# SELLING A SPORTS CLUB IDENTITY

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**Abstract**

*Selling the identity of a sports club is very important in the survival of a sports club in this day and age. Without a steady flow of fans, a sports club will not be able to sell tickets or season tickets thus not collecting any income, without no fans sponsors will not be interested or any public authority. It is a complex mechanism and if only one wheal is missing a sport club will not be able to survive, even if he has a big history of awards and titles.*

*It is important for a manager to create a model or identification* (Attractiveness of players, Social acceptance, Variety seeking (negative influence), Involvement with the sport, Performance (team/player)*) in order to get fans to connect and identify with the sport club and get to make them engage in support behaviors Meeting (games, events, fan clubs, etc.), Merchandise buying (souvenirs, licensed logo items, etc.) and Media consumption related to the team (online, newspaper, TV, radio, etc.).*

**Keywords**: *management communication, sports communication, sport management, sports club management*.

**JEL classification*:*** M10; M30; M37; M37

Selling the identity of a sports club is very important in the survival of a sports club in this day and age. Without a steady flow of fan, a sports club will not be able to sell tickets or season tickets thus not collecting any income, without no fans sponsors will not be interested or any public authority.

When an individual is asked to identify himself with others he usually, gives their name, where he or she is from, and identify with a university or organization.

## A. Model of Identification

Communication is defined as being "fundamentally psychosocial interaction of people, achieved through articulated language or other codes for transmission of information, gaining stability or changes of individual or group behavior" (Iacobini A. 2013, "*Influencing sports culture for the the general population trough mass media"*, PhD Thesis University of Pitesti p 49). It is important for an organization to build a bridge of communication with the fans.

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Figure 1 summarizes five factors that lead to fan identification:

1. Attractiveness of players
2. Social acceptance
3. Variety seeking (negative influence)
4. Involvement with the sport
5. Performance (team/player) **(**Hirt, Edward, 1992. Costs and benefits of allegiance: Changes in fans' self-ascribed competencies after team victory versus defeat. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 63 (November): 724–738.)

Similarly, identification leads to five consequences that generally benefit the sports organization:

1. BIRGing (Basking In Reflected Glory)
2. Attributions
3. Support behaviors
4. Emotional enhancement
5. Spontaneous behaviors

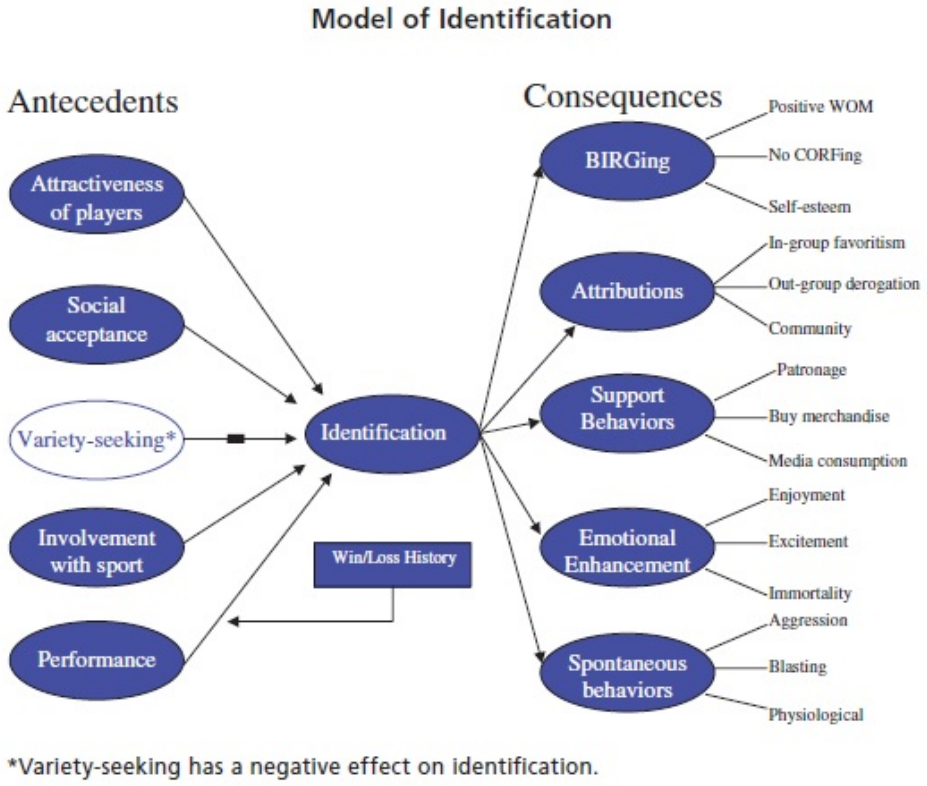


**Figure 1**

**Attractiveness of Players**

Fans may find players to be attractive due to the player's success and similarity.

*Success.* Fans will generally find successful athletes and teams as attractive. When the team performs poorly, attractive members of the team offer fans a basis by which they can identify with the team and still protect their self-esteem. (Wakefield, Kirk L, Team Sports Marketing, p. 16)

*Personal contact.* If you've ever met a professional player in person, odds are that you have continued to follow that player and his team. The more familiar that you become with the player, the higher is the likelihood that you will want to watch the player on TV or attend a game.

The more that the team can facilitate indirect (e.g., interviews) and direct (e.g., autograph signings, public social service events, etc.) contact with the players, the more fans will be able to identify with the players. Players that make themselves available through these indirect and direct means are valuable assets beyond what they do at game time. (Wakefield, Kirk L, Team Sports Marketing, p. 17)

**Social Acceptance**

Social acceptance typically originates from at least three sources: family, peers, and community (including the city, state, and national level). Interestingly, we tend to get our information about what the community thinks by inferring from the views of our families and peers.3 So, the way to improve community acceptance is by targeting actions that will make families and small groups accept the team and sporting event. Minor league sports often do this by focusing on the entertainment value for the family, which in turn influences acceptance of the team in the community.

Two primary ways to increase social acceptance are to improve the place and to give fans ownership of the team.

*The place.* Perceptions of social acceptance of a sporting event are directly tied to the place the sporting event is held. In Table 2.1, which sporting events do you think people are likely to perceive as more popular? (Wakefield, Kirk L. 1995. The pervasive effects of social influence on sporting event attendance. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 19 (8): 335–351.)

| Dimension | Sporting Event "A" | Sporting Event "B" |
|---|---|---|
| Location | Dangerous part of town with few access roads | Near other entertainment and restaurants off major roads |
| Facility | Old and deteriorating | New equipment and modern amenities |
| Food | Popcorn, hot dogs (boiled), peanuts, soft serve ice cream in a little helmet | Southwest chicken salad, BBQ, pizza, chicken, Häagen-Dazs ice cream |
| Parking | Entry and exit are bottlenecked | Entry and exit facilitated by layout and shuttles |
| Maintenance | Dirty restrooms, food service, and seating areas | Clean restrooms, food service, and seating areas |
| Service Personnel | Facial hair, unkempt uniforms, long hair | Clean shaven, clean uniforms, short hair |
| Comfort | Cramped seating and aisles | Ample knee, arm, and seat space |

**Figure 2**

A chief reason that progressive sports organizations invest so much capital in facilities is for the obvious reason: people like nice places and they don't like bad places. It's that simple. If a facility becomes known nationwide as unfriendly to fans and even the players, then it is probably time to get a new stadium or do major renovations.

*Ownership.* Perceptions of social acceptance are connected to the extent to which individuals in the community feel as though they have ownership of the team. Fans of the Green Bay Packers literally do own a piece of the team, but fans can feel as though they own the team in other ways. The Memphis Redbirds (AAA) baseball team's not-for profit status helps the community feel as though they are supporting the city when they support the Redbirds. Providing fans the opportunity to have input and communication with team ownership and management also breeds ownership feelings.

## Variety Seeking

While the first two factors of attractiveness and social acceptance increase fan identification, individuals who are variety seekers are unlikely to be highly identified with the team. Variety seekers attend a game simply for a change of pace. These entertainment hoppers" may go to the game one weekend and then not return for the rest of the season. (Wakefield, Kirk L, Team Sports Marketing, p. 22)

In short, sports marketers must evaluate what the objective and effect of sales promotions are on fans. While some infrequent spectators might attend due to a promotion and decide that the event is enjoyable enough to return more frequently, sports-irrelevant sales promotions and discounts are likely to send the signal to spectators that the event is not valuable enough to attend in its own right. In any case, the marketing manager can build identification in weakly identified fans by offering promotions that are somehow related to the team, the event, and its players. (Wakefield, Kirk L., and Barnes, James H. 1996. Retailing hedonic consumption: A model of sales promotion of a leisure service. *Journal of Retailing* 72 (Winter): 409–427.)

**Involvement with the Sport**

Within the sports setting, fans may have an enduring involvement with the sport and situational involvement with the event. Enduring involvement is an ongoing interest or concern with the sport on a day to-day basis.6 (Richins, Marsha L., and Bloch, Peter H. 1986. After the new wears off: The temporal context of product involvement. *Journal of Consumer Research* 13 (2): 280–285.)

Unless individuals understand the nature of the game and something about the participants in the game, they can't identify with the team.

Sports marketers can increase fans' enduring involvement with the sport and thereby increase fan identification.

**Performance**

Countless studies confirm the fact that winning increases team identification and attendance. It is important to point out, however, that the team's history plays a role in this relationship.

Fans may perceive their team as performing relatively well even if the team is below with justifications such as:

- We're better than last year!
- At least we beat the #1 team.
- We've got the talent; we just haven't put it together yet.
- Given how small our budget is, we do pretty well compared to the big guys in the conference.
- We've got some of the best players in the league, we just need one more (pitcher, lineman, point guard, etc.).
- Wait till next year.

| Increasing Enduring Fan Investment | |
|---|---|
| **Method** | **Example** |
| Increase opportunities for sports **participation** | • Sponsor local sports teams and leagues<br>• Offer sports clinics staffed by coaches and players |
| Provide **information** on **rules** of the game | • Feature something like the ESPN/NHL's "NHL Rules" on Web sites<br>• On broadcast and live games, show "You make the call!" programming that illustrates rules<br>• Announce the availability of printed rules of the game at stadium information centers or from section attendants |
| Provide complete game and **player** information | • Handout halftime stats in the stands<br>• Install scoreboards that post real time game stats<br>• Introduce players with personal information<br>• Feature in-depth player information in freely accessible formats (read: not only in expensive programs) |
| Facilitate **media** exchange | • Give reporters ready access to players and management<br>• Arrange player/coach appearances in non-sports settings |

Marketing managers can influence this perception by focusing on the achievements and performance of individual players, progress from previous years, isolated successes, or changing the point of reference from winning to some other trait on which the team or organization performs well.

*Positive word-of-mouth.* Highly identified fans expend considerable amounts of time expressing positive sentiment regarding the object of their identification. This positive word-of-mouth may take the form of oral or written communications with family and peers, as they encourage others to join them in attending the sporting event or otherwise supporting the team or player. This positive word-of-mouth is also likely to influence social acceptance among families and peers, which, in turn, builds fan identification. (Wakefield, Kirk L, Team Sports Marketing, p. 27)

**Attributions**

People make inferences about themselves and others based on behaviors and situations they observe.(Kelley, Harold H. 1967. *Attribution theory in social psychology*. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.)

People make inferences about themselves, groups, group memberships, and group characteristics. If you are in a group, you will tend to make self-serving attributions, assume responsibility for group decisions greater than is deserved, and will be biased in favor of the in-group and be biased against an out-group.

(Folks, Valerie S., and Kiesler, Tina. 1991. "Social cognition: Consumers inferences about the self and others," in *Handbook of Consumer Behavior*, eds. Thomas S. Robertson and Harold H. Kassarjian, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.)

One favorable consequence of in-group bias is that fans tend to accommodate and cooperate with other fans. Highly identified fans see each other as part of a group, facilitating positive fan behavior. (Wakefield, Kirk L, Team Sports Marketing, p. 40)

**Support Behaviors: 3Ms**

Spectators reinforce their identification with the team by engaging in support behaviors. The more identified fans are, the more they will engage in:

- Meeting (games, events, fan clubs, etc.)
- Merchandise buying (souvenirs, licensed logo items, etc.)
- Media consumption related to the team (online, newspaper, TV, radio, etc.)

*Meeting.* Fans will seek opportunities to meet or join other fans to support their favorite team or player. An obvious effect of identification is that highly identified fans will attend games (home and away) and other related events. Highly identified fans will join fan clubs and other support groups, such as university booster clubs. (Wakefield, Kirk L, Team Sports Marketing, p. 41)

*Merchandise.* Fans buy team or player-related merchandise to reinforce their identification and to represent themselves to others as fans of the team or player. This has important implications for promotions and for licensed product sales. Identified fans will desire promotional items that are somehow related to the team or event to enhance and reflect their self-concepts.

Team jerseys, t-shirts, equipment, and other items (e.g., bobble-heads on office desks) that are frequently on display to others are likely to be highly desired by fans. Licensed logo apparel sales are an important source of revenue for many sports organizations. Since identified fans are seeking to bolster their self-esteem by associating themselves with the team or player through how they appear. (Wakefield, Kirk L, Team Sports Marketing, p. 43)

*Media.* In order to feed their feelings of identification with the team, highly identified fans will spend more time following their favorite team or player in the various media.

Sports organizations can enhance fan excitement and enjoyment in a variety of ways:

- Pregame music and video that fi ts the demographics of the fans.
- Innovative player introductions that build excitement and chances to BIRG even before the game starts.
- Event-specific music and sound effects that ignite fan excitement at key points in game.
- Post-game rallies on the field or court (helps if team comes back out) after big wins.

## Conclusion

Without a steady flow of fans, a sports club will not be able to sell tickets or season tickets thus not collecting any income, without no fans sponsors will not be interested or any public authority. It is a complex mechanism and if only one wheal is missing a sport club will not be able to survive, even if he has a big history of awards and titles.

Sports organizations must build fan identification through attractive players, building social acceptance in the community, converting variety seekers into more identified fans, building local involvement with the sport.

The sports organization that increases its numbers of highly identified fans will reap the consequences of increased support—namely, more fans in the seats, giving more money to support the team, watching more broadcasts, and buying more team merchandise.

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