

# **The Perceived Value of Marketing Techniques Utilized by NBA Marketing Directors**

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*This study provides updated research that investigated the opinions of NBA marketing directors during the 2017-2018 season regarding the perceived value of 20 marketing techniques used by their franchises to attract fans to home games. All 30 NBA marketing directors participated in the study. Results showed a consensus in the perceived value of face-to-face meetings with businesses, email offers, group sales, social media, promoting star players, referrals, and preliminary and post-game events. The results further indicated a decreased value in radio advertising and direct mailing, as well as a slow uptake on the use of virtual reality and podcast marketing.*

*Keywords: NBA, sport marketing, marketing techniques, fan attraction*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sport in an event form is marketed as a social entertainment product... often enhanced with services that seek to maximize the positive experiences of sport consumers (Ratten, 2016; Trequattrini, Lombardi, & Battista, 2015). Due to the emotional investment, social connectedness and identity, and psychological well-being inherent to fandom through professional sports teams and leagues (Wann, 2006), sport marketing professionals must use a multitude of techniques to link those fans with this type of entertainment product. Furthermore, since individuals have their own personal preference for how they consume entertainment products, the sport marketing efforts employed as related to professional sports teams and leagues can have a very intense effect on the fans. As a result, sport marketing professionals must be innovative and conceive new ways to target sport consumers because individuals consume sport in different ways and for different reasons.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

According to Plunkett Research (2018a), the estimated size of the global sport industry in 2018 was \$1.3 trillion USD, with 41.5% of that value (\$539.7 billion USD) attributed to the United States sports market. In terms of the 'Big 4' leagues in the United States (Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, and the National Hockey League), it is estimated that combined they bring in approximately \$33 billion USD of revenue annually (Plunkett Research,

2018b). Despite the apparent financial strength of the professional sports leagues in the United States, ticket revenue for many teams have been declining as a result of more product options including social, digital, and mobile media offerings (Howard & Crompton, 2018; Moore, 2019). As a result, sport marketing professionals have needed to come up with creative revenue generation methods including dynamic ticket pricing based on opponent or performance of the team, incentives through pre-paid discounting of tickets, and even money-back guarantees (Howard & Crompton, 2018; Moore, 2019).

In looking specifically at the National Basketball Association (NBA), there are numerous studies over the past 30 years that have examined the various marketing techniques utilized by teams, as well as comparisons of value between fans and marketing directors. The first of these studies was by Mawson and Coan (1994) during the 1988-1989 NBA season where they examined attendance records and 21 marketing techniques utilized by NBA teams using the Marketing Technique Questionnaire (MTQ) model from Hambleton (1987). The goal of the study was to rank the perceived effectiveness of a wide variety of strategies including market research, strategic planning, identifying target markets, advertising, sponsorships, sales promotions, and publicity (Dick & Sack, 2003). The ranking was conducted using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1), with NBA marketing directors ranking the most relevant techniques used to promote attendance at home games for their individual teams (Dick & Turner, 2007). In conducting a comparison of low attendance teams and high attendance teams, it was generally found that promotions related to business sponsorships, strategic planning, and offering a variety of season ticket options were the most effective marketing techniques, with low attendance franchises also believing newspaper advertising to be relevant (Mawson & Coan, 1994).

Dick and Sack (2003) conducted a study to update and extend the Mawson and Coan research during the 1997-1998 NBA regular season. This study was two-fold. First, the same 21 marketing techniques were examined, with significant differences being found in over 1/3 of the perceived effectiveness of those techniques including the top three from Mawson and Coan being ranked no higher than 10<sup>th</sup> (Dick & Sack, 2003). Second, NBA marketing directors were asked to add to the list of marketing techniques used to account for advances in sport marketing systems, processes, and methods, which resulted in an additional 33 items (Dick & Sack, 2003). The authors then resent the survey to NBA marketing directors with all 54 items included and requested them to rate the effectiveness of the techniques using the same 5-point Likert scale as used by Mawson and Coan (Dick & Sack, 2003). This resulted in 11 new items being ranked in the top 25 and showed that the top two items of ticket sales and community service projects were not even considered in the previous study (Dick & Sack, 2003).

Dick and Turner (Dick & Turner, 2007) then further evolved this research during the 2003-2004 NBA season to focus on a comparison between fan perceptions of the value of marketing techniques as compared to that of the marketing directors for NBA franchises. With the continued advances in sport marketing systems and processes and the realization by marketing professionals in the NBA that the techniques they were using had remained relatively unchanged over the past three decades, there was a need to understand what methods met the needs and wants of their fans. To start, the authors put together an expert panel of five sport marketing professionals to examine the list of 54 marketing techniques from the 2003 Dick and Sack study. Upon reviewing the list, “all five members of the panel agreed that there was some confusion and duplication of the 54 marketing techniques [and] as a result, the panel fine-tuned the list down to 20.” (Dick & Turner, 2007, p. 141). The new survey was sent out to NBA marketing directors to rank each marketing technique based on the same 5-point Likert scale as previous studies. In addition, attendees at two different home games of an NBA team were surveyed using a random sampling methodology of handing the survey out to every 25<sup>th</sup> person entering at five different entry points (Dick & Turner, 2007). Also collected was demographic information of fan respondents including gender, age, ethnicity, household income, and educational level. The ultimate goal of the study was to “determine if the marketing techniques that NBA marketing directors viewed as valuable and useful were viewed in a similar manner by attendees at NBA games” (Dick & Turner, 2007, p. 141). Results showed that “ticket holders and directors of marketing significantly disagreed on the importance of 15 of these techniques” (Dick & Turner, 2007, p. 143). The results showed that marketing directors in the NBA are not fully

connected with their fans and need to re-evaluate the marketing techniques used to attract fans to home games.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Since the publication of the Dick and Turner study in 2007, there have been many advances in sport marketing techniques. The most significant relates to the advances in the use of social, digital, and mobile media, which was practically non-existent during the previous studies. Over the past decade, there has been a dearth of research investigating the way professional sports organizations utilize social media to engage with fans to build relevant relationships with them (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Pedersen, 2012; Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011; Yuan & Shuhua, 2015). In addition, the literature shows that other techniques being utilized by professional teams ranging from the traditional method of television (Mongeon & Winfree, 2012) to electronic methods including podcast marketing (Alonso & O'Shea, 2012) to digital and mobile technologies such as virtual reality and interactive experiences (da Silva & Las Casas, 2017; Ronkartz, 2019).

Hence, the purpose of this study is to replicate relevant aspects of the previous studies by Dick and Sack (2003) and Dick and Turner (2007) for a 3.0 version that focused on determining the marketing techniques current NBA marketing deemed to be the most valuable tools for attracting fans to attend home games. Secondarily, the results from this study will be compared to those from Dick and Turner (2007) to evaluate changes in perceived value over the past 15 years.

## **METHODOLOGY**

During the 2017-2018 regular season, the marketing directors of the 30 NBA teams were surveyed to investigate their opinion on the perceived value of the marketing techniques being utilized by their organizations to attract fans to home games. The survey was emailed to each of the marketing directors based on the contact information listed in each franchise's staff directory or through their LinkedIn profile. This was followed by a follow-up communication to all marketing directors to explain the survey and request their participation. All 30 NBA marketing directors agreed to participate and the study resulted in a 100% response rate.

The starting point for the development of the survey instrument was the list of 20 marketing techniques that were identified in the Dick and Turner (2007) study, which evolved from both the Mawson and Coan (1994) and Dick and Sack (2003) investigations. The researchers evaluated the list based on the results provided in the previous studies to decide if any of the marketing techniques were no longer relevant. Based on that review, civic groups, implementing good public relations, in-arena messages/public address announcements, newspaper advertising, and using a strategic and marketing research plan were removed from the instrument. Then, based on the review of the literature and an evaluation of current practices being used in professional sports, five new items were added to the survey - interactive sales center experiences, podcast marketing, social media, television, and virtual reality. The final list of marketing techniques used to develop the survey is shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**MARKETING TECHNIQUES USED IN THIS STUDY**

• Booster/Special Memberships
• Direct Mail
• E-mail Offers
• Employee Incentives Nights
• Face to face Meetings with Businesses
• Grass Roots Marketing
• Group Sales
• Interactive Sales Center Experiences
• Mini Packs
• Outdoor Advertising
• Podcast Marketing
• Pre- and Post-game Events
• Promoting Star Players
• Promotional Giveaways
• Radio Advertising
• Referrals
• Social Media
• Telemarketing
• Television
• Virtual Reality

The survey was designed on Wix.com. In designing the survey, a 5-point Likert scale was utilized allowing for a ranking of each marketing technique ranging from a ‘5’ (strong perceived value) to a ‘1’ (weak perceived value). Each marketing director evaluated each of the 20 marketing techniques based on this scale. Data was retrieved from the online delivery portal once each marketing director completed the survey. Then, the mean score of each of the 20 marketing techniques was computed for each of the 30 NBA teams based on the perceptions of each marketing director.

## RESULTS

The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate the current perceptions of NBA marketing directors during the 2017-2018 regular season as to their perceived value of 20 selected marketing techniques. As noted in Table 2, there is a consensus amongst NBA marketing directors that face-to-face meetings with businesses ( $M=4.83$ ;  $SD=0.461$ ) is the most important marketing technique. In addition, there is agreement around the perceived value of email offers ( $M=4.63$ ;  $SD=0.718$ ), group sales ( $M=4.60$ ;  $SD=0.814$ ), social media ( $M=4.60$ ;  $SD=0.814$ ), and promoting star players ( $M=4.50$ ;  $SD=0.731$ ) as very relevant marketing techniques for NBA marketing directors. They also feel referrals ( $M=4.37$ ;  $SD=0.890$ ) and preliminary and post-game events ( $M=4.30$ ;  $SD=0.702$ ) are generally valuable marketing techniques to use to attract fans to home games. There is less consensus about the perceived value of the remaining marketing techniques, but it seems some newer methods such as virtual reality ( $M=3.07$ ;  $SD=1.311$ ) and podcast marketing ( $M=2.63$ ;  $SD=1.299$ ) have had a significantly variable but low level of acceptance. Additionally, it seems that marketing techniques such as radio advertising ( $M=3.23$ ;  $SD=1.135$ ) and direct mailing ( $M=2.47$ ;  $SD=1.167$ ) are perceived as less valuable by NBA marketing directors.

**TABLE 2**  
**RANKING OF PERCEIVED VALUE OF MARKETING TECHNIQUES ACCORDING TO NBA**  
**MARKETING DIRECTORS DURING THE 2017-2018 REGULAR SEASON**

Rank	Marketing Techniques	Mean	SD
1	Face to Face Meetings with Businesses	4.83	0.461
2	Email Offer	4.63	0.718
3	Group Sales	4.60	0.814
4	Social Media	4.60	0.814
5	Promoting Star Players	4.50	0.731
6	Referrals	4.37	0.890
7	Preliminary and Post-game Events	4.30	0.702
8	Mini Packs	4.23	1.006
9	Grass Roots Marketing	4.13	1.074
10	Television	3.90	0.995
11	Promotional Giveaways	3.83	0.986
12	Employee Incentives Nights	3.77	1.135
13	Telemarketing	3.77	1.431
14	Interactive Sales Center Experience	3.67	1.184
15	Outdoor Advertising	3.60	1.192
16	Booster/Special Memberships	3.33	1.124
17	Radio Advertising	3.23	1.135
18	Virtual Reality	3.07	1.311
19	Podcast Marketing	2.63	1.299
20	Direct Mailing	2.47	1.167

The secondary purpose of this research is to see the change over time in the perceived value of marketing techniques by NBA marketing directors by comparing the results from this study to that of Dick and Turner (2007) from 15 years ago (2003-2004). As noted in Table 3, there were 15 marketing techniques common to both studies.

**TABLE 3**  
**COMPARISON OF RANKING OF PERCEIVED VALUE OF MARKETING TECHNIQUES BY**  
**NBA MARKETING FROM 2003-2004 TO 2017-2018**

Marketing Techniques	2003-2004		2017-2018		+/-	
	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean
Preliminary and Post-game Events	16	3.66	7	4.30	+9	+0.64
Face to Face Meetings with Businesses	8	4.28	1	4.83	+7	+0.55
Promoting Star Players	10	4.03	5	4.50	+5	+0.47
Email Offer	6	4.38	2	4.63	+4	+0.25
Booster/Special Memberships	20	3.14	16	3.33	+4	+0.19
Outdoor Advertising	18	3.38	15	3.60	+3	+0.22
Promotional Giveaways	13	3.79	11	3.83	+2	+0.04
Grass Roots Marketing	9	4.10	9	4.13	0	+0.03
Group Sales	2	4.59	3	4.60	-1	+0.01
Employee Incentives Nights	14	3.72	12	3.77	-2	+0.05
Referrals	4	4.41	6	4.37	-2	-0.04
Radio Advertising	15	3.69	17	3.23	-2	-0.46
Telemarketing	7	4.31	13	3.77	-6	-0.54
Mini Packs	1	4.62	8	4.23	-7	-0.39
Direct Mailing	11	3.97	20	2.47	-9	-1.50

The comparative analysis of the results of the two studies articulates the shift in the importance of marketing techniques over the past 15 years and hence can show the change in trends in marketing techniques utilized by the NBA. The marketing technique showing the most substantial increase in perceived value was preliminary and post-game events ( $M +0.64$ ), which moved up nine ranking positions. Other marketing techniques showing a considerable increase in perceived value included face to face meetings with businesses ( $M +0.55$ ) up seven places to the number one spot, promoting star players ( $M +0.47$ ) up five places, and email offers ( $M +0.25$ ) advancing four positions.

In terms of those marketing techniques that saw minimal changes, a group of three remained relatively entrenched in the top 10 including grassroots marketing with no change in rank, group sales losing one spot but still in the top three overall, and referrals down two places. At the same time, five marketing techniques remained in the bottom 10 of marketing techniques. Booster/special memberships and outdoor advertising were both up four and three spots respectively but remained amongst the lowest-ranked marketing techniques valued by NBA marketing directors. Promotional giveaways and employee incentive nights remained relatively unchanged in perceived importance, while radio advertising showed a trend of becoming less relevant.

The marketing technique that showed the most significant drop in perceived value was direct mailing ( $M -1.50$ ), dropping nine ranking places to the last spot on the list of 20 marketing techniques. Other marketing techniques showing drops in perceived value included telemarketing ( $M -0.54$ ), which dropped six positions and mini packs ( $M -0.39$ ) down seven spots. The mini packs still remained in the top 10 of marketing techniques but dropped from being the most important methods in the first study to the eighth.

## DISCUSSION

A sport marketer would look at the results and ask the questions ‘should we or are we employing these top 20 techniques?’ and ‘in particular, should we use the highest rated top 10 techniques?’ Season tickets are always where the majority of the revenue is located in ticket sales. Season ticket holders are the backbone of any sports franchise while ticket sales are the blood that circulates through the organization. The 80/20 rule is in effect with 80 percent of our ticket sales revenue comes from 20 percent of our ticket holders who are our season ticket holders. To close the sale of a season ticket holder we use a face-to-face meeting with business, which is the highest-ranked technique. To supplement the season ticket holders there is a term Full Season Equivalent (FSE). Therefore, in the NBA there are 41 home games. If I sell two tickets in a 20-game mini-plan, or four tickets a 10-game mini-plan, that is one FSE for each sale. Group sales are a great way to sell tickets to a group of people who want to socialize together. The sport organization product (the NBA game) is fulfilling their social need to be together. They often expect a ticket to be discounted and location of the tickets is not their top priority. Group sales are a great way to sell tickets in the second level/mezzanine area at the end of the court.

Email and social media through the internet are second and fourth, respectively. These techniques have moved up the list and should remain in the top 10 for years to come. Promoting star players is what the NBA was founded on. The NBA promotes its’ star players as good as any league or better than any other professional sports league. The best way to measure star power is to calculate the road attendance for any NBA team. You will see that a team like the Chicago Bulls in the years 1990-1998 sold out not just at home, but also on the NBA road. Recently, the Golden State Warriors and the Los Angeles Lakers sell every ticket for every NBA game they play.

Referrals are the golden leads to any salesperson in any sales industry. The internet and in particular the secondary market like StubHub capture customers who have purchased one game from the ticket system. This referral of name, address, email, and phone number is then forwarded to the NBA sales department. The StubHub user is called by a sales representative. The sales representative says, “I saw you came to one of our games recently. Did you think of five or 10 game plan with our team?” The sales representative speaks to an individual who has parked in the parking lot, been to the building, used the bathroom, used the concession stand, seen the product, hopefully had a wonderful game experience with a win, and we want them to come again. It is very similar to the car salesperson who gets you to test drive the car. There is an increased chance you will buy the car after a test drive.

Events before or after the NBA game is an effective technique to increase attendance only in situations where the NBA building is NOT sold out with FSE’s. Promotional giveaways are something that everyone likes, but not all giveaways are targeted to increase home game attendance.

Grassroots marketing lays the foundation for the long-range future with community relations and the use of the mascot, junior programs that provide fans under 16 years old to be involved, and programs through Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, and others. Television is a technique that involves a three-hour broadcast of a team’s game. We could say that it is a three-hour commercial. Television also provides a “drop-in” commercial read by the play-by-play person coming out of a paid commercial. Television is good for mass-marketing coverage and is appealing to the senses, but is very expensive and high in clutter. Employee incentives nights are basically group sales for specific corporations that often include an acknowledgment from the team like a pregame autographic ball session before the game, public address announcements, and/or special tee shirts or hats. Telemarketing more than any marketing techniques is a financially measurable technique in regards to ROI. Interactive sales center experience is a new technique that shows great promise as technology continues to grow. Outdoor advertising has flexibility and high repeat exposure, but little audience selectivity.

The sport marketer tries to identify where their season tickets holders are located by zip code. Booster/special members are used to give rewards and exclusivity to season ticket holders. Similar to television, radio broadcasts NBA games. Radio is effective as a technique because of good local acceptance and high geographic preference, but the downside is no visual and low number of listeners.

Virtual reality and podcast ranked 18 and 19, respectively. While the future may be bright for these techniques, there is a thought process that these techniques are newer and still in the stage of early adoption. Number 20 direct mail is considered to have a very bad return on investment (ROI).

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In the comparison of the 2003-2004 NBA season versus the 2017-2018 NBA season, one of the observations would be how similar the results. For example, some of the preliminary and post-game events, face-to-face meetings with business, promoting star players, email offers, and direct mail had somewhat similar results 14 years apart. As for preliminary and post-game events involve concerts after the NBA games, the marketers realize that you have to spend money to make money. It has to be the right concert or event at the right price and time, such as on a Friday or Saturday night. While we can sell an individual ticket, group sales, or even a mini-plan sale with a phone call, a full season ticket sale will need a face-to-face meeting. Face-to-face meetings with businesses jumped from eight in 2003-2004 to number one in 2017-2018. Many of these season ticket holders may have interested in sponsorships and that will need multiple face-to-face meetings. Promoting star players has been an important marketing technique going back to and even before Michael Jordan. Recently, the movement of star players who have become free agents and are relocating to make super teams has been very popular. This trend affects the strategies of sport marketing professionals. LeBron James and Kevin Durant particularly have played for three different teams in pursuit of playing with the best players thus increasing their chance at a championship.

Overall, sport marketing practitioners will continue to use a maximum number of techniques to increase attendance at NBA games. However, NBA marketing directors will need to analyze these techniques in terms of the hard costs associated with implementation. The trends articulated in the results show that techniques involving social, digital, and mobile media will continue to rise as effective techniques to increase home attendance, while direct mail, telemarketing, and other antiquated techniques will continue to decline in use and effectiveness.

## **LIMITATIONS**

A limitation of the study is that while each director of marketing was contacted, there are instances that the vice president of marketing or other members of the marketing and sales department may have completed the questionnaire. The researchers can confirm that all 30 teams completed the instrument. It has been more than 20 or 30 years since the original study was completed depending if you are counting the Mawson and Coan study. The researchers want to report that the turnover in the director of marketing positions is nearly 100 percent. While some staff is no longer with the organizations, others have been promoted. A future study could be the following: what are the characteristics of employees who survived and, in some cases, prospered within an NBA organization. Many of these employees have lasted through one, two, or even three ownership changes where the entire department have been dismissed or resigned. A panel of five experts from the NBA selected the 20 techniques that were ranked. While this may be considered a limitation, the five individuals who were selected have been working in the NBA for more 10 years.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This third iteration of this study has revealed a number of opportunities for future research. A first suggestion would be to add a qualitative focus to the research to allow NBA marketing directors to provide more details about their reasoning for rating certain techniques as high or low as they did, as well as offer them the opportunity to make recommendations of techniques to add or take off the list. A second opportunity would be to replicate this study in other professional leagues in the United States and then conducting a comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences between leagues. This could lead to opportunities for cross-promotional efforts between teams from similar marketplaces.

Another possibility for future research would involve reviews the clustering of teams by geographic and city sizes. For example, NBA cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee are located in the Midwest and are similar size cities. This may reveal through the clustering of teams by divisions or regions that certain techniques are more prevalent in certain locations. Finally, as there is now data from three studies, it may be possible to conduct a longitudinal analysis of marketing techniques used over time by the 25 NBA franchises that have been part of all three studies. From this, a team-by-team and league-wide analysis could be conducted to show similarities and changes over time, which in collaboration with attendance data may reveal the use, relevance, and success level of the various marketing techniques implemented.

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