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**WESTERN UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS: KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE**

*Tessa Weidner wrote this case under the supervision of* *Elizabeth M. A. Grasby solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.*

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At the end of April 2016, Merlin Morton, manager of sponsor acquisition at Western University (Western), had reviewed attendance records for varsity sporting events over the previous academic year. He was concerned that growth in student attendance was stagnant despite increasing university enrolment. If the current trend were not reversed, he might have difficulty obtaining external sponsor funding that varsity athletic and intramural athletics programs depended upon to promote their home games to the public and to students.

Morton needed a marketing plan that would guarantee a significant rise in student attendance. He would be presenting this plan at the upcoming annual sponsorship meeting with both current and new Western Athletics sponsors, but first, he had several questions to answer: Were certain sporting events not being marketed effectively? Should he focus on a specific student demographic? What decisions could he implement to reverse this trend? Were there other promotional options that would attract Western students to support Western varsity sports?

Western University

Founded in 1878, Western University was located in London, Ontario—Canada’s 11th largest city, with a population of more than 366,000. Set in the heart of southwestern Ontario, London was the region’s economic, entertainment, and cultural hub. Big enough to offer a “big city” experience, but still far more affordable than many other Canadian cities, London was known for its extensive educational and health-care community.

Western was considered one of Canada’s most beautiful universities; its 200-hectare main campus included a mix of gothic-style buildings and modern, LEED-certified structures.[[1]](#footnote-1) Western’s combined land area of over 500 hectares included more than 650,000 square metres of space in 87 buildings. There were more than 6,000 parking spaces available in 21 lots throughout the campus.

Western was London’s fourth-largest employer, with nearly 4,000 faculty and staff. The university also had over 30,000 students and 309,000 alumni around the world. Through 11 faculties, a school of graduate and postdoctoral studies, and three affiliated university colleges, Western offered its students more than 400 specializations, majors, and minors as well as innovative modular degree structures that allowed them to combine numerous disciplines.

Students from more than 100 countries attended the university, where high academic achievement and athletic and social engagement were encouraged.[[2]](#footnote-2) These activities often fostered a life-long sense of pride and belonging within the Western community. Consequently, Western’s alumni made significant contributions in fields ranging from business and politics to engineering, medicine, music, and athletics.

WESTERN ATHLETICS

Background

Western’s varsity teams (Western Mustangs) had a rich history. With 46 varsity teams and more than 1,100 athletes, Western Athletics attracted exceptional students to compete at the highest levels in their sports and promoted the merits of goal setting and team achievement both on and off the field. Athletes from all over the world competed annually at both the provincial and national levels on the 46 recognized varsity sports teams.

Operations

Hockey, basketball, volleyball, and football were the only ticketed home sports games at Western. Non-ticketed sports included soccer, rugby, ringette, and track; admission to these games was free for all attendees. At each ticketed game, ticket scanners relayed information to a computer system that tracked whether each ticket sold was a student, general-admission, faculty or staff, or child’s ticket. This information was presented to sponsors and used to monitor attendance.[[3]](#footnote-3) Average ticket prices were $10 for general admission (including alumni), Western faculty, and staff and CA$5[[4]](#footnote-4) for children; tickets for Western students were free.

The Ontario University Athletics conference scheduled games annually; therefore Morton did not have control of game dates and times. During the academic year, hockey, basketball, and volleyball games were usually scheduled for Thursday, Friday, or Saturday evenings between 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. in Thompson Arena and Alumni Hall. Football games occurred on Saturdays from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. at TD Stadium. Football was Western’s most-attended varsity sport; it attracted an average of 30,000 attendees each year. Football’s high attendance was due to a large alumni following, special events such as the “Welcome to Western” game and homecoming, the teams’ success record, and the media coverage at games.

Games were played on Western’s campus, so Western paid for the day-to-day operations and the costs and maintenance of the buildings.

Merlin Morton

Before assuming the role of manager of sponsor acquisition for Western Athletics, Morton had been an executive manager of sponsorship programs at large national banks and major charitable organizations. His employment history and skill set made him an ideal candidate to develop corporate-sponsorship packages for Western. His duties included increasing event participation, monitoring ticket sales, liaising with sponsors for future event funding, and managing the student division of the marketing department.

The Marketing Department

The student division of the marketing department started in 2011, with five part-time student employees. Now, there were 20 part-time student employees and one student leader. The student leader, who hired all part-time student employees, was organized, driven, and specialized in sports marketing management. The marketing department was comprised solely of student employees, with the exception of Morton, who was the only full-time Western employee in the department. Because Morton wanted to spend his entire budget on advertising for events, he encouraged part-time student employees to apply to the university’s work study program, which would pay for their hours of work.[[5]](#footnote-5) Student employees ranged from 17 to 25 years of age and came from various university disciplines; a large portion of these employees were upper-year students.

Morton had observed that many students wanted an immediate monetary reward for doing quick and easy work. In fact, many employees did not want to work weekends or found it difficult to balance their work hours with their school commitments. Turnover rates were high, and Morton found it difficult to maintain good staff who were passionate about organizing events that drove student attendance.

Previous marketing initiatives had involved canvassing in student residences, organizing game events, and handing out free tickets to students around campus. To increase family and alumni ticket sales, the marketing department’s student employees attended off-campus London city events such as hockey and basketball games, where they would set up booths to advertise upcoming sporting events. They also displayed posters around the city of London and offered group discounts for home games. Groups included birthday parties, alumni groups, and local sports teams. Western Athletics successfully attracted families by offering low admission fees, group discounts, and children’s activities during the home games.

WESTERN VARSITY SPORTS EVENTS

Western had a busy varsity schedule, including teams from 46 different sports. The ticketed events are listed below.

Football

Western was known for its school spirit, or “purple pride,” especially at football games. All five home games were played at Western’s TD Stadium, which had a 7,800-seat capacity. Approximately 30,000 people each year attended these four-hour games; 20 per cent of total attendees were students. Attendance peaked at the beginning of the season (September) and dropped off by November’s playoff season. In an effort to attract families and alumni, free parking at three lots was offered to anyone attending the games. Western Athletics employed 100 students to assist at these games by running half-time events, helping people to their seats, advertising upcoming sporting events, and handing out free sponsorship samples. These students earned $12 per hour for each four-hour game.

Hockey

Western had both men’s and women’s hockey teams, which played 18–20 home games from September to March in the Thompson Arena. Playoffs occurred in mid-February. The arena’s seating capacity was 2,200. Annual attendance totalled 12,000–14,000 for the two varsity teams; 30 per cent of spectators were students. Thompson Arena had easy access to free parking. In the past, attendance had increased by 3 per cent when the hockey game advertised an event where the audience was entertained throughout the home game. One example was “Rock the Rink,” where a local disc jockey was hired to play music and create a club-like atmosphere during men’s hockey games. Western Athletics hired 10 students to excite the crowds, direct people to their seats, and promote upcoming games by offering attendees free sponsorship samples (t‑shirts, shaving razors, stickers, and discount coupons). These students earned $12 per hour for each three-hour game.

Basketball and Volleyball

Basketball and volleyball teams (both men’s and women’s) played 14–15 home games in Western’s Alumni Hall from September to March. Playoffs occurred during February and early March. Alumni Hall had a seating capacity of 1,200. Total yearly attendance for both teams ranged from 6,000 to 8,000 for basketball and from 10,000 to 12,000 for volleyball; 20 per cent of the tickets sold each year were to students. Western Athletics hired 15 students to help direct people to their seats, encourage crowd participation, and promote upcoming sporting events. These students earned $12 per hour for each three-hour game. Event games, such as the October women’s basketball game in support of breast cancer research and the “White Out” men’s volleyball game between Queen’s and Western Universities, had an increase in home game attendance of 1.5 per cent in the past year.

COMPETITION

London Sporting Events

The London Knights (Knights) hockey team and the London Lightning (Lightning) basketball team drew crowds from various cities and had full-time, professional advertising and management departments. The Knights averaged 9,013 attendees and the Lightning averaged 5,003 attendees per game.[[6]](#footnote-6) Ticket prices ranged from $15 to $30. These sports teams also offered group prices; held regular game-night events; and advertised on radio, television, and local newspapers to increase attendance. Morton believed the Knights and Lightning’s game-day success propelled attendance because many people could follow the teams’ wins through media outlets such as radio, newspapers, or television. These media outlets advertised the games, reaching a wider audience beyond London. The teams also played in convenient downtown locations and were close to paid parking. Morton wondered why some students preferred to pay to attend these games instead of attending free games at Western.

Downtown London

On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, many activities and special events occurred in downtown London, with its many bars and restaurants, which were popular with students. These choices gave students and young adults over the age of 19[[7]](#footnote-7) ample opportunity to socialize in a variety of settings. Students often went out for dinner on the weekend, typically between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Downtown London was about a 15-minute bus ride from Western, with buses driving to campus every 30 to 45 minutes. Morton wondered if Western Athletics events could ever compete against downtown’s wide variety of potential activities for students and others.

Evening Events on Campus

Western had over 150 student-organized clubs, an active students’ council, and residence staff. These groups frequently planned and hosted evening events or meetings during the academic year, and these events were designed to give students opportunities to meet new people with common interests. Activities ranged from charity events and cultural evenings to dances and pub nights. Most club meetings were held in the evenings, between 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. Most events were held on campus, with residence staff hosting activities in specific residences. In addition, residence staff would often plan weekend entertainment for students living in residence.

STAGNANT ATTENDANCE

After a review of last year’s attendance, Morton concluded that attendance at varsity home games was stagnant. Western was not the only university with this concern: stagnant or declining student attendance at sporting events was a common concern among many Canadian and U.S. universities.[[8]](#footnote-8) Nevertheless, this was particularly worrisome to Morton: if Western Athletics could not reverse this trend for the upcoming academic year, the funding to promote the games would be in jeopardy. Universities often depended on sporting traditions to remain connected to their alumni and hoped that they would become paying season-ticket holders and future donors.

Western Athletics sponsors included beverage companies, restaurants, and sports-apparel companies. On average, these sponsors donated a total of $60,000 annually. The amount of funding varied because it was based on the total number of tickets sold the previous year. The marketing department charged sponsors $5 per student that attended each game. Morton believed that sponsors could be open to an increase in price to $7 if he could make a compelling argument.

TARGET MARKET—STUDENTS

Morton reviewed what he knew about Western’s student population. Currently, Western had an undergraduate student population of 22,000, including approximately 5,200 first-year students. Most students were passionate about their studies and spent their weekends and evenings working on assignments or preparing for tests and exams.[[9]](#footnote-9) Even though education was their first priority, Morton believed many students were interested in attending sports events and supporting Western’s varsity teams.

Students in Residence

Western operated nine student residences. Student residences provided an opportunity for students to meet new people and adjust to university life. About 4,566 first-year students lived in residence.[[10]](#footnote-10) Western’s residences were within a five- to 15-minute walk to Thompson Arena, Alumni Hall, or TD Stadium. Morton observed that many of these students had higher levels of disposable income from increased parental support and lower levels of student debt. Many students living in residence enjoyed attending events close to their residences in groups. Sports were a common activity that provided opportunities for bonding among diverse students.

Athletic Students

Morton thought about targeting the students who were already involved in sports at Western. He assumed that students who were playing sports would also enjoy watching sports. In addition to its varsity sports, Western offered a variety of intramural and club sports to 4,200 participating students. These athletes had limited disposable incomes because they paid for their own sporting equipment and some travel expenses. Varsity players were also extremely busy with practices and away games. Because of their busy schedules, Morton was nervous that these varsity athletes might have less time to regularly attend their fellow athletes’ games.

Upper-Year Students[[11]](#footnote-11)

There were about 11,800 upper-year students who were not actively involved in athletics. Many upper-year students had little disposable income because they often paid for their own rent, food, and other expenses. Most upper-year students (81 per cent) lived off campus, mainly in London’s downtown, and were a 10- to 15-minute bus ride from Thompson Arena, Alumni Hall, or TD Stadium.[[12]](#footnote-12) Morton thought many of these students might have more free time to attend the evening and weekend games. Others might be too busy with club activities or school commitments to regularly attend home games.

MARKETING OPTIONS

Group Pizza Deal

With many home games held during the dinner hour, Morton wanted to consider selling pizza to groups of attendees. Morton wondered about offering a dinner group ticket deal for students attending the event.[[13]](#footnote-13) The group ticket would include one large pizza, PowerAde or other non-alcoholic drinks for all members, reserved seating, and recognition of the groups by the sports announcers during the game.

Profits from this venture were important because they would be used for the marketing department’s event budget. Morton was planning to charge $28.00 for this group ticket. The marketing department could purchase vegetarian, pepperoni and meat-lover’s pizzas for $9.50, $11.25 and $12.75, respectively. PowerAde and related drinks cost $0.75 each, and there was a delivery fee of $2 per pizza. Morton also purchased packages of 50 napkins and paper plates for $5. The only fixed costs that Morton could think of was the equipment (display and serving equipment, cash register, etc.), which the marketing department could lease for $1,500 per year.

There were still many questions unanswered. How many groups would purchase pizza? Should the price be increased? Which of the three types of pizza would generate the most sales?

Western Clubs’ Night

Western had over 150 different clubs with about 8,500 members. Each club represented a specific niche or interest. In September, Western hosted a clubs’ week that showcased all the clubs and provided students with an opportunity to learn about them.[[14]](#footnote-14) Morton wondered if Western Athletics should host mini-club weeks during varsity home games. This promotion would encourage a variety of students to attend more games, and it would also provide a social gathering to learn about the clubs. Morton believed these events could increase attendance if they were marketed successfully. To encourage attendance at home games, Western Athletics employees would attend club meetings to promote upcoming events. Three employees were expected to use a total of five hours a month to maintain their specific club relationships. Morton hoped to target the largest clubs on campus in order to reach the largest percentage of students. Morton wondered which clubs would be best to attract.

Teddy Bear Toss

The teddy bear toss was a popular event that typically occurred during the winter holiday season at many major sporting arenas throughout North America. This event could happen at Western’s Thompson Arena. Students would be encouraged to take a stuffed animal to the game and throw it onto the playing area after Western scored its first goal. Western Athletic employees would then quickly collect the stuffed animals and give them to a children’s charity club on Western’s campus. Morton thought of partnering with charity clubs on campus to bring more people to the event; one charity club could collect the toys to donate to a children’s charity. Morton wondered if students or charity clubs would be responsive to this initiative.

Social Media Campaign

With the recent increase in social media usage, Morton thought about connecting with students through popular social media sites or apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. To capture students’ attention, he would need interactive social media pages that communicated about upcoming events, game locations, and players. Students who participated in these online conversations would have opportunities to win prizes such as gift cards to restaurants and sporting equipment. The annual cost of these prizes would be $400. Three of the department’s employees would need to maintain the social media sites and update them during each game.[[15]](#footnote-15) Would students actually want to interact on social media with Mustang Athletics?

Morton also wondered if the marketing department could create promotional videos for the popular video-sharing website, YouTube, to encourage students to attend varsity games.[[16]](#footnote-16) YouTube would charge Western Athletics each time the entire advertisement was watched (called a cost-per-view or CPV). “In-display” ads were ads placed to the side of the video that a viewer could click on; these would cost $0.10 per view. “In-stream” ads played in the main videostream before a video began and would cost $0.30 per view. Morton could select either option. He wondered how much of his budget he should dedicate to YouTube.

Western Mustang App

To attract the same level of attendance for the upcoming year, Morton believed he needed to provide an incentive to draw students to the home games. He wondered about a smartphone app that would allow students to sign in at games, to collect points for prizes. The app could be downloaded for free to any smartphone with Internet connectivity. All of Western’s campus offered free Wi-Fi for Western students, so students could easily download the app. At the beginning of each home game, students would sign in to a game and collect points. The more games students attended, the more points they would receive. The points could be redeemed at any time for prizes. Students could pick up their prizes at the following game or at the Western Athletics booth at the game, which promoted upcoming events. Morton wondered what types of prizes he should offer and how much money he should allocated for them.

The app would be available for download on both the Apple App store (for iPhones) and the Google Play store (for Android smartphones). Apple charged US$99 annually to keep the app on Apple’s application store. The Google Play store charged a yearly fee of CA$27. General maintenance on the application would be contracted out and would cost CA$5,200 per year. [[17]](#footnote-17)

Conclusion

Morton wondered if there were any other ideas for increasing student attendance at varsity home games each year. Morton had budgeted $10,000 to create an effective marketing plan.

1. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Designed (LEED) buildings were highly energy efficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Western University, *Common University Data Ontario—2014*, accessed March 30, 2017, www.ipb.uwo.ca/documents/cudo2014.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There was a $1,000 set-up fee for lighting, sound, and other technical equipment for each home game. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All currency in Canadian dollars unless specified otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Work study was a government grant program that provided financial assistance to students working on campus. “Work Study.” Western: Office of the Registrar, accessed March 30, 2017, www.registrar.uwo.ca/student\_finances/work\_study.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “London Knights Yearly Attendance Graph,” Hockeydb.com, accessed March 31, 2017, www.hockeydb.com/nhl-attendance/att\_graph.php?tmi=6618; Morris Dalla Costa, “Strength Underlies Numbers,” lfpress.com, February 2, 2016, accessed March 31, 2017, www.lfpress.com/2016/02/01/strength-underlies-numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The legal drinking age in Ontario was 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This article notes that average student attendance at American college football games is down 7.1 per cent since 2009. Ben Cohen, “At College Football Games, Student Sections Likely to Have Empty Seats: Declining Attendance Reflects Soaring Ticket Prices, Increase in Televised Games,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2014, accessed March 31, 2017, www.wsj.com/articles/at-college-football-games-student-sections-likely-to-have-empty-seats-1409188244. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Western’s undergraduate students ranged in ages from 16 to 60. Midterms occurred in October and November and again in February; final exams occurred in December and April; week-long school breaks occurred in October, December, and February. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Students typically lived in residence only for their first year of university. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Upper-year students were students who had successfully passed their first year of university. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Western University, *Common University Data Ontario—2014*, accessed March 30, 2017, www.ipb.uwo.ca/documents/cudo2014.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The average group size was predicted to be four individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “All About that Club Life?: Getting Involved with the USC Clubs Community is a Great Opportunity to Get the Most out of Your Student Experience,” USC: Clubs, accessed March 31, 2017, http://westernusc.ca/clubs/. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Each employee would work about five hours a week from September to November and from January to March. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Reuters, “YouTube Stats: Site Has 1 Billion Active Users Each Month,” Huffpost: Tech, updated May 21, 2013, accessed March 31, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/21/youtube-stats\_n\_2922543.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Melissa, “How Much Does It Cost to Create an iOS App?,” Bluecloudsolutions, November 21, 2013, accessed March 31, 2017, www.bluecloudsolutions.com/articles/cost-create-ios-app/; US$1 = CA$1.26 in April 2016; Tim Mackenzie, “App Store Fees, Percentages, and Payouts: What Developers Need to Know,” TechRepublic, May 7, 2012, accessed March 31, 2017, www.techrepublic.com/blog/software-engineer/app-store-fees-percentages-and-payouts-what-developers-need-to-know/. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)