

Segmentation of Season Ticket Holders in Minor League North American Professional Sport

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Minor professional sport in North America includes the many leagues that are not part of the “Big Five.” For these leagues, ticket sales, especially season ticket sales, are one of the major sources of club revenue. Segmenting customers into homogenous groups is well established as an effective means to render efficient marketing. In addition, market segmentation has been well researched in a variety of contexts; however, further research in the area of minor professional sport in North America will advance our knowledge and offer practical value to practitioners. Therefore, this research, in collaboration with a minor league professional sport club, provides a framework for season ticket holder segmentation application by minor professional sport leagues and clubs, and offers practical recommendations to reach niche markets.

Keywords: market segmentation, season ticket holders, fandom, ticket sales, relationship marketing

Introduction

Professional sport in North America has been characterized through tiers (O'Reilly et al., 2022), with the top one encompassing professional sport where clubs are valued in hundreds of millions of dollars (or more) and players are (largely) independently wealthy. By most accounts, this includes the National

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Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL) and—to some extent—Major League Soccer (MLS). The majority of the published research related to professional sport has been focused on these leagues (Foster et al., 2020). There is, however, a large number of other organizations outside of these five leagues that are often referred to as the ‘minor leagues.’ For this study’s purpose, this includes leagues and clubs where players are making average to modest income, and are of lesser financial strength or media significance. Examples include the National Lacrosse League (NLL), the American Hockey League (AHL), the Canadian Football League (CFL), and the Arena Football League (AFL). It is also worth noting that even if a league represents the highest form of play in a given sport (e.g., NLL), it is still considered minor for the purposes of this research due to the financial capacity.

Minor league organizations tend to be smaller than those in “Big Five,” with fewer resources available to understand their customers (Billings et al., 2021). A North American minor league sport organization was facing this type of resource constraints when a senior marketing executive approached the research team for this study. This marketing executive was looking for support in the development of data-driven insights about their fans with an aim to increase recruitment and retention of season ticket holders. The research team agreed to help, and this study was one of the results.

Over a two-year period, the research team worked in close collaboration with the sport organization, focusing on the relationships between the club and its fan base, notably those who purchased season tickets. This was particularly important given the high proportions of club revenues that come from ticket sales in minor professional sport (Foster et al., 2020), and in a context where the resources—both time and money—of these consumers are increasingly divided between the increasing number of entertainment and leisure activity options available to

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them (Gladden & Sutton, 2014). The reality for most minor league sport teams is that the season ticket holder is the most important fan group (McDonald, 2010). In turn, the discussion of relationships with season ticket buyers (and potential season ticket buyers) led to the concept of market segmentation, where season ticket buyers were grouped into segments of people with similar characteristics.

By definition, market segmentation involves “aggregating prospective buyers into groups, or segments, that (i) have common needs and (ii) will respond similarly to marketing action” (Crane et al., 2017, p. 233). Market segmentation is undertaken by using “bases” of segmentation (e.g., demographics, commitment, loyalty, satisfaction, trust) to identify the groups. The Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001; Funk, 2002) and the Psychological Commitment to Team Scale (Mahony et al., 2000) are two examples, among others, used to segment sports fans based on loyalty, motivation, and other variables. More recent work on segmentation in professional sport has typically focused on a single segmentation element, such as club identification (Lock et al., 2014), churn rate (McDonald, 2010), and psychographic profiles (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012). Similarly, research work with minor league organizations has examined segmentation by leveraging data from attending fans. Greenwell et al. (2002), for instance, surveyed minor hockey league spectators to segment them based on their service experience, using a combination of fan demographic and psychographic variables. In another study focused on minor league baseball, Lee and Won (2012) sought to understand the characteristics of game attendees within four pre-determined segments based on levels of sport and team identification. The current study, meanwhile, differs from this limited past research on minor league segmentation by focusing on niche segments within the season ticket holders, rather than game attendees.

The objective of this study was, therefore, to identify distinct season ticket holder fan segments in the minor league context. Such understanding will then allow clubs to build customized and mutually beneficial relationships with key segments. This is critically important in minor leagues, where the majority of revenues are fan derived (i.e., ticket sales), as previously noted.

Method

Following guidelines by Kennett et al. (2001), the researchers worked in close collaboration with the sport organization to develop a survey, and later to interpret the findings. In doing so, the researchers followed an abductive approach (Peirce, 1931; Bamberger, 2018), which emphasizes the research benefits of using both deductive and inductive reasoning when examining results. The study was started by surveying the literature to identify variables that might act as bases of segmentation for season ticket holders and collaborated with the sport

Table 1. Scales and Examples of Survey Questions

Category	Sample Measures
Club Identity Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993)	e.g., I feel a personal sense of achievement when the [team] do well; I often feel a personal connection with the [team]
Sport Knowledge Scale (Funk & Pastore, 2000)	e.g., I regularly track the statistics of specific players; I look up the [team] statistics regularly
Sport Escape Scale (Gladden & Funk, 2001)	e.g., Games represent an escape for me from my day-to-day activities; I look forward to games because they are something different to do.
Social Scale (Wann, 1995)	e.g., Interacting with other fans is a very important part of being at [team] games; I like going to [team] games with clients or work colleagues
Club Reputation Scale (Jang et al., 2015)	e.g., The [team] are an organization I have a good feeling about; The [team] are an organization that I admire and respect
Net Promoter Score (Reichheld, 2003)	e.g., I recommend the [team] to someone who seeks to go to a professional sporting event; I will continue to purchase more tickets from the [team] in the next few years
Value Scale (Hanzaee & Norouzi, 2012)	e.g., [team] tickets are excellent value for the money; Compared to other entertainment options, the [team] are not very good value (R)
Game Experience Scale (Wann, 1995)	e.g., Game atmosphere, In game entertainment, Concessions
Media Consumption (Funk et al., 2003)	Hours per week on social media (by social media channel) Hours per week on traditional media (TV, radio)
Club Media Consumption (Funk et al., 2003)	Hours per week on club social media (by social media channel) Number of total games watched on TV per season (home and away)
Other Sport Consumption (Funk et al., 2003)	Purchase of season tickets or game day tickets for other professional sport clubs
Demographic Data (Funk et al., 2003)	Demographic (age, marital status, dependents, education, ethnicity) Employment (income, industry, fulltime/ part-time)

organization to ensure that the selected variables matched with the organization's own experience. As a result, an instrument (see Table 1) was developed that includes a total of 66 variables and eight scales.

As noted in Table 1, a series of established scales and variables (see Funk et al., 2003) were adopted and adapted to the context of minor league professional sport. The scales were adapted from prior research, with demonstrated instrument validity and reliability. Following the identification of these scales, focus group discussions were conducted. During the focus groups with a small sample of season ticket holders, the number of questions was refined to 35 questions, including demographic, open-ended, and scale questions. Many of the questions

Table 2. Sample Questions and Scales

Q1: Using a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree - for the following, please indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement

[The (club name) winning is the most important thing for me] | [I am completely satisfied with the (club name)] | [I consider myself loyal to the (club name)] | [I like going to (club name) games with clients or work colleagues] | [(Club name) tickets are excellent value for the money] | [The (club name) are an organization that I admire and respect]

Q2: In using a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is not important and 7 is very important - how important are each of these factors to you when deciding whether to attend a [club name] game?

[Ticket price] | [Parking/ transit] | [Team opponent] | [Pre-game Tailgating] | [The season/ time of year]

Q3: Using a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is very dissatisfied and 7 is very satisfied - how satisfied are you with each of the following:

[Ticket price] | [Parking/ transit] | [Team opponent] | [Pre-game Tailgating] | [The season/ time of year]

Q4: On average, of the club's home games (including pre-season), how many games do you usually attend?

Q5: Which of the following official [club name] social media do you follow?

[Facebook] | [Instagram] | [Twitter] | [Snapchat] | [YouTube] | [Google+] | [I do not follow the club's social media]

Q6: On average, how much time do you spend each week, in minutes, doing each of the following activities?

[Browsing sport social media] | [Watching sports on TV] | [Talking to people on social media about sports] | [Browsing sports news websites] | [Listening to sport radio] | [Listening to sport podcasts] | [Following fan blogs] | [Watching sports on streaming services]

Q7: Do you use your tickets primarily for business or personal use?

Q8: On average, how many [club name] home games do you personally attend per season?

Less than 10% 10-24% 25-49% 50-74% 75% or more

Q9: If you are a season ticket holder and missed any games this season, what the reasons you were unable to attend (you may select more than one).

[I had to work] | [I was on holidays] | [I was busy] | [It was raining] | [The game schedule was inconvenient] | [I have not missed a game]

Q10: How likely are you to renew your tickets for the 2019 season?

[Extremely likely] | [Somewhat likely] | [Neither likely nor unlikely] | [Somewhat unlikely] | [Extremely unlikely]

had multiple answer options (variables). All scale questions used a 7-point Likert format. Table 2 provides a sample of the scales and questions used for the survey.

As noted in Table 2, the minor league professional sport club partnered with the researchers on the collection and analysis of data for this paper, on the condition of anonymity. This collaboration included the involvement and feedback from senior marketing staff at the club throughout the process. As a general description, the club is a long-standing member of an established North American minor professional sport league that has been in existence for more than 20 years. The average player salary in the league is less than \$100,000 (USD) and ticket prices typically range from \$20 to \$100 per game, with variation among clubs and home markets. The club invited, via email, its database of season and game-day ticket holders following the 2018 season to participate in the survey. Data from season ticket holders was retained to complete the segmentation analysis discussed in the following section. The data was collected in May 2018.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 1,282 useable surveys were completed, all from season ticket holders of the club. The sample represents approximately 10% of the season ticket holder base for the club. On average, season ticket holders had held their tickets for more than 20 years and they had a mean age of 50 years, with 30% identifying as female. About one third (33%) of the sample had children under 17 living with them at home, and 35% reported being between 30 and 59 without children. The most common household income range was \$50,000 to \$100,000 (66% of respondents). A further 11% reported a household income greater than \$250,000.

Respondents were supportive fans of the club, attending on average 74% of home games and watching 57% of all games (home and away) on TV. Further, about 57% of season ticket holders reported following at least one social media platform held by the club, with approximately 30% engaging in at least two of the club's social media platforms. Twitter, followed by Facebook, and then Instagram, was the most commonly reported.

Segmentation Analysis

For the purposes of segmentation, a multiple-step process was undertaken. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (Hair et al., 2006) was conducted to reduce the variables into factors. Each of the factors recorded eigenvalues of greater than 1.0. Regression weight analysis (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and Cronbach's alpha (Valentine et al., 2002) were used to assess the reliability and consistency of

the data, supporting convergent validity. Eight themes then emerged including: (i) Sport Knowledge (e.g., team stats, player stats), (ii) Game Experience Score (e.g., close games, last minute goal), (iii) Social (e.g., social opportunities, other fans), (iv) Club Identity (e.g., my success, identity), (v) Net Promoter Score (e.g., recommend, encourage), (vi) Value (e.g., priced fairly, good value), (vii) Club Reputation (e.g., trust, admiration), and (viii) On-Field Performance (e.g., achievement, not winning). Next, a correlation analysis was conducted. Although there was a strong level of correlation among the constructs (e.g., Net Promoter Score and Club Reputation), there did not appear to be any significant risk of multi-collinearity (Ross et al., 2006), allowing an identification and populating of segments based on these factors.

Due to the large number of variables and the considerable body of literature on the topic, the 17 variables related to fan satisfaction were not included in the confirmatory factor analysis, and were reduced in a separate confirmatory factor analysis, with three satisfaction related factors emerging, namely: (i) Stadium (e.g., bathrooms, concourse, exit), (ii) Entertainment (e.g., atmosphere, family fun), and (iii) Schedule (e.g., time, day). When combined with the eight factors previously listed, this results in a set of 11 factors that have the potential to distinguish ticket holders in minor league professional sport. Following regression analyses with the 11 factors and the demographic variables collected (age, dependents, life-stage, etc.), the six independent variables were identified consistently in a series of different models run, and, in turn, were used as the bases for the segmentation model (i.e., number of dependents, primary purpose [business/personal], age, club identity [factor], sport knowledge [factor], and social [factor]). From this, each season ticket holder respondent ($N = 1,282$) was coded based on the six independent variables and three engagement variables. Refer to Table 3 for a summary of this segmentation coding model used in this study.

Based on the segmentation variables reported in Table 3, the regression model with Game Attendance as the dependent variable was accepted as a good model ($R^2 = .755$) with each of the factors (representing the eight themes noted) influencing the dependent variable at the $p < .001$ level. Following the regression analysis with the 11 factors, the eight from the principal component analysis (PCA) and the three factors from the engagement variables were analyzed using an industry-based segmentation analysis approach. Here, each factor's common and different variables were used to allocate the respondents into segments with similar results on the 11 factors. This analysis involved calculating means, correlations, and graphing the data in an industry-style analysis (i.e., a segment-by-segment assessment by multiple authors using the regressions, PCA, correlations, and descriptive statistics results).

Table 3. Segment Coding Measures

Variable (Base of Segmentation)	Measures	Type of Variable
TV viewing	• Number of games watched per season on TV	• Engagement
Game attendance	• Number of home games attended live	• Engagement
Social media following	• Number of club social media channels followed	• Engagement
Dependents	• Number of dependents	• Independent
Primary purpose	• Business or personal	• Independent
Age	• Year of Birth	• Independent
Club identity	• Factor (from Confirmatory Factor Analysis)	• Independent
Sport knowledge	• Factor (from Confirmatory Factor Analysis)	• Independent
Social	• Factor (from Confirmatory Factor Analysis)	• Independent

The next phase of analysis involved systematically isolating cohorts of respondents sharing the same attributes. In consultation with the club, a floor of 1% of the total number of respondents was set as required sufficiency to be included as a segment for a group of season ticket holders. Such a low threshold was set due to the importance (as a proportion of total club revenues) of any season ticket purchaser for a minor league professional sport club (relatively more than for a major professional club; Foster et al., 2020). A set of nine distinct segments of season ticket holders (see Table 4) resulted from the analysis.

The segments reported in Table 4 were initially developed to be specific to the season ticket holders of the club in this study. They were then generalized to be adaptable to any minor sport club in North America. As noted in Table 4, the resulting nine segments outline the varied nature of ticket holders in minor league professional sport, with some of the distinct aspects of each highlighted (with further details provided in the paragraphs that follow). Resulting from the analysis, each segment represents an array of season ticket holders sharing similar views, traits, motivations, and behaviors (Funk & James, 2001). Each of the nine segments is distinct from the other season ticket holder segments (as a ticket holder may only fall into one segment; Greenwell et al., 2002). The segments in Table 4 are listed in order of their size (i.e., percentage of sample). Table 4

Table 4. Season Ticket Holder Market Segments in Minor Professional Sport in North America

Segment	Segment Name	Description	%	Media Minutes/ Week (Traditional/Social)	Coding Attributes
1	Local Market Club Promoters	Season ticket holders are strong advocates for club, both traditional and digital	49	585 / 132	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highest team identity and net promotor scores • Highest social media use
2	Original Fans	Long-time fans of the spot (not the club), oldest segment	42	426 / 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend 94% of games • Lowest social media use • 18% are over 70 years old
3	Value Seekers	Season ticket holders who attend home games and have high affinity to the club and value	3	392 / 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend 87% of games • Driven by ticket price and atmosphere • Does not follow club social media
4	Loyal, Long-term Advocates	Passionate representatives of the club and sport on and off the field	1	965 / 81	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend 83% of home games in person • Watch an additional 65% on TV • Avid traditional media follower
5	Devoted Boomers	Older segment of fans who hold season tickets and attend every game	1	510 / 64	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend all home games in person • Watch all away games on TV • Strong advocates for the club
6	Early Stage Season Ticket Holders	Recent purchasers of season tickets who attend most games	1	389 / 83	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend 94% of home games in person • Watch all away games on TV • Strong advocates for the club
7	Professional Sport Super Fans	Season ticket holders who are ticket holders for many local sport clubs	1	620 / 86	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Club is one of many clubs they follow • Attend 85% of home games • Only 18% identifying as female
8	Connected Fans	Season ticket holders who share tickets and have dependents.	1	457 / 105	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many (52%) have dependents
9	Place To Be Seekers	Holders with low affinity to club but high interest in schedule and stadium	1	413 / 40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lowest net promoter (43%), team identity (25%), and value (48%) scores

also provides the average number of minutes per week that each member of that segment consumes in both traditional media and social media.

The first two segments, *Local Market Club Promoters* and *Original Fans* represent 91% of season ticket holders. The *Local Market Club Promoters* segment is a group of younger members (average age 44), identifying largely as male (73%) season ticket holders with the highest social media use (2.4 club channels followed, 132 minutes/week), and very high club identity and net promoter scores. The *Original Fan* segment is the oldest segment (average age 62), identifying largely as male (92%). They have low social media use and have been season ticket holders for many years. The third segment listed in Table 4 represents 3% of the sample. This is the *Value Seeker* segment, which is older (53 is average age), 75% male/25% female identifying, with high affinity to the club, who identify with the club, with low social media use and an interest in good price.

The next six segments each represent approximately 1% of the sample. Although small in size, they are included given the high importance of season ticket holders to club revenue (Foster et al., 2020) and following the club management's suggestion. These segments include *Loyal, Long-term Advocates*, an older segment (average age: 55), identifying mostly as male (73%) season ticket holders who are highly influenced by the club's success and are active advocates for the club, as well as devoted sport fans overall (more than half also regularly buy tickets to other professional sports). Next, is the *Devoted Boomers*, who attend each and every home game and watch each and every away game on television. This group, although modest media consumers, are keen promoters for the sport, also purchase tickets to other professional sport events, and identify mostly as male (76%). The next segment, *Early Stage Season Ticket Holders*, is very similar to the Devoted Boomers in all respects (identifying as male, advocate, attend 94% of home games, watch all away games, etc.). However, they were identified as a separate segment because they (i) are newer season ticket holders (average of 2.0 seasons), (ii) are more likely to identify as female (39%), (iii) consume less traditional media, and (iv) are younger (average age of 47). The seventh segment is the *Professional Sport Super Fan*, who identify as male (82%) season ticket holders. They follow closely all professional sport clubs in their market, and have lower affinity to the club. The final two segments are *Connected Fan* (i.e., more balanced [40% identifying as female] fans, often with dependents, with higher social media use), and the *Place To Be Seeker* (i.e., cluster of fans with low affinity to the club but who attend 44% of games largely for stadium/schedule reasons). For minor league teams with limited means to advertise, the findings suggest targeting the four aforementioned clusters to generate more ticket sales.

Discussion

This research investigates market segmentation in the context of minor league professional sport in North America. In close collaboration with a professional sport club in a minor professional sport league, the researchers had an inside view to the marketing activities related to season ticket holders, which helped guide the research. Building on past segmentation research in sport (McDonald, 2010; Stewart et al., 2003) and in minor sport (Kennett et al., 2001; Lee & Won, 2012), a survey of the season ticket holders of the minor league club informed a detailed industry-style empirical analysis that allowed to model and identify nine segments of season ticket holders.

Although the results are limited to season ticket holders of a single minor league club, they do address a needed gap in minor professional sport and may be generalized for broader application and testing. Notably, a set of nine segments were identified as key sources of season ticket holders for minor professional sport clubs, with two segments representing 90% of the studied population. The first segment, *Local Market Club Promoters*, clearly is the most important group to build, retain, grow, and satisfy for any club in this type of environment. This segment is passionate, active on social media, and are really brand ambassadors for the club. In the case of the club in this research, the fact that they comprise nearly half of season ticket holders is viewed as a positive. The second large segment is the *Original Fan* segment. This is a function of the age of the club, as these fans have been there from the beginning and are ongoing season ticket buyers. However, they are not promoters of the club like the first segment. The remaining seven clusters, although small, should be viewed, practically, as sources of season ticket holders for the club. For example, the *Early Stage Season Ticket Holders*, whom 39% identify as female, could be a target for increasing the female fan base.

Each segment is generalized (Table 4) to the context of any minor league professional club in North America for practical application. Clubs in this context can adopt and adapt the segments presented here for their own marketing, as opposed to conducting their own time-intensive and resource-dependent research. For example, a minor league baseball club could plot its ticket holder database against the segments, prioritize the most important, and build specific marketing plans for each priority segment. This club could also pick certain segments to focus on if it has particular marketing objectives or season ticket holder sales needs. For example, a club located in an urban environment could build a marketing plan targeting *Place To Be Seekers* as a growth area for season ticket holder sales.

From a conceptual perspective, this study contributes to our understanding of the consumer and the need for such is again supported as key for the success of a sport business (Foster et al., 2020). This includes the detailed segmentation of consumers to respond to their timely needs and to satisfy their wants in a focused way, where segmentation is an efficient approach to do so (Lee & Won, 2012). Further segmentation of customers with common needs allows a marketer to base an approach on evidence, design an adaptive strategy, and make informed decisions specific to niche markets (Greenwell et al., 2002). In this regard, the findings of this study build on past literature and inform practitioners to efficiently and effectively identify specific groups of consumers based on their common attributes (bases of segmentation). This allows practitioners to choose the segments that will allow them to most efficiently attain their marketing goals.

Further, and in addition to the uncovering of the nine segments, there are marketing implications for this study, notably in relation to the segmentation of season ticket holders, or the segmentation from the most loyal of fans/consumers (McDonald, 2010). Season ticket holders are again shown to be the key to the off-the-field success of sport organizations (Foster et al., 2020). Findings related to minor leagues clubs contribute to our knowledge in the area because in these situations, season ticket holders are often considered to be “diehard” fans and are the most important revenue contributors to the club (McDonald, 2010). Being able to identify segments within season ticket holders can then allow sport organization with more limited financial and human resources to focus their efforts on a specific niche audience. Rather than developing marketing tactics broadly targeting all season ticket holders, these niche segments can be more specifically targeted with potentially more impactful tactics and results.

In this study, we also highlighted the importance and benefits of the collaborative relationship between researchers and the partnering sport organization. The relationship was beneficial for the organization, as it garnered important insights and received actionable recommendations from the research team. In turn, the research team gained access to a set of data that would not have been possible to collect without the organization. This provided data on which to report on this applied research. These types of innovative partnerships provide a much-needed connection between the theoretical constructs and the practical sport marketing and sales applications. Future research should continue the type of investigation with club-level marketing managers and season ticket holders. This could also include validation of the segments and deeper investigation into each one, as well as undertaking comparisons to existing typologies (e.g., Funk & James, 2001).

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