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Opinion

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With the fantasy football season over, those not accustomed with the highly popular, online activity may wonder what all the fuss was about. Corporate sponsors, media providers and online advertisers will tell you it is all about the participant. That is, in addition to representing their most highly coveted target demographic, the average fantasy football participant (male, age 22-51, highly educated, average household income between $75,000-$95,000) has been reported to have abundant spending habits that outpace traditional NFL fans and the general public, as a whole.

However, parallel with this robust purchasing behavior, fantasy football participants are unfortunately known for their fervent and sometimes off-the-wall behavior associated with their fantasy teams and players. This fanatical behavior has ostracized by numerous media syndicates as counter-productive to traditional, team-centered sport behavior and positioned as an activity limited to young, social outcasts with financial and computer usage issues. However, like many stereotypes, these labels are hyperbole based on few facts and little empirical evidence. As a result, recent consumer research, done in conjunction with the Fantasy Sports Trade Association, set out to determine the real social-psychological profile of avid fantasy football participants.

Three in-depth and consumer-focused studies tapped two years of Web-based survey research that included more than 1,100 fantasy football participants. The primary goal of the research was to understand more about fantasy football participants and discern any differences between the less-involved participant and the highly engaged user. Consumer involvement level is a well-researched positive predictor of future consumer action. Consumers with high levels of involvement with a product or service consistently out-purchase and out-consume lesser-involved individuals. Thus, information on the differences between high- and low-involved consumers is important for market segmentation purposes.

Ultimately, the studies’ results showed that the behavioral typcast of highly involved fantasy football users is not of the gambling degenerate noted above, but of the traditional NFL fan, version 2.0. For instance, the amount of money invested to participate did not predict differences in the involvement level of the participant, and the financial motivations that were investigated actually resulted in less fantasy involvement due to perceptions that the game then involved more skill than luck. Thus, intense users were not motivated by the opportunity to win money, but by the additional opportunity to consume and interact with professional sport.

A participant’s age, the amount of hours spent on the Internet per day, and the total number of teams owned per season were also not significant predictors of high involvement. This debunks the previously mentioned stereotype that avid fantasy users are young and compulsively engaged in the activity. In fact, with the ability to join free fantasy leagues abundant, the results found the owner of 30 fantasy football teams is no more or less involved than the owner of one team.

The results did suggest that avid participants were motivated by entertainment aspects and the chance to compete with friends, family and co-workers. The social interaction-related results lead to speculation about social context of fantasy football participation in which participants build and sustain relationships with other players. Given that the Internet has become the pre-eminent domain for being involved in groups and pursuing interests with like-minded individuals, it seems likely that some fantasy football users are satisfying the personal gratification of developing and maintaining social relationships through fantasy participation. In the near future, look for enhanced integration between social media Web sites (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) and fantasy sport participation.

Surveyed users also indicated that the more perceived skill required in fantasy football, the more involved they were in the activity. Thus, regardless of the actual amount of luck involved in fantasy football, sport marketers should continue to facilitate the perception that the activity requires skills such as keen judgment and sound research. Promoting these types of aptitudes will support and foster an experience that encourages participants to spend more time and money focused on the sports products and services associated with the fantasy football league (e.g., print publications, Web sites and TV programming).

Interestingly, despite the built-in contradiction of fantasy football participation in which enhanced focus is placed on individual players and statistics as opposed to teams, the results of these studies
suggest that enhanced fantasy football involvement not only maintains a fan’s commitment to their favorite NFL team, but actually increases their interest and loyalty to their most preferred team. This implies that participants can be both passionate traditional NFL fans and avid fantasy football participants, thus strengthening the overall league brand without weakening individual team brands in the process.

In all, whether focused on the marketing of a particular sport or sponsorship activation, these findings are noteworthy for sports organizations, corporate partners, and league administrators seeking to position their product or service within the sport industry. The contemporary fantasy football player is definitely more than meets the eye, and as the game continues to spread to additional demographic segments such as women and other ethnicities, opportunities for sponsors and advertisers to engage and penetrate new markets through fantasy sports partnerships will become increasingly attractive and available.

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