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Opinion

Coupons, sampling can offer sports fans a feeling of value

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The combination of a cluttered marketplace and a poor economy has made the word free very much in vogue. Denny's, KFC and Starbucks have given away free product as a way of either trying to reconnect with consumers or in the case of KFC, to introduce a new product.

Last holiday season, I received a \$50 gift card from Tommy Bahama to use as I saw fit and as a way of thanking me for past patronage (and encouraging me to visit). The \$50 savings I received only cost me an additional \$225 in purchases — what a bargain! While I am not a proponent of free tickets for sporting events, I am in favor of employing sampling as a way to increase exposure (and sales opportunities) for concession items, merchandise sales and ticket upgrades.

Borders and Barnes & Noble have weekly e-coupons for their membership. Some of these coupons are about them (buy this book on this day and receive 25 percent off; they determine what I am to buy) while some are about me (40 percent off any single item next weekend; the choice as to what to buy is mine).

Coupons are a form of sampling in that they provide an incentive to visit the store (online or brick and mortar) and make a purchase. Why don't we send similar e-coupons to our respective databases, for example \$25 off any ticket plan of four or more games? Make the amount substantial and make the coupon easy to use. The more you restrict the coupon (only good for Monday games), the less likely the consumer will be to redeem it.

In terms of ticketing, why not provide upgrade certificates to allow ticket holders to sample the next higher priced seating location or to provide passes to clubs and other premium areas on days where space is not an issue?

In my 25-plus years in this business, I am convinced that unless people experience the next best option, they are content with sitting where they are. An upgrade provides a no-risk, no-cost opportunity to try something new that is presumably better. I would go so far as to create a ticket plan that has a seat upgrade already assigned for let's say the third game in a ticket plan of four or more games. The buyer has then experienced the seat that he or she has purchased for two games, is moved to the better location for the third game, then presumably moved back for the fourth game. I would advocate calling the buyer after the third game experience and inquiring if he/she would like to upgrade to that location for the remainder of the games in the ticket plan.

The same principle would hold true for club or premium seating with dining options. In many cases, the consumer has never even seen this area as access is controlled and it is not in plain sight. The customer would probably have little interest if solicited to upgrade to such a product over the telephone without having the experience to make a sound decision. Would you commit to a plan that includes multiple meals if you had never eaten at that particular establishment? So why should we expect anyone else to?

Coupons and sampling could also work well in terms of concessions. All of us have walked through the food court at the mall and have probably been offered a sample of bourbon chicken. Why not employ sampling in ballparks and arenas? It is simple and could be used to drive traffic to underperforming stands with new food items. Coupons could be part of the mix, or they could be distributed when people enter the ballpark or arena. Concessionaires need to stop thinking about guests as POAs (Prisoners of Arenas). Instead of thinking these people will pay whatever price a vendor asks because they have no other recourse, concessionaires must realize that the POAs are probably eating and drinking less (maybe eating before they arrive) to save money.

Consumers are searching for value and are afraid to make a poor decision, so in many cases they don't make the decision at all. Sampling and coupons are simply ways to provide a little more safety

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and comfort into the decision. Trying it for free or buying at a lower cost provides the feeling of value, and for some, the all-important feeling of "I got a deal!"

As sports marketers we need to step back and realize that now more than ever we are part of a consumer spending decision. The decision as to whether someone attends a game or how frequently they attend is now much more than an entertainment decision; it is a lifestyle decision. If I do this what can I cut or eliminate? If I go can I afford to have dinner? Can I bring everyone? If I buy a ticket plan, how many games will I definitely attend?

While we need to remember that we are sellers, we need to understand what people are buying and why, and attempt to construct offers and packages that will be attractive to them.

An all-you-can-eat seat is our version of dinner and a show. Let's make the dinner affordable and interesting and make the show something worth repeating.

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