Research Problem / Purpose

Given resource constraints in marketing budgets of athletic departments, many intercollegiate athletics marketers often face a difficult choice between marketing all sports fairly and marketing only those sports that would provide the highest return on investment of marketing dollars. In many intercollegiate athletic departments, the resource constraints are so impregnable that managers often are forced to rely on a host of volunteers to accomplish the daily operational tasks. This case study explains the creative efforts made at one university to incorporate student volunteers when marketing, promoting, and selling tickets to collegiate baseball. This case provides examples of how intercollegiate athletic marketing directors can capitalize on student help to greatly enhance the outcomes for fans, students, and other stakeholders in the athletic department.

Issues

Volunteerism in sport has recently received greater attention as the sport industry increasingly becomes more dependent upon this labor segment. While some scholars have focused research on the motivations of volunteers at particular events or sports, Chelladurai (2006) outlines three more general reasons why people tend to volunteer for sporting events. First, volunteers often gain some benefit directly from their participation (i.e., utilitarian outcomes). Second, people often volunteer for social incentives derived from interpersonal relationships gained during or through the experience (i.e., affective incentives). Finally, people volunteer in some instances because of a desire to do something positive or because of a shared belief in organizational missions, values, or goals (i.e., normative incentives). While motives of the student volunteers in this current case are not altogether known, all three motives could possibly be represented, i.e., students could join the two critical student volunteer groups based upon a desire to help the baseball team (normative), develop existing relationships with other sport management majors who are in the group (affective), or capitalize upon a means to develop their resumes (utilitarian). Regardless of their motivation(s), this case examines the innovation in one intercollegiate athletic department that utilized volunteerism to generate appreciable outcomes for its baseball program whose marketing budget was virtually nonexistent.
Volunteerism at Georgia Southern University has occurred primarily through two main groups: (1) students taking a sales class in the sport management program, and (2) a student-based group called Grand Slam Marketing (GSM).

Students in the sport management program at Georgia Southern University may opt to enroll in a course involving the ticket sales process in the sport industry. Each fall semester, approximately 25 students enroll in this sales class to learn the intricacies of selling the sport product. Students are first exposed to current literature involving the sales process, the nature of consumer response to sales, prospecting for leads, phone script development, overcoming obstacles, closing the sale, and other sales principles such as cross-selling, database marketing, and upselling. During the course, students have the opportunity to role-play with salespeople from both intercollegiate and professional athletics sales staffs. Then, in conjunction with the GSU athletics ticket office, students practice their skills in a five-week ticket sales campaign targeting men's basketball, women's basketball, and baseball ticket sales. Each student receives a partial database of former season ticket holders for basketball, baseball, and football to use when making initial calls. By asking for names of friends who are sports fans, students then attempt to extend their partial database to use in future weeks of the sales campaign. At the end of the semester, the students who sold the most products are presented with many different awards ranging from cash prizes to official GSU athletic gear. Students use specific product code sheets during their sales presentations that included full-season ticket packages, as well as 10-game and 20-game flex ticket packages. The scripts that students use during the calls coincide with these products. If a fan is not interested in a full-season package, students are encouraged sell a partial season package. In 2007, the class generated over $20,000 in ticket sales for the baseball program alone, which amounted to over 400 season tickets. One very popular product sold as part of the class is called the Ballpark Bound plan, which essentially allows for a fan to purchase season tickets that are then distributed to local non-profit groups for use by underprivileged children in the area. Some groups receiving Ballpark Bound tickets include the Joseph Home for Boys, the Boys and Girls Club, and Statesboro Middle and High schools. The long-term aim of the initiative is to generate grassroots interest in GSU baseball. In 2007, the class sold 83 Ballpark Bound season tickets valued at $2,905, which distributed roughly 2500 tickets to area children over the course of the season (83 season tickets multiplied by 31 home games).

Grand Slam Marketing (GSM) exists as the second critical student group assisting GSU sports marketing. This group is populated by roughly 20 volunteers per season (mostly sport management majors) under the direction of the sport management faculty. The mission of GSM is to provide an enjoyable and memorable fan experience to everyone attending GSU baseball games by performing three key functions: 1) increasing awareness of upcoming events in the student body and community, 2) assisting with game-day sponsor activation and on-field promotional activities, and 3) operating and managing a retail outlet in the stadium concourse for the University bookstore. First, students who are involved in the first function create and send out flyers, e-mail blasts, and announcements promoting upcoming baseball games on campus. This helps drive awareness of upcoming events and ultimately impacts attendance positively. Next, students assigned to the second function are responsible for sponsorship activation and on-field activities between innings. One of the more popular activities the students organize is a sumo wrestling contest where fans dress in sumo wrestling costumes and wrestle each other for two minutes. Other activities conducted on the field are dizzy bat contests, build-a-burger promotions, and longest drive contests with plastic golf balls. All of these promotions are sponsored by particular businesses from the community at large and thus, represent sponsorship activation efforts by the volunteers. Additionally, students generate considerable amounts of in-stadium marketing research that provides GSU sports marketing with information on fan demographics and psychographics, sponsorship recognition, and promotion effectiveness. Data is then used to create marketing strategy for upcoming baseball seasons. In the third primary function of GSM, students manage a satellite retail store in the stadium concourse that sells licensed baseball merchandise and souvenirs. This third function directly generates additional revenue streams through a partnership with the University Bookstore. Before GSM was established, the University Bookstore had no presence at the GSU baseball games. Costs to operate a satellite bookstore at the stadium (primarily paying bookstore employees’ salaries) would offset any revenue generated by GSU merchandise sales. However, with GSM volunteers staffing the retail store, these costs of staffing the booth are eliminated, and the financials are more justifiable to the University bookstore. In 2007, retail store
in the baseball stadium concourse generated $5,734 in revenue; in 2008, it generated revenues of $4,022. This volunteer-based system has benefited GSM’s members who gain valuable retail and marketing experience through their participation in the GSM organization. More importantly, however, the efforts of the student volunteers fulfill GSM’s mission to provide an enjoyable and memorable fan experience, which ultimately reflects positively upon GSU’s sports marketing and intercollegiate athletics department. Moreover, the baseball-focused marketing efforts of GSU sports marketing are greatly enhanced by the cumulative work of the student volunteers in the GSM organization. Through the efforts of student volunteers, fans are now more entertained with on-field activities, awareness of each upcoming baseball game is heightened, and the retail store creates both financial returns to the University and opportunities for fans to purchase GSU merchandise during the baseball games.

**Analysis and Discussion**

According to Chelladurai (2006) people often volunteer for utilitarian reasons in hopes to gain valuable experiences that can later be translated into a vita of work experiences that potential employers find attractive. In this case, many students in the sales class and in GSM achieved a utilitarian return on their volunteer efforts after graduation in the sense that they were more qualified to work in particular areas of the sport industry as a result of their experiences. Since implementing the sales class in 2005, over 30 students who were enrolled in that class have received entry-level job offers in ticket sales or sponsorship sales in the sport industry. From the GSM side, many students have successfully found employment in marketing areas of minor league baseball and intercollegiate athletics as a result of their involvement with the volunteer organization. Some students have even found sponsorship activation to be of interest and discovered that their work with GSM was considered by sport industry managers to be a highlight on their resumes.

Many scholars note that rates of volunteering are declining, but increased demands exist for it within the sport industry. Indeed, within athletic departments at many universities, resource constraints make student help virtually a necessity. The cumulative efforts of the sport management faculty and students at Georgia Southern University provide an example to sport industry managers of how this problem can be handled in a creative and innovative way and one that provides tangible benefits for all stakeholders involved.