

CASE STUDIES

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Knowing Your Fans: A Case Study of Survey Research in a Collegiate Ticket Office

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The Project Develops

Jenny had been anticipating this project for her last few years in school. She was a sport management student at Hinton University and needed to complete a research project as the capstone experience. Because she knew a few people in the ticket office, she immediately identified the Director of Athletic Ticketing, Mr. Blackledge, as a person who may give her an opportunity to perform a meaningful study, while also completing the requirements in her program. Thus, she scheduled a meeting and was ready, but a little nervous. As she drove to campus, she passed numerous athletic fields, including the football stadium where the teams had won several national championships in the NCAA Football Championship Subdivision. But recently, Hinton University had made the jump to NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision, and ticket sales revenues were now more important than ever.

Jenny pulled her car into the parking lot on campus where the ticket office is located, parked, and excitedly walked into the office building.

“Good morning Mr. Blackledge,” Jenny greeted him.

“Good morning, Jenny. I’ve been looking forward to our meeting,” Mr. Blackledge said heartily. “Let’s talk about your project, and how we can work together to achieve some meaningful results.”

“Great,” Jenny responded. “I’m in the Sport Management Program here, and I need to complete a research project as the final capstone experience. With that in mind, I thought about gathering some data that you could use in the ticket office. In my sport management classes, we have discussed all manner of ways that data can help decision makers chart their next moves, so I know there are many opportunities here in the ticket office. What do you see as the key areas that we need to address right now?” Jenny asked.

“Well,” Mr. Blackledge began, “We have about 18,000 fans at an average football game here, and I really don’t know much about them. I have a list of basic information on our season ticket holders, but we only have 1,100 of those. So, my big questions are (1) Who are these fans at the ballgames?; (2) How do they compare to our season ticket holders?; (3) Where are they from?; (4) Do they spend the night in town?; (5) What connection do they have with Hinton?; (6) Do they travel to away games?; and (7) Maybe most importantly, how can I convert some of them to season ticket holders?”

“I can tell you have thought about this a considerable amount,” Jenny replied. “Those are certainly important questions. Tell me about how these 18,000 tickets are sold for each game.”

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"I'd say the majority are sold at the stadium on game day, or the week of the game over the phone. We close phone sales on game day 3 hours prior to kickoff."

"Okay," said Jenny. "And, tell me about the type of information you know about your 1,100 season ticket holders."

"Nothing fancy. We just have the basic information like names, addresses, how many seats they purchase, and how long they have been season ticket holders. That's about it," Mr. Blackledge responded. "I wish I could tell you it was more nuanced than that," he said.

Jenny then asked, "Have you ever surveyed the season ticket holders in any way?"

"No," responded Mr. Blackledge, "and could we do that too? I'd like to know how they compare to the walk-ups."

"How they compare?" Jenny queried, as she didn't know what he meant by that.

"Yes," Mr. Blackledge said. "You see, we only have addresses for season ticket holders and don't know much about how they are connected as a fan. That is, are they fans because they attended Hinton, or are they just connected as a casual fan? Do they come with friends, work associates, or others? We need to know all those things. Also, I have a suspicion that some of my walk-up sales are actually from my season ticket holders who buy tickets for friends, family members, and others. But overall, I really need to know where they are from, because perhaps there are opportunities/clusters of fans in surrounding towns that I'm missing in my marketing efforts. Make sense?"

Jenny began taking notes and spoke her train of thought, "Yes, I grew up here, and my parents were season ticket holders. Many of our game day friends just came because they were locals, but when I became a student here, I started to meet other fans that were connected as alumni like my parents. You know, it may be useful to know how many consecutive years one has been a season ticket holder; we talk about "loyalty" of fans a lot in my sport management classes, so you may discover something there with strategic currency, so to speak."

Mr. Blackledge nodded his head in affirmation.

"So, how many different ways do you think we can label the majority of season ticket holders?" Jenny asked.

"Well, we had a couple who came in the office to order season tickets this morning because their daughter is a freshman in the band, and they wanted to be at all of her games," Blackledge replied. He added, "Then there are some locals, and some parents of current students."

Jenny paused to further collect her thoughts.

"So, I have an age question, then one about consecutive years as a season ticket holder, and then one about their connection to the university. Now, you want to add that same question with walk-up purchasers?" Jenny asked.

Blackledge brainstormed aloud, "You'd obviously have the alumni option with the season ticket holders. Walk-ups could be connected to the opposing team. Our fans travel to away games in big numbers; there is nothing to say our opponents don't travel, too. We always have family weekends, so they could be visiting a current student and go to the game. Locals who aren't connected may decide to come. Am I missing anything?"

"They could be visiting with a season ticket holder. Season ticket holders may only have a couple season tickets but a third person may want to tag along to the game," Jenny reasoned, then added, "We should also determine how far they are traveling on both surveys so we can get a geographic dispersal of walk-up vs. season ticket holders. Right after that, we can ask if they'll be staying overnight in a hotel. Depending on the responses to that question, we may be able to develop an economic impact survey later."

"Yes. We could also use the hotel information to send our marketing department for sponsorship requests. If people are staying overnight in the hotels for the games, hotels will want to capitalize on that revenue and could be convinced to come on board for sponsorships. Away game information is very important. We get a cut of all of the away tickets we sell, so we could use that information to better determine our target market and potentially identify untapped sources of revenue," Blackledge responded.

"Okay, so we'll ask on both surveys if they attended away games last season and if they intend on going to away games this season. For the walk-up people, I think we should ask if they intend to return for more home games this season. If they're planning to attend three out of five home games, it shouldn't be too hard to convince them to buy a package of some type. I'll be sure to promote that option when talking to the fans while standing in the ticket line. Maybe you should even consider making a public address announcement as such during the game. One more thing: There are only adult tickets right? Has there been any discussion about implementing a child's ticket?" Jenny asked.

"If you can get me information on how many adults have kids with them during the games, I can pitch a child's ticket to the Athletic Director. It could also help with scheduling pregame marketing activities like games and the bouncy houses," Blackledge said.

"Those are pretty much the main things I need. I don't want to make the surveys too long, because then people would be resistant to completing them. People are trying to meet up with friends and have a good time on game day. I don't want to take up too much of their time. I'm thinking I'll use the mall-intercept method before the game. Thus, keeping the survey simple and a single page is important. I can use your addresses to mail the season ticket holder surveys. Is there anything else you would like for me to include?" she asked.