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political party.

# Fliers into Fans

By Ramon Lo

## AIRPORTS, SPORTS TEAMS SHARE SIMILAR CHALLENGES – AND POSSIBLY SIMILAR SOLUTIONS

Attend any major league sporting event and you'll come across throngs of enthusiastic supporters of the home-town team. They'll spend many hours talking about and experiencing their team's players and performances, and they will spend lots of money buying tickets, souvenirs and other paraphernalia.

If an individual airport could capture just a sliver of that enthusiasm and loyalty, it likely would have a fan base unrivaled in the industry.

Some social identity experts say airports could learn a lesson from sports teams on building a solid fan base.

Joseph Wagoner, an adjunct faculty member in the psychology department at California State University, Fullerton, says teams generate a loyal fan base by integrating themselves into the fabric of community life. It's a concept called social identity theory.

"People use groups to identify who they are as a person, what they think or how they feel," says Wagoner, manager of Claremont Graduate University's Social Identity Lab, which











**Above:** Adam Earnhardt, chairman of the department of communication for Youngstown State University, says there is a geographical and social identification that comes with being a fan and a user of an airport.

**Left:** Dan Farrell, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the St. Louis Cardinals, says creating a memorable atmosphere is key to developing loyal fans.

researches how people identify with groups and how belonging in certain groups influences thoughts and behavior.

"It makes us feel like a part of a community that's larger than ourselves," he says. "It makes us feel good about ourselves."

Wagoner says although direct flight options, price and proximity are true determinants of whether a traveler uses an airport, it should not deter airports from continually seeking to draw travelers into the social identity "groups".

"Teams do things to build loyalty such as reinforce their group membership," Wagoner says. "They're trying to ensure that people are attending their events and wearing their memorabilia. Airports need to do a similar reinforcing."

Adam Earnhardt, chairman of the department of communication for Youngstown State University, regards the loyalty to a sports team to be on the same level with the loyalty to a religion or a political party. Having co-edited several

books on sports fandom, Earnhardt notes that the three often overlap.

"When you hear sportscasters use metaphors, it's usually related to politics or religion and vice versa," Earnhardt says. "It's a horse race, the Hail Mary pass or the Immaculate Reception."

Although on the surface it might not appear as though sports fans and airport users have much in common, Earnhardt says he sees some similarities.

"What motivates someone to follow a sports team is the same reason why someone would use a certain airport," says Earnhardt. "Yes, utility is a factor. But there's geographical identification and also social identification that comes with being a fan."

### Creating The Right Atmosphere

Of course, there are obvious differences between utilizing an airport and attending a sporting event. One is a necessary step in the travel process; the other is a destination

for fun and entertainment. Yet both can, in their own ways, create an experience that leaves a positive impression.

Dan Farrell, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the St. Louis Cardinals, says a memorable fan experience is more than just the result of the game. He says the team works to create a fan-friendly atmosphere.

"We try to communicate the ambiance in the ballpark that it's fun and lively," he says. "We present that image at every possible communication point to say that this is the place to be."

The "communication point" to which Farrell refers is the outreach to Cardinals fans watching games at home.

"We pay an awful lot of attention to our radio broadcasts," says Farrell. "Our TV announcers and production crew are close, and we communicate with them regularly. These are things that, if televised, would add to the ambiance and add to the fan at home feeling like they are part of the experience at the ballpark."



Customer Service Experts works with various organizations to develop an employee-centric training program. According to CSE President and CEO Lise D'Andrea, when an employee is positive and engaged, that will transfer to providing the customer with exceptional service.

Like airports, many major sports teams have the advantage of a somewhat captive audience. Certainly, no one is forcing residents to become fans of their town's teams, just like residents can choose not to use their local airport. But for some, sports fandom seems all but inevitable.

"Most fans are dedicated for life," says Ray Mickens, a former player in the National Football League and now the owner of **M2 Concepts**, a concessions operator at **Dallas/Fort Worth International (DFW)**. "They associate their team with their upbringing and usually pick teams at a young age."

A former New York Jets player, Mickens refers to the fans as "some of the craziest fans I know."

Scott Berchtold, senior vice president of communications for the Buffalo Bills, concurs.

"In Buffalo, fans become loyal as a birthright," says Berchtold. "You grow up knowing and expecting to be at Ralph Wilson Stadium enthusiastically supporting the team."

## Embracing The Community

Like most airports, sports teams also seek to integrate themselves fully into their local communities.

A source of team pride, says Berchtold, is the Bills' community involvement.

"Our entire organization believes in being an integral part of the fabric of the Buffalo community," he says, adding that every level of the team, from the players to the coaches to the staff, is involved in many charitable organizations.

Ken Sheirr, vice president of marketing for the Houston Rockets, calls the organization's community involvement "critical".

"It's a goal from our owner Leslie Alexander that we have embraced," explains Sheirr. "It's not just from a brand-perception standpoint."

For Mickens, the connection between organization and community is essential.

"It's big to contribute and give back," he says. "People will feel a great connection knowing that you care."

Wagoner says sports fans want to feel distinct from everyone else and identify themselves as part of a group, an idea that is transferable to airports.

"Airports can try to drive home the idea that this is related to who you are as an individual, that you're attached to this territory," says Wagoner, who uses **LA/Ontario International (ONT)** because he says he is loyal to the region. "The airport needs to also build on these loyalties in addition to the more flights and the convenience."

Lise D'Andrea, president and CEO of **Customer Service Experts Inc.**, says she thinks airports should try to achieve a

higher level of community involvement, for reasons other than marketing. CSE's work with the Baltimore Orioles has allowed her a firsthand look at the efforts of sports organizations.

"They're visible," D'Andrea says of the Orioles. "They're connecting with the fans just like an airport in its community could connect with potential passengers."

The additional level of visibility and repeated impressions will drive familiarity and comfort, "especially where you have multiple airports serving the area," says D'Andrea, citing her work with **San Francisco International (SFO)** and its proximity to **Oakland International (OAK)** and **Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International (SJC)**. "Are you really connecting on an outreach versus just awaiting passenger traffic to come to your airport?"

Farrell also acknowledges that organizations need to stay connected with their fans, and he suggests airports do the same with their users.

"You need to stay on top of things," says Farrell. "You need to be relevant to the younger generation with the communications."

The Houston Rockets' Sheirr agrees, noting that a steady stream of communication or engagement allows fans to see a team as if it's a living, breathing entity. He adds that as younger people continue to join the ranks of fans, faster communications and social media have become increasingly important.



"We have Twitter, Facebook and Instagram," Sheirr explains. "People want to communicate constantly and instantly. You want your brand to be perceived as contemporary."

Humanizing the organization is key, says Earnhardt.

"Help fans of the airport connect with the airport by putting a human face on it like we do with sports teams," adds Earnhardt.

For the past several years, most airports have been striving to better reflect their communities by creating a sense of place, incorporating a city's local feel into concessions and overall terminal design. The shift has resulted in what Earnhardt thinks is a more genuine, local experience.

He notes how elements native to Pittsburgh are incorporated within **Pittsburgh International** (PIT), such as the statue of Franco Harris' Immaculate Reception.

"To have that kind of local flare reinforces identity," Earnhardt says.

Originally from Fresno, Calif., Wagoner says he likes how **Fresno Yosemite International** (FAT) has undergone renovations to incorporate more of the region.

"I enjoy the overall idea that they want to highlight the positive attributes that make people feel that when they get home, they're

enmeshed in their geographical territory and it makes them feel comfortable," says Wagoner.

Mickens says he thinks that creating that local, familiar experience is essential.

"Airports can truly make their terminals represent that city or region with local flair [with] boutique shops and restaurants from local owners," he says. "Every time I land in a city, even if it's just connecting, I want to explore the differences in their culture or food from that city."

## Team Identity

In addition to integrating into a community, many sports teams set an example by developing a core team identity, which is then constantly conveyed to fans and the broader community.

"The personality of an organization is extremely important," notes Berchtold. "From top to bottom, everyone needs to have one set sight and goal."

Farrell says Cardinals fans are an extension of the team's identity.

"They have the reputation of being knowledgeable, loyal, very fair and very supportive of this team and of the game of baseball," says Farrell. "Fans carry that attitude.

In turn, employees here know that they are taking care of the best fans in the world."

D'Andrea agrees that the development of an organization identity and loyal fans begins by focusing internally within the organization, which is the goal of CSE's employee-centric, service training program EC<sup>2</sup>.

"If the employee is set up for success, has a positive, supported and engaged experience, then that's automatically going to transfer to an exceptional customer experience," says D'Andrea. "It turns into a community of ambassadors representing the airport."

One goal of CSE's work with the Orioles is to help the team measure and monitor customer service to optimize employee experience resulting in the ideal fan experience. The intended result is not so much to develop an identity, but to establish a culture of service that will create loyalty.

"The more you can drive strategic planning behind developing that culture of service," D'Andrea notes, "the more and more impact it's going to have on that passenger." ■

We'd like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Ramon Lo at [ramon@airportrevenueews.com](mailto:ramon@airportrevenueews.com).

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