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**An Analysis of the Factors and Marketing Techniques Affecting Attendance at
NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Games**

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Abstract

The gap in revenue production at most schools between the two “big-time college sports” and women’s basketball is vast. One of the biggest contributors to revenue for most sports is attendance, and while there has been some general research on attendance in college sports, there is little prior work examining women’s basketball specifically. The purpose of this study was to fill the dearth of research and to gather information on the factors that influence attendance at women’s intercollegiate basketball games. Division I marketing directors at 329 schools that sponsored Division I women’s basketball were included in the survey and 18 (35.87%) participated. The discussion section examines the qualitative survey answers in detail and provides recommendations to those involved in the industry of marketing women’s college basketball.

The landscape of college athletics in America is continually changing, but over recent decades changes have primarily been motivated by money (Cooper, 2011), with the main revenue driving sports undoubtedly being football and men's basketball (Whiteside et al, 2011). The focus on increasing revenue has caused National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments to engage in a continuous battle of *one-upmanship*, specifically at the Division I level. This has led to vast increases in spending on the main revenue sports, and less focus on funding for the remaining non-revenue sports (Cooper, 2011). Women's sports in particular are caught in a seemingly never-ending cycle in the quest for more popularity by way of increased exposure and subsequent increases in attendance. The sport media tend to cover intercollegiate men's sports such as football, basketball, and baseball, which leads to an increased fan base and, more importantly, an increase in revenue from gate receipts (Engleman et al, 2009). While women's sports are, in general, less popular than their male counterparts (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005), it is also undeniable that the number of females participating in intercollegiate athletics has increased rapidly over the past twenty-five years. In 2012, almost 200,000 females participated in NCAA sponsored sports (Wolverton, 2012).

Despite this growth, research focusing on attendance at female athletic contests, and women's basketball in particular, is very limited (Depken, Williams, & Wilson, 2011). There has been a relatively large amount of work examining spectator attendance, but nearly all of this is devoted to male sports (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). While helpful, this work is not directly applicable to women's sports. Researchers have shown that the attendance at men and women's college basketball games are very different. To this end, it is important to explore this polarization in attendance and the unique ways to market to the target audience of each specific sport (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005; Kahle, Duncan, Dalakas, & Aiken, 2001; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). While the main revenue generating sports receive the most marketing and promotion the goal of increasing revenue for an athletic department can also be enhanced by improving attendance and identification with less popular teams. Fink and colleagues found college athletic departments have two significant sources of untapped revenue: female fans and fans of women's basketball (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). While this study focuses on women's basketball, female fans comprise a significant portion of that fan base thus making this study even more valuable within intercollegiate athletic marketing research. The more understanding there is about the factors that affect attendance for women's college basketball the more effectively these games can be promoted, which can in turn increase athletic department revenue and continue the growth of female athletics. Although there are numerous areas that could be studied related to marketing of women's sports, the purpose of this study was to examine the marketing of women's college basketball. The review of literature found below discusses marketing tendencies of sport in general. The focus of this research will be to enhance this research by examining the marketing of women's college basketball, an untapped market.

Review of Literature

Although there is a dearth of research to solely review women's college basketball (Depken, Williams, & Wilson, 2011), there is ample literature focusing on the motivators of attendance for fans at men's sports (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). Even though it may not be directly generalizable to women's basketball, it provides a gap in the literature and the basis for research to close this gap. Research on sport spectator attendance has often examined the differences between male and female spectators (James & Ridinger, 2002). One of the major differences noted in multiple studies examining fans of female athletics is a higher emphasis on the social atmosphere at games being a motivator for attendance (Fink et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Female fans look to be involved in a community that supports a team and attend games both to be with their friends and to create new relationships. Without someone to accompany them to games female fans were far more likely to stay home from sporting events (Trail & Kyoum, 2011).

Much of the success of college athletics is based upon tradition (Wells, Southall, & Peng, 2000). While women's sports do not have the same history as many male sports, simply due to their delayed start, tradition is an increasing factor in attendance at games. Tradition has been described as a motivator for all spectator segments at college sports (Wells et al., 2000). Female fans have shown an even stronger link to university pride as a motivator for their attendance at college sporting events than their male counterparts (Ridinger & Funk, 2006).

An additional segment for analysis in this study is supported by research on the fans of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Although it is a professional league and thus there are many differences with NCAA women's basketball, some of the fans do cross over. Fans attending WNBA games often prefer to attend because of the perceived positive role model status of players and to support women's athletics (Fink et al., 2002). The perception of positive player image is not something that always carries over to the National Basketball Association (NBA) or other male professional leagues. Also many fans attend WNBA games simply to support the growth of women's athletics (Fink et al., 2002). In many ways, attending a professional game to support female sports is no different than a college alumnus or fan attending multiple sporting events to support their school. Other factors that have been shown as motivators for attending female athletic events include aesthetic quality, sense of satisfaction from victories, personal attachment to the team, and a positive atmosphere (Ridinger & Funk, 2006; Wells et al., 2000). Women's basketball in particular is often noted as more aesthetically pleasing than the modern male game (James & Ridinger, 2002).

It is important to recognize the impact that a successful team can have on increasing attendance. Winning creates excitement, increases media coverage, and gives a sense of satisfaction to spectators. All of these factors can lead to increased attendance. One specific measure of success that has been linked with attendance figures is home team winning percentage, which has been described as a strong predictor of attendance in

multiple sports (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005; Whitney, 1998). This correlation has also been confirmed by other studies specifically in relation to intercollegiate athletics (DeSchriver, 1999; Wells et al., 2000).

Another measure of success is the overall success of the previous season. Winning percentage from the previous year has been positively linked to attendance for women's basketball (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). Post-season participation also has a significant impact on attendance the following season. Winning multiple games in the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) or participating in the NCAA Tournament has been shown to have a positive effect on attendance the next year. Winning either of these tournaments can also have a positive boost that lasts for multiple seasons (Depken et al., 2011). This line of research supports the necessity of fielding a winning team if attendance is a priority for any organization. Although there are many variables that influence winning, at the collegiate level a major factor in success is recruiting. To be effective throughout the recruiting process requires strong support from the athletic department as well as close integration with other school departments (Wells et al., 2000). Investment in this aspect of collegiate athletics cannot be discounted, as it lays the foundation for any future success. Athletic departments looking to cut costs may see some recruiting trips as an easy way to limit expenditures, but in context of the research showing the importance of winning this has a likelihood of being counterproductive.

While trailing the impact of success, several other factors have a correlation with attendance at college sporting events. Student enrollment has successfully predicted attendance at collegiate women's basketball, softball, and volleyball games (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). In contrast, community size does not have a direct impact at the collegiate level, unlike major professional sports (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). Competition is another important factor in attendance for college sports. Having multiple competing teams within a fifty-mile radius has shown a negative correlation with attendance figures (DeSchriver & Jensen, 2002). Furthermore, for women's basketball, teams that play in large markets that feature three or more direct competitors have significantly lower attendance than those with a market to themselves (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). Having one or more professional sports teams in the area is also a negative predictor for attendance (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). This shows the effect that external factors can have on attendance, raising the importance of proper marketing efforts for schools in crowded markets. Another factor in attendance is ticket price. Women's basketball typically has lower ticket prices than that of football or men's basketball. Fink and colleagues (2002) have found this is a significant reason why fans of women's basketball attend multiple games.

When reviewing the research related to factors impacting attendance at sporting events, it is important to note that research not performed specifically on women's basketball may not be generalizable to this study. The findings have varied significantly between sport type, level of sport, and gender of the participants (Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005). Therefore, research findings should only be considered applicable to

the specific sport they investigate, as generalization between sports and genders may not be accurate. There is little research for professionals involved in the marketing of women's basketball to reference effectively when seeking to improve their attendance figures. The work of these employees is vital, as simply having a special promotion in place has been shown to increase spectator attendance (Wells et al., 2000). Any research related to women's basketball is dated as well as limited in scope. For example, spectators at women's basketball games have also been shown to be more responsive to promotions than fans of the male teams (Fink et al., 2002). However, there is no research to document what types of promotions are most effective.

While there are several sources one could query in an attempt to examine the effects of marketing efforts on attendance for women's Division I basketball, none are better than the athletic department employees directly responsible for these efforts. Having a position within a college athletic department that is specifically responsible for marketing athletics has a significant positive impact on attendance figures (Wells et al., 2000). This suggests that most marketing employees have an enhanced understanding on the promotions that both help and detract from attendance, at least at their schools' sporting events. Having this knowledge and understanding is a vital part of their job responsibilities, and a lack of implementing proper marketing strategies can eventually lead to dismissal from their employment. While men's sports often get the focus of college athletic marketers, it is still their responsibility to understand and promote women's sports at an affordable price both for the university and the spectators (Liebert, 2008). Based on these factors and the purpose of this study, it is apparent that the most effective people to study would be the employees within college athletic departments who are responsible for marketing women's basketball.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine the marketing factors that have the greatest effect on attendance at NCAA women's basketball games. Email communication was sent to the person responsible for marketing women's basketball at each of the 329 schools that sponsored a Division I women's basketball team. The employee to receive the email from each school was selected by job title. The most common job title found was director of marketing, but there was a wide range of specific titles including positions with a focus on external relations, corporate sales, or communications.

Instrument

The survey included demographic questions including school, position, and experience. Questions related to the attendance goals and actual attendance figures at woman's basketball games for the past season were included in the survey. Respondents then were asked a series of questions measured using a 7-point Likert scale, with choices ranging from 1 or no impact to 7 or most impact. The rated questions consisted of external factors such as team performance, game scheduling, and ticket costs. The next series of Likert scale questions included a list of different marketing techniques, which

the respondents were asked to rate on their perceived effectiveness. The list of marketing techniques was based on the information sought from NBA marketers in prior research (Dick & Turner, 2007). The survey concluded with open-ended questions about specific promotions or marketing techniques that had been either very successful or very unsuccessful at the respondent's institution.

Results

A total of 119 survey responses were received out of a distribution list of 329 for an overall response rate of 35.9%. The first quantitative questions presented to respondents included basic demographic data. Years of experience in athletic marketing gathered a wide range of responses ($M = 6.3$, $SD = 3.99$). Participants were then asked about the number of years of current organizational tenure ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 4.65$).

Addressing the topic of women's basketball more specifically, the next questions dealt with attendance at games during the 2011-12 season. The first attendance question asked if each school had met their attendance goal for the season. Only 41.18% ($N = 49$) of participants answered that they had met their attendance goals, leaving 58.82% ($N = 70$) that had a lower attendance than they anticipated. The subjects were asked to list their average attendance for the year. Given the wide range of schools in this study there was predictably a wide range of attendance figures. The average attendance was ($M = 1,458.4$, $SD = 1,789.6$). Several outliers whose figures were around 10,000 per game skewed the data from the actual attendance of the sample.

The next series of questions focused on the impact of different types of external factors on attendance at women's basketball games. In this case, external factors are used to describe things that affect attendance, which are largely out of the control of marketing employees. Respondents were asked to rate each factor on a scale of one to seven, with one being not important and seven meaning the factor is extremely influential on attendance. Demographic information on the surrounding area was the first set of questions on external factors. There were seven factors to be considered in this section: proximity to other Division I schools, proximity to professional sports teams, general basketball knowledge of surrounding area, socioeconomic status of surrounding area, population size of surrounding area, student enrollment, and generosity of alumni and/or boosters. Of the factors, generosity of alumni and/or boosters scored the highest ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.65$). Population size of the surrounding area was also noted as important, ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.68$), and socioeconomic status was third ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.58$). The least important factors were student enrollment ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.8$) and proximity to professional sports teams ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 2.13$); however, these factors also had a higher standard deviation than the other factors, indicating less of a consensus on their impact.

The next group of external factors related to team performance, which is outside the control of a marketing employee. The factors examined included number of in-state players, star players on roster, record during current season, team standing in conference, and record during previous season. There was a wider spread in mean scores for this

section than the previous demographic section, but scores were significantly higher as well, showing the emphasis success can have on increasing attendance. The highest rated factor in this category was record during current season ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.49$). Not only was current record the highest scoring factor in this section, but it also had the highest mean of all external factors. Team standing in conference was second ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.63$). While the team's record during the previous season was also important ranking third ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.69$). The lowest score ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.88$) belonged to number of in-state players on the roster. Another highly ranked effect on attendance was single game specifics. This involved factors related to scheduling, such as game time either evening or afternoon, rivalry with opponent, ranking of opponent, and point in the season. Rivalry with opponent was listed as the most important factor ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.54$), placing it as the second highest rated factor in all categories. Evening game time was the second most important single game factor ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.43$). Point in season was the least important in this section ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.51$). The standard deviations of all the factors in the single game category were also relatively low so combining this with the general high ratings scores shows that as a group marketing employees see game time and date as vital to improving and sustaining attendance.

The final section on external factors, cost and ease of attendance was the lowest scoring of all categories. One possible conclusion is that ticket prices for women's basketball games are already relatively low, especially compared to men's sports and professional games, therefore it is not a differentiating factor in deciding whether to attend. This category featured five factors: ticket price, parking costs, ease of parking, arena accessibility, and total cost of attendance. Of the group, ticket price ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.94$) and total cost of attendance ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.83$) were the highest rated factors. Both of the parking factors scored very low. Ratings for ease of parking ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.76$) and parking costs ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.96$) show that in general parking is the least influential of all external factors. It should be noted that the standard deviations for this section were as a whole higher than the other sections, showing some level of disagreement over the influence. However, the overall scores still show that cost and especially parking costs are of relatively low importance to determining attendance at women's basketball games.

The final part of the quantitative questioning asked respondents to consider what types of techniques for promoting attendance were most impactful for increasing attendance for women's basketball at their school. There were 23 different marketing techniques listed and participants were asked to rate each on the same seven point Likert scale. The standard deviations of all factors were consistent, with the lowest being 1.30 and the highest 1.77. These deviations showed far less fluctuation than the numbers calculated for the external factors. This indicates that the marketing employees generally have an idea of what techniques they think work most effectively for women's basketball. Communication between different schools to aid one another might also lead to a greater consensus on these techniques. Regardless, the ranking of techniques should provide

clarity to any interested parties over what the field sees as most influential in increasing attendance.

Of all the marketing techniques listed, the highest rated was grassroots marketing ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.50$). The exact methods used for grassroots marketing will be discussed later using the qualitative answers. Referrals and word of mouth was the next most important technique ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.58$). Creating positive public relations was the third highest ranked ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.30$), and the hosting of pre or post-game events was fourth ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.49$). Group ticket sales was next ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.64$), followed by promotional giveaway items ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.59$), use of Facebook ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.40$) one game ticket discounts ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.77$), and community service projects conducted by the women's basketball team ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.59$). The least influential factor was the practice of telemarketing ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.38$). Just above that were partial season ticket plans ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.69$), public address announcements ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.44$), and physical mail advertising ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.51$). It is clear that getting out into the public and creating a positive image of the program and players is vital for women's basketball. While having the results of techniques rated by the employees who use them regularly is very helpful, the qualitative responses to open-ended questions gave further detail to the reasons why particular strategies are more impactful and how to effectively use them.

Discussion

In addition to the quantitative results there were also opportunities for survey participants to explain their responses in greater detail. After review of the responses, several produced themes that detailed the factors influencing attendance.

Reasons for Meeting or Not Meeting Annual Attendance Goal

Following the question about whether or not the school had met its attendance goal for the 2011-12 women's basketball season there was an open-ended question asking, "Why do you think you did or did not meet your attendance goal?" With 58.82% of the schools failing to meet their stated goals for the season there were more answers explaining that disappointment than those stating why they had succeeded.

In reviewing the answers, there were certain themes that appeared. The first of those was team performance on the court. This factor can cause attendance to go both ways; winning encourages attendance while losing causes fans to stay home. Fans can be very fickle, and even a successful season the previous year does not guarantee attendance will hold the following year. One respondent said, "This was a down season for our team coming off a twenty win season last year and playing in a post-season tournament. You can never count on wins or losses but it's easier to drive attendance when the teams are winning." It also seems that while a previous winning season brings no promises for the next year, a losing past year means the new season starts with a lack of energy and excitement. "The [beginning] of the season was a follow-up to two losing seasons in a row so interest was lacking from the start" noted another respondent.

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 a new coach comes renewed optimism and interest in the program. One participant said, "We have hired a new women's head coach and we feel certain that she will turn our program around and bring back the excitement that once filled our gymnasium at women's basketball games". This feeling was supported at several schools that just finished a year under a new coach as they noted an increase in excitement surrounding the program. 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.

Several other internal factors that again are outside the control of most marketing employees include lack of budget for advertising, marketing staff turnover, and the surrounding market. A common response was "not enough time or money allocated to women's basketball." While this may always be an issue at many schools due to the other sports that take priority within an athletic department, it is something that can be offset through successful use of grassroots and free marketing. Multiple employees mentioned "marketing staff turnover in the middle of the season" as a reason why attendance goals were missed. This led to poor or no execution of planned promotions, which then further distanced fans from the program. Several respondents lamented that; "our geographical area presents a problem when it comes to other events in the area, beautiful weather, and traffic." Without question there are numerous factors outside the control of a typical college marketing director, but there are also numerous variables, which can be altered.

The main theme that arose for how attendance had been positively affected in the past year was the strategy to focus on several big games, rather than trying to push attendance at each and every home game. As one participant said, "I think the mistake we made was designating a promotion for every home game of the 2011-12 season rather than focusing in on 5 or 6 games and trying to pack the house for those designated games." There are certain games against poor opponents or over holiday breaks that are unlikely to feature large crowds no matter how much effort is put into marketing. However, having some select games with heavily marketed promotions can lead to vibrant atmospheres several times a year. Common responses included "we had some unique game specific promotions which helped increase attendance" and "with themed events...we had great turnouts for select games." The nature of marketing women's basketball is that at most schools not every game will be well attended, but by focusing the limited resources available on a few bigger games rather than spreading, those out over the season the school can create some excitement in the women's basketball program. Other reasons mentioned for meeting the attendance goal included conference changes, reward programs, group promotions, and student attendance. Competition with larger sports on campus, high player turnover, and lack of doubleheaders were reported as negative influences.

Other External and Marketing Factors Affecting Attendance

A response that frequently forwarded was the influence of weather on game attendance. Both good weather and bad weather can be reasons for why fans choose not to attend. In southern states where the weather is still warm during the winter this enjoyable climate can lead people to stay away from an indoor arena. However, far more responses brought up the issue of bad weather during the winter months in colder states. Even in states with “a very mild winter, people are very cautious about driving in the inclement weather” said one marketer. Another mentioned, “The weather plays a big factor in our attendance. If we have a game on a day with local school cancelling or constant snow it brings down our overall attendance numbers pretty quickly.” Another employee from a northern state put it simply; “if the weather is bad in any way, we always expect bad attendance.”

Another issue that was raised was the competition present in bigger cities. An employee from a large northeastern city mentioned, “there are 3 other schools in very close proximity with Division I basketball programs and also a thriving professional sports scene with which we are always competing for fans.” In addition to other colleges and professional sports teams, high school sports were also expressed as competition for spectators. The general culture of the area was also an important outside factor mentioned. Some parts of the country are known as football or baseball areas and in these states no matter how successful or well marketed a women’s basketball team is there may not be the level of interest needed to create a revenue producing program.

The last, but overwhelmingly most common response had to do with game scheduling. Although marketers do not have much control of this issue, they can influence certain aspects. The coaching staff and athletic department leadership typically do scheduling jointly, and while opponents are relatively unchangeable game days and start times can sometimes be adjusted. It is clear from the responses that weekend games; especially Friday and Saturday are by far the best draws. “Women’s games have to be so carefully scheduled,” said one respondent, “weeknight games are a killer. We have a hard time getting people to a men’s game on a Tuesday night, let alone a women’s game.” Many conferences also play games on Wednesday nights and these were mentioned repeatedly as bad for attendance, often due to community religious organizations that meet that night. Sunday games can be good draws, as long as they are after the NFL season has ended, although several Catholic schools stated that Sunday Mass could negatively affect attendance at women’s basketball games. It was also frequently discussed that doubleheaders with men’s basketball games are a boost to attendance. As mentioned by one marketer, “the doubleheaders really assisted us in our attendance numbers. We have to work a lot harder to get people to come out for the one women’s game versus a doubleheader.” While the number of games on a college basketball schedule means that by necessity some will have to be played on weeknights or other poor times, it is clear that college marketers should use any influence they can to push for important games to be scheduled on Fridays and Saturdays, in conjunction with the men’s team if possible. While this may be impossible at larger schools, the smaller

schools marketing departments noted they were able to have an influence on the scheduling of games.

Detail on Marketing Factors That Rated Very High or Very Low

Following the quantitative question asking participants to rate the list of marketing factors on a 7-point Likert scale there were two openings for them to comment further. One asked them to describe in more detail any factors they had rated very high and the other to talk about any they had rated very low. The highest rated marketing factor was grassroots marketing. Given the limited budgets mentioned earlier, this makes sense. There were many detailed responses describing the importance of grassroots work to drive attendance. "Grassroots and community service projects really boost attendance at women's basketball," said one respondent, "The fans of this sport want to feel connected with the team on a more individual level." Another stated,

We have noticed the more our team interacts with the community at large, the more groups we can target for ticket offers, and the better relationship our fans end up having with the team. This strong bond between fans and the team is crucial to bringing up attendance numbers because it becomes something the fans are invested in seeing.

As mentioned before budget is certainly a consideration on the importance of grassroots marketing. Grassroots "is really the only way to do it," said another response, "We don't have a huge marketing budget for women's basketball so you have to think of cheap, easy ways to get the word out there."

Referrals and word of mouth was the second highest rated factor and there were plenty of comments describing their importance. One respondent said,

So many people have said to me, 'my friend brought me to a women's game and it was great, we loved it.' More and more we hear that it is word of mouth that is getting new people to a game. Once they come, they are hooked.

Another marketer added, "We rely most heavily on people coming and enjoying their experience and spreading the word. People who enjoy our venue and atmosphere are our best salesmen." A different response described word of mouth as "by far the most successful sales tool for us this past season."

Grassroots and referrals, as well as two other factors that scored well, creating positive public relations and community service projects, are all related to a large extent and based on the responses they are the most effective way to market women's basketball. Community service is a great way to boost the perception and awareness of the athletes. Said one participant, "community service events connect our student athletes with the community in ways which encourage reciprocal support of their endeavors." Not only does the work being done at these community projects benefit others, the goodwill created causes people to be more personally interested in the players. Added another, "the team being out in the community and creating a positive image is a huge benefit. If people like the team and the coach and the image they present, they will come to support the team." The core message from these four related and highly rated

marketing factors is that, as a niche sport women's basketball cannot rely solely on athletic interest to draw fans; there must be a more personal connection with the people who attend games. "One of the biggest factors for our program is to create an image of our team that connects with the community," summarized another responder, "We want to have student-athletes that are personable and able to connect with our fan base." The most popular college sports, such as football and men's basketball may not have to reach out as much in order to create interest, but it is clear that for women's basketball creating a personal connection with the public is very important to boosting attendance.

Once you get people to the games, a way to increase connections and keep them coming back is through pre and post-game events. A few of the pre-game events mentioned include pizza for students, facility tours, youth sport clinics, fan item giveaways, and chalk talk with the coaches. Because players are getting ready for the game it is difficult to have them connect with fans prior, but post-game events offer another chance to get the players and spectators interacting. A particularly popular post-game activity is having a team autograph session after several games each year. On-court shoot-around with the team for children is another repeatedly mentioned activity. One unique event was to have a kid's press conference, where local children are able to pose as reporters to ask the team and coach questions about the game. The success of each activity often depends on the local climate and what people are interested in, but these events are just another way to create a positive public image around the community.

A third very important marketing technique that is becoming increasingly prevalent in women's basketball is the use of social media. Facebook and Twitter are the most well known social media networks and are thus the best ways to connect with fans. Perhaps the best aspect of social media is that it is free of charge. A survey participant stated, "Social media has been a great way to promote sports we do not have dollars to advertise for. Our Facebook and Twitter pages reach out to fans daily and promote women's basketball during the season." Another responder stated bluntly, "If you aren't getting the word out on Facebook and Twitter you are probably wasting your time and money." While use of these networks really has no downside, it should be remembered that much of the target market for women's basketball is older and less willing to use these newer developments. As one subject said, "Our fan base in general is older and Twitter is not utilized very much at all. Facebook is a little better but still too young for our current database demographic." Therefore while these two social networks may be a huge help in reaching many fans, there are other markets that do not use them and must be contacted using different methods. Other social networks mentioned occasionally include Living Social and Google+. Although not a traditional social network, Group On is also a new technology used to promote discounts, and the ease of sharing deals creates social interaction among fans in a different sense.

From the opposite perspective, there were some factors described as having little or no impact on attendance. Telemarketing was mentioned multiple times as a tactic that most schools do not use. If they do, it is only at rare times to promote a specific deal.

Another tactic that was repeatedly brought up as ineffective is public address announcements. Despite their prevalence at sporting events, it seems that employees simply run them because it is the expected norm and not because they expect them to have any impact. As one marketer stated, "people often block out the public address announcements and simply pay attention to the activities on the court or personal things while the game is not going on." Direct mail is still utilized but costs and lack of impact lead most schools only send out a few mailings each year. Outdoor advertising such as billboards and signage was also repeatedly mentioned as a little or unused tactic. In fact, some respondents stated that they literally have no marketing budget for women's basketball, so they can only use free forms of promotion.

An interesting theme that also arose from these responses was the perspective that for women's basketball, many schools choose not to promote individual players, but the team as a collective instead. "We don't promote individual players," summarized one marketer, "it is about the team and the overall environment." This does correlate somewhat to the most successful tactics of creating positive goodwill in the community. If just one or two players are out doing service it will not draw the attention that multiple players or the entire team can bring. By promoting the image of the whole team, marketers also distance the sport from the sometimes selfish or cocky attitudes of stars in many male sports. Finally, the theme of not trying to promote every game, but instead putting more effort into a few games was raised again on these questions, highlighting its' relevance to women's basketball.

Specific Promotions That Help Increase Attendance

The promotions that increased attendance during the academic year were events catered to youth. The most positively described events had a youth-centered focus. Some schools had specific games known as "Education Day" or something similar that was held during the day on a weekday. Children from local schools would be bused in and at several schools this was the highest attended game of the year. These games can benefit everyone, as described by one response, "The kids in the surrounding communities have the opportunity to come to a game during the day [for free] and the players are treated to a full house." Even normal game times with a youth-focused event tended to increase attendance. Some of most commonly mentioned events included partnering with local organizations like Girl or Boy Scouts, hosting a "Take Your Kid to the Game" day, and getting youth basketball programs involved in halftime performances.

After youth events, the next most successful promotion involves raising funds for breast cancer research. Whether the school partners with the Play4Kay organization, or simply holds their own "Pink Night," survey respondents spoke positively about the attendance boost and overall atmosphere of the event. This is also a great way to get new spectators to attend a game. Describing one pink game a marketer mentioned, "we were able to get many groups out not because of the basketball game but because they wanted

to support the cause.” Even if many of the first time attendees do not come back, a few new fans might enjoy the core product and return.

Continuing with the focus of promoting several games heavily, a “Pack the House” game was mentioned as being very successful. For these games, a large proportion of the resources for the entire year are focused on promoting just this one game, and as a result, many produce season high attendance figures. In fact, one school went as far as creating a virtual season ticket package centered on one rival game. Fans, who purchased an \$8 ticket for that game, when ticket prices are normally \$6 and \$3, received free tickets to all remaining games. The responder from this school said,

The result of the promotion was we set the single game attendance record, and exceeded revenues from the previous year. The promotion also led to larger crowds than normal at all other games, because fans had tickets to those games. The larger crowds also led to more concessions and merchandise sales.

Not all “Pack the House” ticket sales feature a promotion this detailed, but focusing on driving sales for one or two big games is clearly a recurring theme from many different marketers. Other ways to drive ticket sales for games include heavy group discount packages. One type of promotion that had mixed results was an attempt to increase student attendance. Most schools responding to the survey cited a frustration with difficulties in improving the amount of students at each game. Free pizza and interaction with the coach worked on occasion, but the only method from any of the responses that resulted in sustained student attendance increases was some sort of rewards program for attending women’s games. At schools where men’s basketball game tickets are hard to obtain this can be very effective, because students who attend women’s games get priority for purchase of men’s tickets. However, this will only work if tickets for men’s games are both in high demand and short supply.

Conclusion

Throughout the responses to all questions several main patterns emerged as the most important information that have the potential to increase attendance at women’s basketball games. When it comes to external factors, factors outside the control of the marketing team, there was a pretty general consensus on what had the most influence on attendance. First was simply team success. The more games a team won, especially at home, the more interest it created in the program. Post season tournament runs and victories also helped carry momentum to the next year, while poor seasons mean the next year usually starts out without excitement. The main way to kick start a stalling program seems to be the hiring of a new coach who can energize the team and fan base. Weather is another significant factor affecting game attendance. Not only can good weather keep people from wanting to spend their time inside an arena, but also bad winter weather can prevent people from attending the games even if they want to be present. Another external factor is sport competition in the area. High school, college, and professional teams all provide other events for possible spectators to attend instead. Finally, within

the athletic department things such as limited or no financial budget, low allocation of resources, and marketing staff turnover all prevent women's basketball from receiving the promotion needed to maintain attendance.

A factor that marketing employees have limited control over is scheduling. However, smaller programs reported that their marketing department does have an impact on scheduling. The responses made it clear that weekend games are highly preferred, and coordination with the men's schedule is vital. Of the variables that are completely within control of the athletic department it was obvious that the most important marketing tool is creating a positive public image through grassroots marketing, public appearances, and community service projects. Women's basketball programs must find something that differentiates it from the other more popular sports and create a connection with fans is a must. Once a fan exposed to women's basketball, they were likely to promote games to their friends and family, which is essentially free marketing for the school coming from a trustworthy source. Furthering these connections with pre and post-game events is also important for creating long-lasting support. Because of the limited marketing budget at most schools for women's basketball, free or cheap sources of advertising must be utilized. Social media networks like Facebook and Twitter are a great way to get regular reminders out to the fans.

A very prevalent theme was the importance of selecting certain games for which to increase marketing efforts, while letting some others be less attended. The nature of the schedule means that some games will not be sold out. But there are promotions that can lead to highly attended games at all schools. The limited resources available for marketing mean that these efforts need to be centered on a few of the biggest games against the most popular opponents. The atmosphere provided at these games not only benefits the players, but also increases the likelihood that fans will return for future home games. There are many different promotions that were mentioned in the responses, but there were a few that stood out as the most successful. Events that get local youth involved were the number one response. Pink games raising funds and awareness for cancer research were a close second. The importance of focusing on one or a couple "Pack the House" games was stated repeatedly. Finally, having special group ticket deals or \$1 ticket and concessions nights are additional ways to increase attendance at certain games.

The difficulty in marketing is that each market is different. Therefore, it is impossible to provide one blueprint that will work to boost attendance throughout the country. The most important thing is to know and connect with the local fan base. One highly effective way of learning the best methods to reach fans is to publish coupons or discounts using different sources and then tracking which ones bring in the most people. Only one school mentioned using this tactic, where they would, "include a coupon for the giveaway item on all print ads, email blasts, and Facebook posts. Fans would bring in the coupon for the give-away item and it would allow us to see where the fans were seeing our ads." The importance of methods similar to this that allow the marketing staff to

better understand how to reach the community members cannot be overstated. It has been repeated how important it is to connect with people on a personal level, but without knowing what people want that is difficult to do. Once a program is able to create personal relationships with people in the community though, it can form a loyal fan base that will help spread the word about the product available at each home game.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study is a beginning at understanding the marketing implications of intercollegiate women's basketball programs. The fan base for women's basketball is unique and in many instances untapped. This study sheds light on marketing strategies related specifically to women's basketball. However, further research is needed. More in-depth interviews with experienced marketers would be a way to increase the depth of knowledge in this area. The value of this study comes when combined with future research. Fans who attend women's basketball games and their perceptions are vital to understanding the marketing of women's basketball. We now know the perceptions of those involved in marketing of women's basketball. It is important that further research is conducted to determine methods to increase attendance at women's basketball games – and largely untapped market.

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