial marketing in spectator sport

Industrial marketing is defined as the creation and management of relationships between product or service suppliers and organizational customers (Morris, Pitt, and Honeycutt, 2001). Commonly, industrial marketing is referred to as business-to-business (B2B) marketing. B2B markets differ from consumer markets by virtue of the customer to which marketing messages are delivered, and the market for B2B products and services is generated as a result of demand derived from more typical consumer markets (Webster, 1991). One example in season ticket markets is that companies often use event tickets to reward employee productivity. This assumes that employees have a need or want to be rewarded with entertainment or more specifically event tickets. The success of spectator sport organizations that adopt B2B selling practices is indicative of the fact that season ticket markets are industrial in nature. In describing B2B marketing, Webster (1991) states industrial markets are made up of organizations that buy the same goods and services as consumers, and the distinction between B2B and B2C markets is dictated by the consumer and his, her, or its usage of a product or service. Ultimately, the end user is not typically the focal point of the exchange process in industrial marketing settings. As a result, B2B marketers often focus more on the process of exchange rather than the outcome a product or service provides an end user.

In response to these differences, B2B marketing scholars and industry professionals have focused on organizational buying behaviour, the development of business networks, and buyer-seller relationship links as primary marketing strategies (Backhaus, Luggler, and Koch, 2011 and Reid and Plank, 2000). Further, scholars have recently begun examining new product, service marketing, personal selling, and key account management strategies that are unique to B2B settings (Backhaus, et al., 2011).

Spectator sport organizations engage in industrial marketing on a number of levels; however, the application of B2B marketing principles to sport settings has been somewhat limited in scope. Specifically, the sport marketing literature initially only identified and addressed two key areas of B2B marketing. Wolfe, et al. (2002) state that the B2B relationships in the sport industry may either be categorized as sport/sponsor relationships or sport/media relationships. Further, Benijits, Lagae, and Vanclooster (2011) emphasize this by arguing that as a result of Wolfe, et al.'s (2002) categorization teams are confronted with only two types of business markets, the market for broadcasting rights and the market for sponsorships. While these authors are correct to point out that these two types of relationships are B2B partnerships, this inherently limits an organization's ability to position season tickets as a product that can fulfil the needs and/or wants of a business market. More recently, Titlebaum, et al. (2013) have extended B2B theory to the market for premium seating inventory by describing the buying process from the perspective of the B2B account holder. While sponsorships, broadcasting rights, and premium inventory do represent three critical B2B marketing and selling areas, no studies have addressed typical season ticket accounts from a B2B perspective. This study aims to be the first to provide a B2B framework upon which the analysis of season ticket accounts can occur. Research is needed in this area as the majority of outbound sales efforts among team sales staffs is geared toward developing B2B relationships, and a significant portion of sales training is devoted to approaching industrial markets.

Further, it has been argued B2B service research is lacking in the wider body of industrial marketing literature. As a primarily service-based industry, research on season ticket markets fits this area of criticism. The majority of the B2B sport marketing literature can be categorized as sponsorship research. Sponsorship literature has focused on a variety of areas. Notably, the evaluation of sponsorship success and the distinction between sponsorship activation and leveraging have emerged as critically important areas of examination to the industry. The development of more sophisticated methods of

evaluation coupled with an increased understanding of how to appropriately activate and leverage a partnership provides the needed evidence to build long-lasting, mutually beneficial B2B relationships. Additionally, recent work has begun to examine broadcasting partnerships from an industrial marketing perspective (Benijits, et al., 2011). However, Farrelly and Quester (2005) argue B2B marketing is an underrepresented area of study in the field of sport marketing, and few studies have examined the premium ticket product from an industrial perspective. In general, the sport marketing literature has studied event spectators and ticket buyers from a predominately fan attachment perspective. Further, the spectator sport consumer behaviour literature relies on traditional consumer marketing principles. Overall, the lack of attention currently paid to B2B service marketing and the lack of recognition that the season ticket product is regularly sold to business markets, creates a distinct need to root future season ticket sales research and marketing initiatives in a framework that recognizes the dynamic nature of the season ticket account holder.

Conceptualizing the season ticket holder

Often, the terms customer and consumer are treated as synonymous with one another (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). Further, when considering the spectator sport product the term fan is a regularly utilized third term that is used in place of the terms customer and/or consumer. Specifically, the word fan is often used to describe a person who attends a sporting event. While in many instances it is true, fans attend games. An individual is not required to be a fan to attend or purchase the ticket product. To develop a framework for segmenting B2B and B2C markets for season tickets, a general examination of the definitions of these three terms is appropriate. First, a consumer is a person who uses a product or service while a customer is the individual or entity that purchases a product or service (Webster, 2000). While in many service settings this distinction may be of little consequence, it is of critical importance in appropriately discussing season ticket holders. It is clear in a typical service exchange that the consumer and customer is often the same individual. For example, when a person enters a coffee shop and purchases a cup of coffee from a barista, that exchange results in the beverage reaching its end user. However, in B2B settings there is an additional step (or perhaps multiple steps) in the supply-chain before the product or service reaches the end user. For instance, the coffee retailer may be an industrial market customer for the raw materials used to create a cup of coffee, but the retailer is not the end user. In the market for season ticket accounts it is possible that the exchange is

similar to that of an end consumer purchasing a cup of coffee. A season ticket account holder may be both the customer who purchases the ticket from a sales representative and the consumer who attends the subsequent game. Yet, it is also possible that the person who purchases the tickets from a sales representative never attends a game all season. Instead, this customer may distribute the tickets in an effort to accomplish a corporate objective. This type of arrangement fits the definition of B2B marketing discussed and illustrates the first two layers in this paper's categorization of season ticket account holders represented in Figure 1.

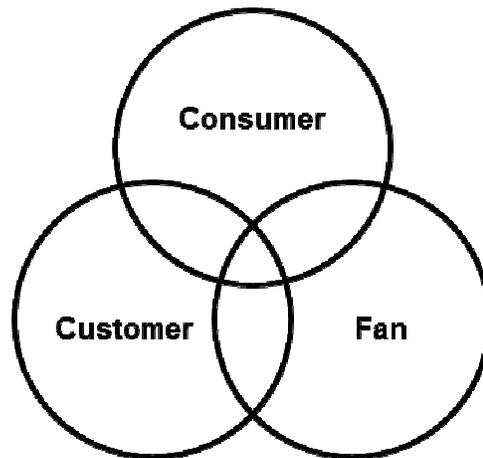


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Season Ticket Account Holder Profiles.

In most service settings, a focused description of the distinction between customers and consumers would be sufficient to begin describing the supply chain and relationship building process involved in marketing and selling a service to B2C and B2B markets. However, the common usage and application of the term fan to describe season ticket account holders requires the addition of a third layer to the analysis. A fan is defined as a person with an overwhelming liking or interest in a particular person, group, or idea (Thorne and Bruner, 2006). An individual's fan identification may range from low to high, and a number of consumption related characteristics are often attributed to higher levels of fan identification. However, while individuals higher in fan identification typically indicated heightened level of intention to purchase products and services the term fan does not indicate a required consumption behaviour. Yet, the term fan is commonly invoked when discussing spectators or consumers. This confusion suggests clarity is needed. Much like a customer who may not be a consumer, a fan is not necessarily a customer or a consumer. Conversely, it is possible for a fan to be both

a customer and a consumer. Customer, consumer, and fan are three distinct terms; however, there is the potential for any one individual to fit one, two, or all three of these designations based on their position in the exchange process. The Venn diagram presented in Figure 1 represents this dynamic.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to segment season ticket holders according to their role in the season ticket purchase and exchange process based on the conceptualization described and to examine the differences of these account types across variables that influence the intention to renew season tickets. Specifically, season ticket holders will be segmented by conducting a k-means cluster analysis. Then, group differences across the resulting clusters, on product quality, relationship quality, and perceived constraints to renewal will be analyzed to determine important differences across segments. Additionally, overall intention of account renewal will be analyzed across segments. Overall, this study seeks to extend industrial marketing theory to the market for season tickets by analyzing the unique differences in the importance of product quality, relationship quality, and perceived constraints to renewal to a series of ticket holder segments.

Methodology

Sample

An electronic survey was delivered to the STH database of a National Hockey League franchise. A link to the survey was emailed by the team to over 3,000 unique email addresses within its season ticket database. The survey was left open for a total of three weeks, and each email account received a reminder to participate seven days after initial distribution. The resulting sample consisted of 823 usable responses representing a response rate of 27.4%. The team preferred that it not include an incentive to participate in the survey likely impacting the overall response rate.

Questionnaire - Procedure

First, ticket holders were asked a series of questions designed to segment them according to the proposed conceptualization. Participants were asked whether or not they were the individual who made the account's ticket purchase. Those that indicated they did make the actual purchase fit the definition of customers. Then, 7-point Likert scales were used to ask participants to rate the regularity with which they personally attended the team's hockey games. Those who were identified as attending a moderate

to high frequency of games were deemed to fit the definition of consumer. Finally, the team identification index was included to measure individual ticket holder level of fan attachment to the team (Trail and James, 2001). Participants who could be categorized as moderate to high in fan identification fit the definition of a fan proposed in this paper. These three measurements were used to categorize STHs according to the framework proposed in this paper. The regularity of consumption and the distribution of fan identification means were somewhat bimodal. As a result, STHs were classified as either moderately regular attendees or highly regular attendees and moderate or high in fan identification. No subjects could be classified as having a low level of attendance regularity or a low level of fan attachment. Collectively, these items were used in a k-means cluster analysis to segment STHs according to their self-categorization as a customer, consumer, or fan

Next, respondents were asked to answer a series of questions related to the quality of their experiences and the variables that impact their decisions to renew their accounts. To accomplish these measurement tasks a series of scales previously tested in the sport marketing literature were modified to suit the research setting. First, product quality was measured using Zhang, et al.'s (1997) scale designed to assess the quality of on-ice performance and the resulting game experience. Second, STH perceptions of their relationships with their assigned account executive were measured using Howatt, Absher, Crilley, and Milne's (1996) service staff quality scale. Third, Trail, Robinson, and Kim's (2008) venue and non-venue constraint instrument was modified to measure the overall importance of the venue and non-venue variables as they pertained to a STH's decision to renew an account. Finally, respondents were asked to report their overall intention to renew their season ticket account for the next hockey season.

Statistical analysis

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted using the STH groups from the k-means cluster analysis as the independent variable and product quality, relationship quality, and renewal constraints as dependent variables. Overall renewal intentions were also compared across groups.

Results

Cluster Analysis

The initial purpose of this study was to segment STHs based on their involvement as customers, consumers, or fans. The k-means cluster analysis revealed six feasible

clusters for further examination. For convenience, the six clusters have been named and can be defined as follows: The first cluster, Customers, are those STHs that indicated they made the actual ticket purchase; however, these individuals attended a moderate number of games and moderately identified as fans of the team. Second, Customer-Consumers are those that made the actual purchase and personally attend games with a high degree of regularity. However, these individuals indicated only moderate levels of fan identification. Third, Consumer-Fans are those who did not make the actual ticket purchase but they do attend games with high regularity and can be classified as high in fan identification. Fourth, Customer-Fans are individuals who made the ticket purchase and are high in fan identification; yet, they do not attend games with high regularity. Fifth, Customer-Consumer-Fans are those who purchased the tickets, attend games with a high degree of regularity, and are high in fan identification. Finally, Fans are individuals who indicated they are high in fan identification, but they only attend games with moderate regularity and they did not make the actual ticket purchase. Table 1 includes a list of the six clusters with relevant frequency statistics.

Table 1. Season Ticket Holder Clusters.

| <i>Cluster Name</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Customers | 41 | 5.0 |
| Customer-Consumers | 83 | 10.1 |
| Consumer-Fans | 188 | 22.8 |
| Customer-Fans | 65 | 7.9 |
| Customer-Consumer-Fans | 362 | 44.0 |
| Fans | 84 | 10.2 |
| Total | 823 | 100.0 |

Manova

The MANOVA supported the STH conceptualization presented in this paper. Specifically, the main effect from the multivariate null hypothesis of equality of the means across the six STH clusters indicated statistically significant differences (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.788$, $F = 2.306$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.047$). These results provide evidence that segmenting STHs according to their role as customers, consumers, and fans is important when analyzing critical variables that influence the decision to renew an account. Table 2 shows the univariate results for STH type on product quality, relationship quality, renewal constraints, and renewal intentions. In sum, eight renewal variables were found to significantly differ across STH types. Product quality expressed in terms of the on-ice product quality as it relates to the game day experience differed

significantly across STHs ($p < .001$) while the quality of a STH's relationship with his/her account executive was not significantly different ($p = .078$). Three out of the six potential renewal constraints that were related to the venue were significant: venue cleanliness ($p = .020$), concessions ($p = .038$), and parking ($p = .048$). Additionally, four out of the nine non-venue constraints were found to be significantly different across STH type: weather ($p = .037$), total cost ($p = <.001$), if the game was broadcast on TV or radio ($p = <.001$), and other social obligations ($p = <.001$). Finally, the overall intention for accounts to renew for the following season was significantly different ($p = .002$).

Table 2. Univariate Results for STH Type on Renewal Variables.

| <i>STH Cluster</i> | <i>Dependent Variable</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | η^2 |
|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| STH Type | Product Quality | 5 | 12.24 | <.001* | .070 |
| | Relationship Quality | 5 | 1.992 | .078 | .012 |
| | Venue cleanliness | 5 | 2.693 | .020* | .016 |
| | Concessions | 5 | 2.370 | .038* | .014 |
| | Parking | 5 | 2.244 | .048* | .014 |
| | Restrooms | 5 | 1.018 | .406 | .006 |
| | Service Staff | 5 | 1.988 | .078 | .012 |
| | Seating | 5 | 1.288 | .267 | .008 |
| | Weather | 5 | 2.380 | .037* | .014 |
| | Other Leisure | 5 | 0.726 | .604 | .004 |
| | Other Sports | 5 | 1.880 | .095 | .011 |
| | Total Cost | 5 | 4.887 | <.001* | .029 |
| | Team Performance | 5 | 0.829 | .529 | .005 |
| | Venue Location | 5 | 1.899 | .092 | .011 |
| | TV/Radio Broadcast | 5 | 5.634 | <.001* | .033 |
| | Professional Commitments | 5 | 2.160 | .057 | .013 |
| Social Obligations | 5 | 8.769 | <.001* | .051 | |

Post hoc analyses revealed significant differences between various groups across the significant dependent variables. Specifically, six significant between groups differences were detected as it related to the importance of product quality, measured in terms of team performance and the game experience. Three of the measured venue constraint variables were found to significantly differ across the STH clusters. Both venue cleanliness and concessions only exhibited one significant between group difference, and despite the early significant finding with regard to parking, no between group differences were found to be statistically significant when analyzing the post hoc tests. Four non-venue renewal constraints were found to be significant. However, no between group differences were found with respect to weather, two for total cost, three for whether the game was broadcast on TV and/or radio, and five with regard to the importance of other social obligations. Table 3 includes a list of the significant between group differences and the corresponding mean difference values.

Table 3. Significant Between Group Differences.

| <i>Groups</i> | <i>Mean diff.</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>SE</i> |
|---|-------------------|----------|-----------|
| <i>Product Quality</i> | | | |
| Customers & Customer-Consumer-Fans | -.533 | .002 | .138 |
| Customers & Customer-Fans | -.517 | .032 | .168 |
| Customer-Consumers & Consumer Fans | -.553 | <.001 | .111 |
| Customer-Consumers & Customer-Consumer-Fans | -.136 | <.001 | .076 |
| Customer-Consumers & Customer-Fans | -.673 | <.001 | .139 |
| Customer-Consumer-Fans & Fans | .365 | .005 | |
| <i>Venue Cleanliness</i> | | | |
| Customer-Consumers & Customer-Consumer-Fans | -.416 | .024 | .132 |
| <i>Concessions</i> | | | |
| Customer-Consumers & Customer-Consumer-Fans | -.427 | .050 | .145 |
| <i>Total Cost</i> | | | |
| Consumer-Fan & Customer-Consumer-Fan | -.274 | .032 | .089 |
| Fan & Customer-Consumer-Fan | -.513 | <.001 | .120 |
| <i>Game on TV and/or radio</i> | | | |
| Customer-Consumer & Consumer-Fan | -.720 | .010 | .211 |
| Customer-Consumer & Customer-Consumer-Fan | -.969 | <.001 | .195 |
| Customer-Consumer & Customer-Fan | -.939 | .006 | .265 |
| <i>Other Social Obligations</i> | | | |
| Customer-Consumer & Customer-Fan | -1.315 | .001 | .317 |
| Consumer-Fan & Customer-Consumer-Fan | -.666 | .002 | .172 |
| Consumer-Fan & Customer-Fan | -1.682 | <.001 | .275 |
| Fan & Customer-Fan | -1.522 | <.001 | .316 |
| Customer-Fan & Customer-Consumer-Fan | -1.017 | .001 | .258 |

As a result of the importance of understanding an account holder's intention to renew his or her season tickets for the following season, renewal intention is analysed separately. Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of each STH cluster's likelihood of renewal for the following season. Figure 2 indicates those STH clusters that include heightened fan attachment are expressing a higher likelihood to renew their seats for the next season. This result is not surprising given extant literature on fan identification.

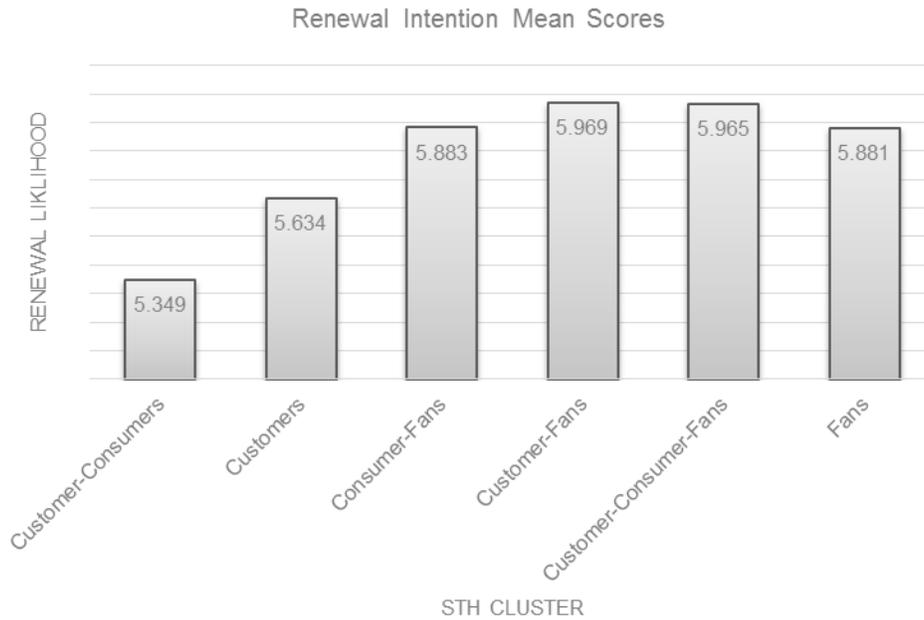


Figure 2. Overall Likelihood of Renewal.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was three-fold. First, the study advocates for a fresh conceptualization of the season ticket holder that is more in line with the industry's approach to marketing and selling season ticket packages. Second, the customer-consumer-fan conceptualization is tested using a sample of NHL season ticket account holders. Third, group differences were analyzed across the resulting season ticket account type groupings to determine the relative importance of select variables that impact account renewal.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge examining B2B relationships in sport marketing. Specifically, this study is the first to explicitly apply B2B marketing theory to STHs of a professional sport team by providing a segmentation framework that relies on a thorough understanding of what constitutes a customer, consumer, and fan. Further, this study builds on Titlebaum, et al.'s (2013) examination of the market for premium seating inventory by allowing us to understand the importance of specific renewal factors to industrial buyers of traditional season tickets. This research was needed as the majority of outbound selling efforts teams engage in are designed to approach industrial markets rather than typical fans.

The findings of this research suggest the three-layered approach to understanding season ticket account types is appropriate. However, the levels of fan identification and actual product consumption indicate that STHs may rarely fall into a category that does not include some level of fan attachment and consumption behaviour. It is also possible those with a heightened level of fan identification were more likely to complete the survey, thus slightly skewing the results.

While the overall analysis suggested differing levels of importance for product quality, relationship quality, venue constraints, and non-venue constraints as it relates to the intent to renew season tickets in the future, closer examination revealed significant differences in a few select areas. Specifically, this study is consistent with previous literature indicating product quality, when measured as directly related to performance on the playing surface, becomes more important as fan identification levels increase. Additionally, the quality of an account holder's relationship with the account manager was not different across the account groups in the study. Given the active role of the account representative in securing, and providing service to a season ticket account holder, it is not surprising to find that this relationship is important to all account holders.

A series of interesting findings emerged from the study of the potential constraints, or barriers to renewal, which were examined. The majority of these findings indicated that the higher in fan identification a STH is the more likely that individual was to find heightened importance in a given renewal constraint. First, groups with higher levels of fan attachment rated the cleanliness of the venue and the overall quality of concessions as more important to their renewal decision. Second, groups with higher levels of fan identification also indicated total cost was more important to them. Not surprisingly, the noted exception in this instance was that respondents high in fan identification who were not customers themselves, the group defined as fans only, did not find cost as important as those with a financial stake in the season ticket buying decision (Customer-Consumer-Fans). Third, the important non-venue related constraints of the game being broadcast on TV or radio and having other social commitments was also more important to groups indicating the highest levels of fan identification.

When viewed from an industrial marketing perspective, these results suggest the B2C market for season tickets is more sensitive to the typical barriers to purchase and renewal than B2B markets. Yet, when asked to rate the overall likelihood of renewal B2C accounts are more likely to state an intent to renew than B2B accounts. These results confirm that fan attachment is indeed critical to season ticket accounts expressing intent

to renew, and that these types of account holders are critical of the customer experience. However, the results of this study also suggest it will be important to delineate between B2C and B2B season ticket accounts in future season ticket holder research. These results also suggest a strong understanding of the B2C account, or fan, in current sport marketing literature.

Managerial implications

This study provides sport marketers with evidence of the importance of understanding the buying process for season tickets and the ultimate usage of a season ticket plan. The confirmation that extending B2B marketing principles to the market for season ticket products confirms the prevailing approach to selling tickets in the industry is valid. Specifically, sales staffs should continue to approach business markets in an effort to generate revenue through the sale of season ticket packages. However, the comparatively low level of fan attachment and importance of team product quality indicated among B2B accounts suggests invoking the common practice of “selling hope” in instances where team performance is lacking, may be unnecessary. Since B2C accounts were significantly more concerned with the on-ice product in this study, it is likely B2B account holders in other spectator sport settings are also less concerned with the team’s performance. This means that when teams market and sell season tickets to B2B accounts, they must deliver a different value proposition. Further, each instance in this study of a group finding heightened importance for any variable as it pertained to the intention to renew an account was found among more ardent fans. Additionally, greater fan attachment indicated a greater intention to renew. The combination of these findings suggests items seen as common barriers to renewal may not be as important to B2B accounts as they are B2C accounts. As a result, a greater understanding of what is important to B2B account holders is required. The most successful sales representatives in B2B settings are beginning to sell customer insights rather than solve known customer problems. This study indicates that while there is a solid understanding of what is important to B2C season ticket account holders, it is decidedly less clear what is important to B2B account holders. Further, this represents an opportunity for progressive sport organizations to begin training their sales staff’s in uncovering insights to best ensure B2B accounts are finding the value in investing in season tickets and that they are having the best possible customer experience thus increasing renewal rates.

Limitations and future research

While innovative in its approach to analyzing season ticket markets, this study has its limitations. First, the relatively low response rate to the questionnaire used to collect data is a concern. It is quite likely that individuals with stronger fan attachment were simply more likely to take the survey. In general, this may have reduced the total number of B2B accounts in the study and created some limitations in the ability to draw conclusions about those groups. Second, the club that served as the research context for this study is one that has boasted season ticket retention rates consistently above 92% and play in a venue that has been awarded numerous accolades for service and overall quality. Additionally, the team experienced a strong increase in team performance, and ultimately a playoff berth, during the season in which these data were collected. The overall positive environment in which this research was conducted may have impacted the importance ratings for all account holders in a positive manner.

The extension of industrial marketing theory to the market for season tickets is critical. Future research should work to further explain the important elements that impact renewal among B2B accounts that make the ticket purchase decision with little regard for fan attachment. Additionally, future studies should investigate sales staffs and individual account executives that are outperforming their peers to uncover any current implementation of insight selling principles within the industry. In sum, there is a strong opportunity to develop theory and managerial insights in the market B2B market for traditional season tickets.

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