How Technology and Digital Experiences in the Professional Sports Fan Customer Journey Affect the Core Brand Experience

Stella Dolan

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Kelly La Venture, Department of Business Administration, Bemidji State University

ABSTRACT

Revenue from the North American professional sports market is projected to be 83.1 billion in 2023 (Statistica, 2022). With the Covid-19 global pandemic in 2021, and fan expectations shifting, the professional sports market is seeking new and varied ways to forge deeper fan connections and improve the core brand experience to vary and increase their revenue streams (Deloitte). To keep fans at the center, the professional sports market is capitalizing on technology and digital experiences, in the professional sports fan customer journey. This is especially pertinent in sports, where "the sports user experience and journey is often more important than the result" (Funk, 2017, p. 151). To investigate how technology and digital experiences in the professional sports fan customer journey on game day affect the core brand experience, an exploratory study will be conducted using a non-probability convenience sampling method. A sample size of 100 respondents will be drawn from the population of human subjects 18 years or older, any gender, and who have attended a professional sporting event in the last 24 months. Data analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross tabulation, and triangulation to determine the impact of technology on the core brand experience.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, technology has witnessed unprecedented advancements, while professional sports have remained a significant source of entertainment. Professional sports teams are actively exploring the synergies between fans and technology in order to create the ultimate fan experience. To achieve this, they are employing advanced technological solutions. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted professional teams, resulting in reduced revenues due to factors such as the absence of fans in stadiums, season cancellations, and the implementation of mask mandates, among others. Consequently, teams are now making concerted efforts to recover from the financial losses incurred and actively encouraging fans to attend their stadiums.

The business of professional sports extends beyond ticket sales, as evident from the significant revenues generated and the high level of fan engagement. Fans engage in an ongoing experiential process, where various brand touch points encountered throughout the year contribute to their overall fan experience at the event. These touch points create a journey for the fans, influencing their perceptions and satisfaction with the event.

In the customer journey, technology plays a crucial role in creating distinctive experiences at every touch point. Professional sporting events and venues utilize technology in diverse ways to enhance the overall fan experience. Although technology is often associated with services, it is important to recognize that it is the outcome of the collaboration between goods and services, working together to deliver a memorable experience. This concept aligns with the notion of the "experience economy" which underpins our ever-growing economy. These opportunities further underscore the significance of services, as they frequently serve as the primary source of the consumer's overall brand experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on developing high-quality services in addition to technology in both research and business settings. This shift in focus is a result of the recognition that brands offer experiences beyond just technological offerings. Consequently, businesses have come to understand the importance of comprehending and developing the customer journey to effectively execute their business strategies. This journey encompasses all the interactions and touchpoints a customer encounters with technology throughout a sporting event, including their pre-experience expectations and post-event emotions (Berry, 2002).

The primary goal of this research is to offer professional sports teams valuable insights regarding the customer journey map, specifically focusing on the fan experience with technology during events. The aim is to provide information on what fans perceive as helpful and useful to enhance their overall experience.

METHODS

To answer the question "How has technology and digital experiences in the professional sports fan customer journey affected the core brand experience?" An exploratory study was conducted using a non-probability convenience sampling method. A sample size of 102 respondents was drawn from a population of human subjects 18 years or older, any gender, and who have attended a professional sporting event in the last 24 months. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross tabulation, and triangulation to determine the impact of technology on core brand experience and presented in a sports fan customer journey map.

RESULTS

A professional sports fan customer journey map is a visual representation of a fan's experience when engaging with a professional sports team or attending sporting events. It provides insights into the fan's interactions, emotions, and behaviors throughout their entire journey, from the initial awareness of the team or event to post-event engagement and brand loyalty.

To ensure fans are having the best experience, managers must gain an understanding of the customer's journey (Berry, 2002). The sports fan customer journey map consists of various touchpoints. These touchpoints can be different variations such as physical, digital, or personal. The touchpoints play a prominent role in a fan's experience when attending a sporting event (Funk, 2017, p. 151). These touchpoints aim to create a customer response which triggers behavior such as interactions, emotions, or behaviors throughout the entire journey. The journey map typically begins with customer's initial awareness of the team and/or event, concluding with post-event engagement and/or brand loyalty (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003, Schmitt, 2010).

Typically, a professional sports fan customer journey map includes the following stages:

1. Awareness Stage: Explain each stage as it relates to the professional sports fan.
    a. Several steps a fan goes through before attending a professional sporting event were discovered through my survey shared on social media. Awareness is how the fan comes to know about the event taking place. Awareness of the event and/or team were identified by the team's website, word of mouth, social media, and television platforms.
2. Consideration Stage:
    a. The consideration stage takes place when customers consider the various alternatives before they decide to attend the specific event. This includes contemplating not attending the event at all, thinking about buying cheaper tickets, the option of buying worse seats in hopes of saving money, or buying tickets from street vendors. In our research found, these were all considerations customers thought about before purchasing. The second aspect of the consideration stage includes the different platforms customers searched for when buying their tickets. Data showed frequent websites such as Ticketmaster, the team website, other platforms, Seat Geek, the venue website, and Vivid Seats.
3. Purchase Stage:
    a. The purchase stage happens when the customer buys their ticket. This can be done in a variety of ways. The most common way to buy a ticket we found in our data was online. Again, the different online platforms included Ticketmaster, the team website, other platforms, Seat Geek, the venue website, and Vivid Seats. 3% of survey respondents purchased their tickets in person at the venue, while the rest purchased online.
4. Pre-Event Service Stage:
    a. The Pre-Event Service Stage is the point of time when customers physically receive their tickets. Our data found that customers did this through Apple Wallet, email, a team app, or a ticketing app.
5. Event Experience Stage:
    a. The Event Experience Stage includes the small details that are available during the event. This includes assets such as touch screen navigation maps to help get around the stadium, contactless payment, in-seat concessions options, loaded ticket packages, and the overall use of social media incorporated with the event.
6. Post-Event Engagement or Loyalty Stage:
    a. The Post-Event Engagement or Loyalty Stage shows the likeliness a fan is to attend another event or recommend someone attends a similar event.

By mapping out the professional sports fan's journey, teams, owners, and event organizers gain a deeper understanding of their fans' needs, pain points, and opportunities to better engage their fans (Berry, 2002). This insight allows them to customize and tailor their marketing strategies and tactics, along with offerings to enhance the fan experience and build long-term fan loyalty (MacMillan 1997).

Table 1. Professional Sports Fan Customer Journey Map.

Customer Journey Stage	**102 Respondents Reported**
Awareness Stage	Customer becomes aware of the event through various channels: • 42% learned about the event from the team website. • 31% heard about it through word of mouth. • 24% discovered it on social media. • 3% found out about it from television.
Consideration Stage	Customers consider alternatives before deciding to attend the event: • 40% contemplate not attending. • 36% think about finding cheaper tickets. • 21% consider worse seats to save money. • 3% consider buying tickets from street vendors. Customers search for tickets on different platforms: • 27% use Ticketmaster. • 20% visit the team website. • 20% use other platforms. • 11% browse StubHub. • 10% explore SeatGeek. • 8% visit the facility/venue website. • 4% use Vivid Seats.
Purchase Stage	Customers purchase tickets using various methods: • 32% use Ticketmaster. • 32% use other platforms. • 11% purchase from the team website. • 7% use the team app. • 5% use StubHub. • 4% use SeatGeek. • 4% use the facility/venue website. • 3% purchase in-venue. • 1% use Vivid Seats. Customers purchasing tickets online: • 75% of customers use an online payment option. • The most common online payment option is a credit card (80%). • Customers rarely encounter problems while purchasing tickets online (1% reported issues).
Pre-Event Service Stage	Customers receive their tickets through various means: • 38% receive tickets in Apple Wallet. • 35% receive tickets via email. • 18% use the team app. • 5% receive paper tickets. • 4% use other ticketing apps.

	Customers receiving paper tickets: • 50% of customers receive paper tickets from friends • 25% pick them up at will call • 25% purchase them at the venue
During Event Service Stage	Customers service experience at the venue: • The venue does not offer touch screen navigation (84%). • Only 25% of customers use touch screen navigation if available. • 43% of customers make contactless payments via mobile phone at concessions. • The venue does not offer in-seat concessions (49%). • Only 22% of customers utilize in-seat concessions if available. • Only 12% of customers used the loaded ticket option. Customers use various social media platforms during the event: • 30% use Instagram. • 25% use Snapchat. • 22% use Twitter. • 2% use TikTok. • 2% use LinkedIn. Customers social media experience at the venue: • 76% of customers reported that the venue engaged with their social media posting or showed them on the jumbotron.
Post-Event Engagement or Loyalty Stage	Customers brand loyalty: • 51% of customers are somewhat or extremely likely to attend another event at the stadium within the next 12 months. • 77% of customers are somewhat or extremely likely to recommend attending an event at the stadium to others.

The statistics presented in the table offer tangible data regarding how different fans experienced the customer journey map in professional sports. The percentages associated with various touchpoints, starting from the awareness stage and extending to the post-event engagement or loyalty stage, provide valuable insights for teams. These insights enable teams to understand how they can effectively cater to fans by incorporating technology advancements. By analyzing the data, teams can identify the touchpoints that have the most significant impact on fans' experiences. This knowledge allows them to prioritize areas where technology can be leveraged to enhance fan engagement and satisfaction. Understanding the customer journey map helps teams make informed decisions on how to allocate resources and develop strategies that align with fan preferences and expectations. By utilizing the insights gained from these statistics, teams can adapt their approach and leverage technology in ways that create memorable and enjoyable experiences for fans throughout their entire journey, from initial awareness to post-event engagement and beyond.

DISCUSSION

Awareness Stage

Several steps a fan goes through prior to attending an event were identified through the collected data. The main finding of this stage is the fact that 42% of respondents learned about a professional sporting team's event through their team's website. While 31% were informed through word of mouth.

Consideration Stage

When weighing the options before making the decision to attend the event, 40% of fans considered not attending the event at all, while 36% of fans deliberated on finding more affordable tickets. During the consideration stage, fans engaged in searching for tickets on various platforms. The data revealed that common websites utilized for this purpose included Ticketmaster, the team website, other platforms, SeatGeek, the venue website, and Vivid

Seats. Research indicated that 27% of fans utilized Ticketmaster, making it the most frequently used website, while team websites were searched at a rate of 20%.

Purchase Stage

During the purchase stage, fans proceed to buy their tickets. Once again, the research confirmed that Ticketmaster was the most commonly utilized platform, with 32% of fans opting for it. Additionally, 32% of fans used other platforms, while 11% relied on the team website for their ticket purchase. When it came to online purchases, the survey indicated that 72% of customers preferred using an online payment method. Among those, 80% utilized a credit card as their online payment source. Notably, only 1% of fans reported encountering issues while using an online payment method.

Pre-Event Service Stage

The pre-event service stage refers to the moment when fans receive their tickets physically. According to survey data, 38% of fans receive their tickets via Apple Wallet, while 35% receive them through email. Furthermore, 18% of fans use the team app to receive their tickets, while 5% receive physical paper tickets. Another 4% utilize other ticketing apps for ticket delivery. Of those receiving paper tickets, 50% of customers get these from their friends, while 25% pick them up at will call, and another 25% purchase them at the venue.

During Event Service Stage

During the event service stage, fans encounter numerous touchpoints that significantly impact their overall experience. Technological advancements have further enhanced these touchpoints. One example is the implementation of touch screen navigation within venues (McCaskill, 2023). However, despite its popularity in various venues worldwide, 84% of fans reported that the venue they attended did not offer touch screen navigation. Moreover, only 25% of respondents indicated they would utilize it if it were available. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, businesses have been adopting contactless solutions, with contactless payments via mobile phones being particularly popular, especially at concessions stands. According to the survey, 43% of customers reported making contactless payments. Another technology trend in professional sports is in-seat concessions, allowing fans to order refreshments without missing any of the game (Buzalka, 2022). However, 49% of survey respondents noted that the venue they attended did not offer in-seat concessions, and only 22% would utilize this service if it were available. Loaded tickets, which come with a preloaded dollar amount to be spent on food and beverages by scanning the ticket at purchase, are another common advancement in sports venues (Loaded Value Tickets, n.d.). In the survey, 12% of customers reported using this loaded ticket option. During the event, social media platforms played a significant role, with Instagram being the most frequently used at 30%, followed by Snapchat at 25%, and Twitter at 22%. Additionally, 76% of fans stated that the venue engaged with their social media platforms by posting or displaying posts on the jumbotron, enhancing the interactive and connected nature of the event experience.

Post-Event Engagement or Loyalty Stage

The likelihood of a fan returning to another professional sporting event or recommending attendance to others is indeed a critical step in the customer journey map. It ensures future attendance and contributes to the success of the business. According to the data, 51% of customers indicated that they are somewhat or extremely likely to attend another sporting event at the stadium within the next 12 months. Additionally, a significant majority, 77% of customers, expressed that they are somewhat or extremely likely to recommend attending an event at the stadium to others. These statistics highlight the positive reception and potential for continued engagement and growth in the business.

The findings derived from the data analysis can be highly valuable for teams, owners, and event organizers. For event awareness, it is crucial to note that 42% of fans learned about events through the team's website. This information is essential for team marketers to optimize brand awareness strategies. Additionally, ensuring that tickets can be purchased through Ticketmaster is important, considering it is one of the most commonly used ticketing platforms. It is encouraging to observe that only 1% of fans reported encountering problems when purchasing tickets online. This highlights the significance of providing a seamless and trouble-free online ticketing experience, which falls under the responsibility of technology and marketing departments within the teams. The survey data also indicated that a quarter of fans would utilize touch-screen navigation if it were available. This suggests that exploring the implementation of touch-screen signage as a helpful asset for venue navigation could be beneficial in the future. Moreover, considering the popularity of Instagram (30%) and Snapchat (25%) among fans during games, game operations personnel should recognize the importance of these apps and devise interactive ways for fans to engage with them. By improving marketing tactics to incorporate preferred technologies and creating seamless experiences for fans, the overall fan experience can be enhanced, fostering long-term fan loyalty for professional sports teams.

LIMITATIONS

The group studied in this research only represents a fraction of the 18-year-olds who have attended a professional sporting event in the last 24 months. The suggestions to enhance the fan's overall experience could potentially affect the experiences of other attendee groups not considered in this study. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the fan experience at the professional sporting events, it is essential to conduct research with attendees of each professional sport across the country and make comparisons. The survey respondents in this research were all acquaintances via social media of the researcher, as well as classmates. This group may not be deemed as a true representation of fans across the United States. A larger sample of a wider variety of sporting events would provide a more accurate representation of professional sports and specify a proper customer journey map. These individuals were also selected on their attendance to a professional sporting event within the last 24 months. Opting for individuals who attended more recent games would have minimized potential biases related to recall and memory, thus offering a more accurate depiction of the genuine customer journey.

Most of the participants provided data specifically about the Minnesota Wild or Minnesota Twins. While collecting information about the Xcel Energy Center and Target Field was beneficial, conducting interviews exclusively with a group of Wild fans or Twins fans would offer a more precise depiction of the procedures these individuals follow when attending games, enabling more comprehensive analysis to take place. Vice versa of this statement is also true; providing more fans from differing teams across the country would provide a more accurate representation, as stated before.

Lastly, the survey included an excessive number of open-ended questions, making it challenging to draw conclusions. Conducting a more precise analysis would have been possible if the survey responses had provided deeper insights aligned with a specific objective. The execution of the study did not fully leverage its potential due to the researcher's lack of experience in the field. Furthermore, a larger and more refined survey sample would have yielded a higher response rate and a greater number of critical incidents. With a larger volume of responses, along with well-crafted survey questions, it would have been feasible to identify and analyze trends, patterns, and insights more effectively.

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