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Tactics used by sports organizations in the United States to increase ticket sales

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Four prominent tactics used by sports organizations in the United States to increase ticket sales are discussed. Each of them is underpinned by the concepts of either price discrimination or social exchange theory. Differential pricing is usually based on quality of the opposing team, time or place. Flexible season ticket packaging enables fans to select from an array of mini-season packages instead of being required to purchase a season ticket for all the games. Money-back guarantees are a promise to refund the purchase price to dissatisfied patrons. Web-based ticketing facilitates both the pre-purchasing of tickets and the creation of a secondary market for the resale of already purchased tickets.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, almost $12 billion a year is spent on the purchase of tickets to sporting events (Street and Smith, 2002a). Teams in some of the major leagues such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Hockey League (NHL) depend on gate receipts as their single greatest source of income. Admission charges in the form of greens fees at golf courses and lift ticket passes at ski resorts are the lifeblood of many of these and similar types of sports organizations, while at the major university level of collegiate sport ticket sales comprise almost 30% of the total income generated by athletic departments (Howard and Crompton, 2004).

The recent economic recession contributed to a widespread decline in attendance at many sporting events in the United States and to a corresponding decrease in match day revenues to sports organizations. The erosion in ticket sales was further stimulated by a sharp rise in the cost of attending many sporting events. For example, ticket prices for major professional league and collegiate football and basketball games have more than doubled over the past decade (Team Marketing Report, 2002).

There is concern that this is creating an economic disconnect between professional sports and most Americans. Indeed, nine out of ten Americans say ticket prices are so high that it is difficult for them to attend a professional sporting event (Howard, 1999). With ticket prices displacing all but the most affluent consumers, teams—particularly in the NBA and NHL—have devoted an increasing proportion of their seating inventory to corporate ticket buyers. A survey conducted by the NBA's Minnesota Timberwolves found that 62% of season tickets sold in the lower bowl of their arena were owned by corporations (Swift, 2000). While teams may be able to sell an increasing share of their most expensive tickets to businesses, the trend leads to other problems. It has been pointed out that,

> The corporate fan, who has replaced the core fan, is a fickle beast, choosy about

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> which game he'll use his precious free time to attend. Mid-week against the Milwaukee Bucks, or the Nashville Predators? That's a pass. If the suit bothers to give the tickets away, he's likely to hand them over at the last minute to some secretary in Personnel, who might prefer to be home watching Regis [a television game show host] make people sweat. (Swift, 2000, p. 75)

It's no wonder, then, that no-shows are a growing concern to the major leagues. Some teams, like the NBA's Charlotte Hornets, were filling less than half the number of seats that were actually sold late in the 2002 season.

Sold but unfilled or unused tickets can have serious financial repercussion because these sales lead to other sources of match day income such as revenues from concessions, programme sales, parking fees and apparel and souvenir sales: 'When no one is in that seat, not only do we lose the value of the ticket, we lose concession money, merchandise money, and programme money' (Swift, 2000, p. 76). In both the Premier League and the Football League, for example, match day income accounts for approximately 30% of all trading income—the other major sources are television, commercial, and the sale of players (Boon and James, 2001).

When establishing ticket prices, many sports manager at all levels rely on traditional approaches. The predominant method has been to raise prices incrementally by some arbitrary percentage or flat rate. Historically, pricing decisions have been based on either the revenue needs of the organization or on management's perception of what the market will bear. Confronted with evidence that core fans are being displaced because of high ticket prices; with increased competition from other entertainment providers for spectators' discretionary dollars; a 'soft' economy; and widespread attendance declines; it has become imperative for sport organizations to adopt alternate approaches to setting ticket prices.

This paper discusses four of the most prominent tactics that have been adopted in the US: (i) differential pricing; (ii) flexible season ticket pricing; (iii) money-back guarantees; and (iv) web-based ticketing. The examples used in the paper to illustrate these four tactics, for the most part were derived from the authors' personal interactions with managers of the sport organizations cited, either face-to-face or by telephone. These were supplemented by material from secondary sources such as sports business publications and websites.

DIFFERENTIAL PRICING

Differential pricing is the core of a marketing-oriented approach to pricing professional sports. It is based on the concept of price discrimination, which is a widely used strategy adopted when a market is comprised of segments that have different demand characteristics. It is defined as charging different prices for the same service where the price differences are not proportional to differences in costs (Loomis and Walsh, 1997). The purpose of price discrimination is to capture as revenue as much of the buyer's consumer surplus as possible.

Clowes and Clements (2003) in their study of discriminatory ticket pricing practices in the Premier League investigated price discrimination based on season ticket versus single ticket purchase; price reductions based on customer status and seat location; and charging different prices for different opponents. In the US, it is the latter of these three contexts which has aroused most interest. When teams have instituted price discrimination, their approach has been based on one of three variables:

1. *Quality* of the opposing team.
2. *Time* (prices vary by different times of day, week, or season of the year or first round versus championship game or match).

3. *Place* (prices vary by different seating locations).

A growing number of teams sell tickets at different prices to reflect differences in demand caused by the attractiveness of the opponent and the dates of play. For example, in Major League Baseball (MLB) the Colorado Rockies charge extra when the team plays the New York Yankees; the San Francisco Giants add a surcharge for weekend games; and the St. Louis Cardinals charge fans less for tickets in the spring and fall than in the summer months. In all three cases, teams use price discrimination to achieve a fuller and/or more balanced use of venue capacity. The intent is to encourage visitation at off-peak times and to maximize revenue production from the peak demand times. The premium charge serves as a rationing mechanism for allocating tickets for the most attractive games. This tactic was also reported as being used by seven of the 18 teams in the Premier League (Clowes and Clements, 2003).

The St. Louis Cardinals reduced ticket prices in the spring and fall in order to raise attendance during these traditionally slower months of the 7-month long MLB season. According to a club spokesperson, ' ... We reduced prices for those times of the year when we'd had trouble. Basically, we're talking about April, May and September, when kids are in school. It's a practice we're going to continue, because there's a definite benefit to having people in the ballpark even at a lower price' (Cameron, 2002, p. 50). At the same time, the Cardinals raised the price of every ticket $1 for games played in the high-demand period between 31 May and 2 September, which was projected to net the team $750,000 in increased revenues annually (Rovell, 2002).

The San Francisco Giants charge between $1 and $5 more for weekend games (Friday evening to Sunday afternoon). The decision produced an additional $1 million in net revenue in the 2002 season (Rovell, 2002). According to one baseball executive, 'Weekend summer games and certain matchups generate a different level of demand than other games. It only makes sense to price them differently' (King, 2002, p. 4).

Price discrimination based on location of seats in a stadium or arena is standard practice, but the implementation of this strategy is especially sophisticated at major universities. In these contexts, 'price' is determined not only by the cost of the ticket but also by the magnitude of the annual donations which individuals have contributed to the university's athletic department. Every gift entitles a seating privilege and the larger the gift, the higher the seating priority an individual receives. Many college athletic departments have established point systems which award points for the amount of an annual donation, number of consecutive years of contributing, and number of consecutive years of purchasing season tickets. The more points accumulated by a donor, the better the seating location. For example, at Clemson University an individual receives 1 point for every $250 of cumulative lifetime giving and between 1 and 50 points for the magnitude of the current gift amount.

This form of price discrimination recognizes that every individual's ability and willingness to pay is different and capitalizes on this by inviting bids for seats so the potential revenue for each seat is maximized. This strategy gets close to 'perfect' price discrimination which occurs when a seller extracts all of the potential consumer surplus by charging buyers a price equal to their maximum willingness to pay (Loomis and Walsh, 1997).

FLEXIBLE SEASON TICKET PACKAGING

Clowes and Clements (2003) in their study of pricing practices in the Premier League reported that eight of the 18 clubs in their sample used what they termed 'price

bundling'. Five of the eight clubs bundled games together in two or three match ticket packages, while the other three clubs offered multi-game packages. This conservative approach to ticket packaging also was typical in the US until recently with most teams offering minimal flexibility to fans considering the purchase of season tickets. A majority of teams offered potential customers only one or two options. College and professional football teams, with their relatively small inventory of five to eight home games per season typically offered only the opportunity to buy a full-season ticket. Basketball, hockey and baseball, with their much more extensive game inventory, historically provided fans with the option of buying either a full-season or a half-season package (21 to 23 games for hockey and basketball, and 41 to 43 dates for baseball).

As ticket prices have increased substantially over the past decade, the cost of purchasing full-season ticket packages to major league sporting events has required a much higher financial commitment. The average cost of a full-season, 43-game (41 regular season, plus two pre-season) ticket plan for NHL and NBA teams exceeded $2,000 for the 2002–03 season. Given that relatively few households have the financial capacity to make such a significant investment, teams in the leagues have developed more affordable ticketing options. Full-season ticket plans have been split into different types of partial plans to accommodate individuals and companies who either could not afford the full package or who knew they would be unable to attend many of the games. This approach exemplifies what economists term third degree price discrimination which 'involves separating buyers into groups with different elasticities of demand and selling prices so that marginal revenue equals marginal cost in each' (Loomis and Walsh, 1997, p. 356). Sports teams are apt to implement third degree price discrimination effectively, because they have the market power to set their own prices, the sub-markets have different elasticities of demand, and there is likely to be relatively little transfer among customers in the different sub-markets.

One of the early successful efforts to create a more flexible and affordable ticket plan alternative for fans was a 'mini-plan' programme implemented by the Milwaukee Brewers. In 1992, the team sold a total of 6,326 (full-season equivalent) tickets, one of the lowest totals in major league baseball (Eisenberg, 1993). The Brewers had struggled for wins and fan support for many years. Their trip to the 1982 World Series was the team's only appearance there in the past 40 years.

However, in 1992 the team challenged for the division title, winning 92 games, leaving fans upbeat at the end of the season. Team officials recognized that they were facing the most positive selling environment they had seen in years. At the same time, they realized that in order to take full advantage of the team's growing popularity, they would need to develop a more market-sensitive approach to selling season tickets.

Their first action was to expand their understanding of the marketplace. The Brewers added a new computer system that enabled them to collect data. In addition to integrating a database management system with ticketing, the team conducted market research through surveys and focus groups to learn more about its customers, where they came from, why they purchased season tickets and what benefits they valued most.

One finding was that potential existed for increased sales by converting customers from their individual-game buying pattern into mini-season packages. To encourage this, the Brewers developed a 'product line' of 16- and 13-game packages based on themes that their market research indicated would be attractive to potential spectators in the Milwaukee market. Among the new lines of mini packages were:

- 'Arch-Rival Pack' (16 games): featuring the Brewers' most attractive opponents.
- 'Hot Summer Nights' (16 games): consisting of games between 28 May and 10 September.
- 'Game Day Pack' (16 games): packaging in all the day games.
- 'Sunday Pack' (13 games): focusing on attracting families to the ballpark.

This variety of customized ticket packages proved popular. In 1993, the Brewers achieved a franchise record by selling 9,018 full-season equivalent ticket packages, an increase of 43% over the previous year. Most of the incremental sales were attributable to the mini packages. The Vice-President for Ticket Sales and Operations stated, 'The revamped approach to our mini season plans attracted many customers, both business and individual, who would have otherwise spent little or no money with us' (Eisenberg, 1993, p. 9).

Following the Milwaukee Brewers' successful model, most professional sports teams, offered partial or mini-season ticket plans. For example, the NBA Phoenix Suns, after a disappointing 9% attendance decline the previous season, aggressively offered a half-dozen new themed partial ticket plans to their fans (Liberman, 2002, p. 9). The Suns created several six-ticket packages that for $100 allowed fans the opportunity to 'sample' NBA games throughout the season. They also offered three ten-game packs that focused on weekend, Western Conference ('West Coast') and Eastern Conference ('East Coast') games, respectively. The team created a 20-game (half-season) package and a 'family night' package that included, along with four Suns game tickets, four vouchers to a local movie theatre chain, four sandwiches and four sodas. The family package was offered at $75, compared to its face value of $125. The Suns found corporate sponsors for several of their partial ticket programmes, such as the 'Budweiser 6 Packs' and the 'AT&T Wireless Big 10 Packs'. The team benefited from extending greater branding opportunities to its corporate partners and the sponsors helped to promote the ticket plans through their television, radio, and print advertisements throughout the season.

Although teams would rather sell full- and half-season packages, it has become evident that many fans seek more flexible and affordable ticketing options. A senior vice-president of an NBA franchise noted, 'Teams can no longer rely on a handful of traditional ticket plans as before'. He stated that the future will be in 'creating packages for distinct demographic groups and marketing them in a targeted way to appeal to those particular audiences' (Liberman, 2002, p. 9).

Clowes and Clements (2003) raise the issue of whether it is desirable to offer packages that link perceived 'premium' and 'inferior' quality teams together so that guaranteed 'sell-outs' are linked to matches that are likely to have spare capacity. The basic requirement for mixed bundling of this nature is non-substitute (i.e. complementary or independent), perishable products with an asymmetric demand structure. Because the products are not perfect substitutes, it is possible to get spectators to buy both (or all). Because the products are perishable, periodic or random discounting strategies are not feasible (Tellis, 1986). The sport product meets these requirements well and so such a tactic increases the possibility that both games will be sell outs and that revenues will be substantially enhanced. However, there is some danger that this approach would damage relationship building efforts with the fans.

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEES

The conceptual structure that underlies all commercial market transactions is social exchange theory. This recognizes that all market interactions are a process in which two parties supply one another with valued

resources. A sports organization supplies an entertainment product that fans want and they reciprocate by channelling resources to the organization. This process only works as long as both parties perceive that the reciprocity in the exchange process is equitable. If either of the actors perceive there to be a negative imbalance to them of benefits and costs in the exchange, then the relationship's stability is threatened, loyalty is undermined, the exchange behaviour is likely to be withdrawn, and the sense of injustice will make it difficult to re-establish it in the future.

Social exchange theory underpins the decision of some sports organizations to encourage sales by reducing the potential risk fans incur in buying expensive ticket packages. Service guarantees, which are a promise to refund the purchase price to dissatisfied customers, have proven effective because they remove the possibility of imbalance in the exchange process by eliminating or reducing financial risk (Burton and Howard, 2000).

The NBA's New Jersey Nets extended the offer of a satisfaction guarantee to new corporate season ticket buyers, promising that if the season tickets did not help ticket holders increase their company's sales, the Nets would refund the cost of tickets plus interest. The Nets Vice President for Ticket Operations reported, 'Everybody we issued that money-back guarantee to, renewed ... and the programme helped the team generate $250,000 in new season ticket business' (Burton and Howard, 2000).

The University of Kansas athletic department adopted the service guarantee concept to induce fans to buy season tickets to the university's football games. The programme was targeted at 'first-time' season ticket buyers who were offered a two-game, 'test drive' for the season. For $157, new buyers received a ticket for each of the team's six home games, with an option for a full refund if they were not satisfied after the first two games. Those who were dissatisfied or uninterested in attending the final four games had 3 weeks—the interval between the second and third home games—to exercise their full money-back guarantee. Even though the Jayhawk football programme struggled, the Director of Promotions reported, 'You could count on one hand the number of people who exercised the guarantee, maybe five, total' (Mullins, 2002).

WEB-BASED TICKETING

Sport organizations increasingly use the Internet to enhance ticket sales. Web-based ticketing—applying internet technology to selling and/or reselling tickets—is a prominent component of ticket operations. Major ski areas, for example, now offer consumers opportunities to pre-purchase almost all of their services online. Those interested in skiing at Mt. Bachelor Ski Resort can go to the Central Oregon resort's website, click on the 'e-center' and choose from an array of options including 22 different season pass formats, a variety of daily lift ticket prices, lesson programmes and even gift certificates. The interactive 'Season Pass Wizard' website feature helps users select the most suitable options by guiding them through a series of questions about the specific types of experiences they seek and the prices they are willing to pay. The Breckinridge Ski Resort website allows users to pre-book every aspect of their visit to the Colorado Ski Resort, including choice of lodging, lift ticket packages, and entertainment options, complete with 'early booking' discounts and a variety of other 'web-special inducements'.

The NHL Washington Capitals reported that '60% of our season tickets and individual tickets are sold online—not by phone, not the salesmen, not TicketMaster' (Smith and Street, 2002a). It is likely that in the future most tickets will be sold on the net. Ordering online is more convenient and has a number of other advantages, such as allowing fans

to see a map of all seats in the facility and to pick the best seat for themselves. However, not all fans feel comfortable ordering online. Fears about the security of online orders exist. To overcome this hesitation, sport organizations have offered discounts for the first online order, held sweepstakes for those who order online, and offered tickets online before they are available at the box office outlets. Once fans have ordered online once or twice, their fear of placing orders on the Internet generally decreases and the convenience of ordering online ensures their repeated use.

In the early days of the technology, those buying tickets online were required to physically claim their reserved seats at a stadium or arena's 'Will Call' window. As more fans purchased tickets online, they found themselves waiting in long lines to pick up tickets. However, the advent of 'print-at-home' options for ticket buyers, enables them to print game tickets from their personal computers. The NBA entered into an arrangement with TicketMaster to equip 28 of its 29 arenas with barcode technology capable of reading print-at-home tickets, so NBA fans can now print their own direct admission tickets online. This technology has benefited not only consumers, but also the ability of fans to bypass will-call windows has enabled teams to reallocate staff from serving will-call clients to opening more windows for direct on-site sales.

Web-based ticketing is used to facilitate the social exchange in two ways. The above examples illustrate how it reduces the costs associated with search time, travel time, waiting time, personal effort and 'hassle' which fans are required to make and, thus, reduces the resources they invest in the transaction making it a more favourable proposition. It is also used to reduce the cost to fans of not being able to use some of their tickets. Indeed, web-based ticketing's greatest contribution to enhancing the ticket distribution process may be its ability to facilitate the resale of already-purchased tickets. The 'secondary' ticketing market has long been a problem for many sport organizations. For fans unable to attend games, the available alternatives were either to sell their tickets to scalpers (ticket touts) or to forfeit the use of the pre-purchased tickets. Season-ticket holders either had to fend for themselves in the secondary market or accept the loss of expensive unused tickets. Both fans and teams suffered. When fans don't use their tickets, teams lose additional revenues which would have accrued from the ticket holder's expenditures on parking, food, beverage and merchandize sales. These on-site ancillary revenues typically amount to $15 per person at major sports venues (Howard and Crompton, 2004). A 10% to 15% 'no show' rate translates into as many as 1,500 to 2,500 ticket-buying customers not attending NBA or NHL games. If this no-show rate is extended over 41 home games ($41 \times 1{,}500 = 61{,}500$ no shows), then a team could forfeit almost $1 million in ancillary revenues over the course of the season ($\$15 \times 61{,}500 = \$922{,}500$). Not only does the sport organization forfeit substantial income, but because of the imbalance this creates in the social exchange, it risks many of its season ticket holders not renewing their season ticket packages.

MLB, with the largest inventory of home games, has taken the lead in using web technology to alleviate the problem confronting full-season ticket holders who cannot attend each of the team's 81 home games. The system was introduced by the San Francisco Giants in 2000, and now all MLB teams use the Internet to resell unused tickets of season ticket holders through an online ticketing service. Available through either individual team websites or the centralized MBL.com, the service provides season ticket holders with a convenient and safe outlet to sell tickets they are unable to use. Fans without tickets who are interested in attending games can access some of the

most desirable seats in the venue by checking a website before a game. The teams become ticket brokers, using their websites to match season ticket holders unable to use their tickets to certain games with fans interested in purchasing choice seat locations.

The San Francisco Giants 'Double Play Ticket Window' allows season ticket holders to sell their tickets online at any price above the face value of the ticket, ensuring the ticket holder, not a scalper (ticket tout), is the recipient of any incremental benefit. When a ticket buyer agrees to pay the price designated by the ticket holder, the Giants process the order in which they make the tickets available to the purchaser either at the Will Call window or at one of the team's many 24-hour 'Automated Will Call' machines throughout PacBell Park. The team charges a 10% 'convenience fee' which is added to the purchase price of the ticket. Season ticket holders can either have the money refunded to them at the end of the season or they can exchange it for team merchandize.

All parties benefit from this programme. The Giants not only reduced no-shows by 50%, they generated an additional half million dollars from their 10% transaction fee (Dickey, 2000). Season ticket holders aren't left with a drawer full of unused tickets, and fans who may not have the time or resources to attend more than a few games a year have the ability to purchase some of the most desirable seats in the ballpark.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Increased revenues from ticket sales can result from either selling more tickets or raising the unit cost or price of tickets sold. From 1991 to 2000, ticket prices in the four major North American sports leagues (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHC) grew at an annual rate of 84%, so that gate receipts more than doubled in that decade (Howard and Burton, 2002). However, the percentage of available seating capacity sold across the four leagues remained generally flat and stagnant between 1995 and 2002 (Howard and Crompton, 2004). In addition to the higher ticket costs, reasons for this include increased competition from the entertainment industry, the availability of more sports programmes on free or cable television than ever before, and competition from the multitude of new sports leagues and options that have emerged or gained in popularity. Professional sport organizations now compete in a saturated entertainment marketplace. Consumers have more entertainment options than ever before. Sport managers are competing for the scarce time and disposable dollars of the same consumers that many other entertainment companies are seeking to attract. During the 1990s, spending on spectator sports in the US grew at a modest 2% per year, while personal investment in video, audio and computer equipment increased at an annual rate of over 10% (Sports Business Research Network, 2001). Finding ways to increase ticket sales to new customers, and to retain existing fans, in an increasingly cluttered marketplace requires increasingly sophisticated pricing tactics.

Until recently, tickets to most major college and professional sports games were not very price sensitive. The overriding concern of most sport organizations was recovering costs. However, it has frequently been demonstrated that the most effective prices are those that are based on customer reactions, rather than on covering some given percentage of an organization's costs. Thus, switching from a cost-oriented to a demand-oriented pricing strategy appears to be prudent.

In both the Premier League and the Football League in England, match day income accounts for approximately 30% of all trading income which demonstrates the importance of ticket sales (Boon and James, 2001). Two

theories underpin organizations' ticket sales tickets: price discrimination and social exchange theory. The paper has demonstrated how contemporary tactics have been developed using those demand-oriented conceptual frameworks to optimize revenues from ticket sales at sports events.

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