

Intercollegiate Athletics' Marketing Techniques to Attract Football & Men's Basketball Fans

Chris Croft, chris.croft@usm.edu

Abstract

NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics are a major business in today's world. With the elevated popularity of intercollegiate athletics through television platforms and social media technology, it is imperative that intercollegiate athletics' programs explore increased options in attracting fans to the two most revenue producing sports: football and men's basketball. This is an absolute must by both Power 5 and Group of 5 institutions. The Power 5 conferences include the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference (B1G), Big 12 Conference, PAC-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference (SEC). The Group of 5 (sometimes called the G5 or Go5) include the American Conference (AAC), Conference USA (C-USA), the Mid-American Conference (MAC), the Mountain West Conference (MW), and the Sun Belt Conference.

Intercollegiate athletic institutions' seek a consistent flow of sports' fans at their home venue events. These sought-after fans are desired to fill stadiums and arenas to capacity on game days. These packed crowds continuously reinforce the university's brand and promote the "front porch of the university." Additionally, these environments offer an increased home advantage for their football and men's basketball programs. However, most importantly, these fans bring in essential game revenue from man-dated donations or priority-giving finances in addition to added revenue from game tickets. College athletic programs make tremendous financial gains off donor-giving to enable the opportunity to purchase season tickets. For example, with the University of Alabama football program's South End Zone expansion in 2010, the Tide Pride football ticket priority program now raises approximately \$25 million annually, ("University of Alabama," 2018). Other state laws sometimes dictate the need for increased fan revenues. Since athletics' programs in Florida may receive no monies from the State of Florida or from the University, operations must be funded with revenues earned or contributed, ("Seminole Boosters," 2018). Florida State University Athletics has incorporated a Football Priority Policy. This policy requires a per-seat contribution requirement for each section in the stadium in order to purchase Seminoles' season football tickets. Seats on preferred sides of the stadium and closest to the 50-yard line demand a higher per-seat requirement.

Chen, Henderson, Worrell, and Salazar (2012) stated PSLs entitle season-ticket holders to purchase the right to their own specifically designated seats in an arena or stadium for any public event. Individuals, who choose to attend the event, pay for season tickets with an additional

charge to own their seats (Barker, 2009). According to Chen, Henderson, Worrell, and Salazar (2012), additionally some athletic departments have tweaked the concept of PSLs to create an endowment seating program (ESP) in which donors who give a substantial amount to the school secure season ticket privileges. The “donors” of the ESP can pay for the seat up front for up to 30 years and receive a huge tax write-off for their “charitable contribution,” (Barlow, 2009). “It is noted that, since 2004, more Top-25 college football programs have started to introduce this type of two-part pricing practice,” (Fort, 2005).

Much of the success of college athletics is based upon tradition (Wells, Southall, & Peng, 2000). While some institutions are fortunate to possess this characteristic, they still must strive to maintain this support. With expanded capacity now reaching 85,000, Nebraska football has continued its’ NCAA-record streak of consecutive sellouts that dates back to 1962 and is at 361 games entering the 2018 season, (“Memorial Stadium,” 2018). Other institutions lacking tradition are constantly seeking ways to attract masses of fans consistently to reap financial windfalls. Having high team performance, is generally expressed as home team winning percentage, is considered a positive forecaster of fan attendance. Wong (2017) notes Northwestern Basketball recently appeared in its’ first-ever NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Tournament (a.k.a. March Madness) snapping a 78 year drought.

All intercollegiate athletics programs are searching for new fans to add to its core base. This involves placing sports fans on the marketing escalator and ascension to medium users first and then to hopefully eventually heavy users. There are several possible avenues to attain this.

Highly successful seasons and winning greatly assists fan attraction. UCF football’s recent surge provides quick reference. According to Ramasami (2017), “UCF attendance progressed from averaging approximately 26,000 fans during winless 2015 season to 32,000 fans during Head Coach Scott Frost’s debut 6-7 season to culminating with over 40,000 during 2017 undefeated season.”

Martinson, Schneider, and McCullough (2015) stated one method that does seem to be a way to renew interest in an unsuccessful program is to bring in a new coaching staff. With the presence of a new coach and team culture, there is a renewed sense of instant hope with increased winning on the horizon. “While this buzz does not last forever, an optimistic, enthusiastic new coach can breathe life into a stale program and re-energize the fan base,” (Martinson, Schneider, & McCullough, 2015).

Adding marquee game opponents is an engaging tactic for sports’ fans. Fans desire to see their team compete against high caliber competition. There has been a recent push for this among NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball programs due to the importance of RPI (Ratings Percentage Index) ratings for both making the annual March Madness tournament and also due to importance of seeding. Wilco (2018) noted the average Top 15 RPI team would get 2.1 wins in the NCAA tournament, meaning they will at least make the Sweet 16.

Having premier players for sports' teams also provides an opportunity to increase fan attendance. This star power will increase fans consistent flock to the venue while also render financial dividends. "Research conducted by Joyce Julius & Associates on Texas A&M football's historic 2012 season finish and quarterback Johnny Manziel winning the Heisman Trophy showed that the redshirt freshman winning the prestigious trophy produced more than 1.8 million media impressions, which translates into \$37 million in media exposure for the university," (Texas A&M Today, 2013). Recent Oklahoma basketball star Trae Young has attracted fans to the Lloyd Noble Center on campus. "For a recent clash versus Big Ten member Northwestern in the fall of 2017, 9,692 fans attended the Sooners' contest which was the largest non-conference crowd on hand at the arena since 2008," (Straka, 2017).

Professional sport teams from the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL also provide intense opposition for fan attendance. Having one or more professional sports teams in the area is also a negative predictor for attendance (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). The presence of professional teams and the intense marketing can reduce intercollegiate athletic programs attracting fans. Professional teams will also slash the media coverage of local university teams on television and radio outlets. This loss of media space for football and men's basketball programs will force those programs to look at alternative or unorthodox methods to reach potential fans. Shackelford & Greenwell (2005) emphasized that despite the fact there are a number of differences between professional sports and intercollegiate sports, they do compete for consumers' limited entertainment dollars and time. For example, the Statistics Portal (2018) outlines the presence of the NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder since 2006 and their current average of 18,000 plus fans per game has plucked fans from area colleges at the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, and University of Tulsa sporting events.

According to Shackelford & Greenwell (2005), when examining intercollegiate sports, it is also important to note that intercollegiate sports teams draw spectators from the student community in addition to the local community. Students are a valuable aspect of home-court advantages for both football and men's basketball venues. Packed and loud student sections can highly motivate the home team's performance and energize the general season ticket holders' base. These young fans are more connected to the student-athletes' on the playing field due to current class interaction and other club associations.

It is vital for intercollegiate athletic departments' to gain consistent student fan attendance. "Prior to the start of the 2009-2010 men's basketball season, K-State's athletic department was approached by members of the student government association with an idea to help address issues surrounding the pre-game line-up procedures, especially for marquee games, such as the in-state rivalry game, known as the "Sunflower Showdown," against the University of Kansas (KU)," (Peetz, 2011). The result was the implementation of a group points system where students obtained points for attending all home games and this points total dictated a priority system for game-day lineup procedures for the rivalry showdown versus the Jayhawks. Additionally, this is a vital time for the intercollegiate athletics' program to connect to their

future fan base. After the student's graduation, past sports connections will prove invaluable in attracting the students on the marketing escalator and moving them up the desired levels.

With today's current trends in technology, it is crucial for intercollegiate athletics' departments to send constant and consistent messages through various social media platforms to connect to fans. The most popular platforms include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Martinson, Schneider, and McCullough (2015) stated that Facebook and Twitter are the most well-known social media networks and thus the best ways to connect with fans. Other emerging platforms that can be very beneficial are Pinterest, YouTube channel, and Periscope. Significant reasons to use these social media outlets are that they are today's millennials preferred way of communication, and in addition these resources are free of charge.

Increased athletic departments are incorporating alcohol sales to its' fan base. This is a concept that has encountered huge success in the professional ranks and is now transitioning to the college environments. Constant excuse for fans not attending intercollegiate athletic events has been the inability to enjoy alcoholic beverages at the venue. Isabella (2018) noted the initial push of the newest Big 12 member West Virginia to being the guinea pig in alcohol sales at athletic events. According to Isabella (2018), in the five years since, six of the 10 schools, either have full-fledged beer programs to the public or are currently amidst an experimental pilot program stage. The sale of alcohol has provided an in-game amenity for the fans while also providing a financial windfall. "Texas generated more than \$3 million in revenue from alcohol sales at football games in 2017," (Isabella, 2018).

Another constant complaint from fans that aids in an excuse to stay home and away from intercollegiate events is venue's Wi-Fi reception. With the current addiction to technology, it is vital for athletic venues to allow fans "to connect" to their family and friends through text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. University of Kentucky recently became fully connected in their historic Rupp Arena including a new scoreboard and sound system. According to Tynan (2017), reliable internet access was essential to keep the 41-year-old venue relevant, which hosts Wildcats basketball in addition to 100 shows a year ranging from Disney on Ice to U2 concerts. The three-year planning process cultivated with a \$1.5 million price tag but will provide additional entertainment for Wildcat fans between the basketball action.

It is extremely important for intercollegiate athletic departments to utilize both the manpower and money needed to attract fans for football and men's basketball games. These two revenue sports can bring enormous recognition to the front porch of the university: the intercollegiate athletics program. Additionally, these fans have the ability to bring enormous financial windfalls to their respective athletics' department. It is vital for intercollegiate athletic departments to ascend fans up the marketing escalator. Sports' marketers seek to move fans to at least medium users' level and then propel to heavy users' level while also continuing to explore additional opportunities to bring both new and younger fans on board.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

In today's competitive age of intercollegiate athletics, it is imperative that athletic administrators and sports marketers analyze ways to attract and retain sports' fans in football and men's basketball for financial gains as well as advantages in increasing home field advantage for their respective teams.

Author Information:

Dr. Chris Croft is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management in the College of Business at the University of Southern Mississippi. Croft has been involved in intercollegiate athletics for over twenty years as an assistant basketball coach, head basketball coach, and a college administrator including the Big 12, PAC 10, and Big Ten Conferences.

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