

# Service Fairness in Spectator Sport: The Importance of Voice and Choice on Customer Satisfaction

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## Abstract

This study examines how perceptions of fairness may influence sport spectators' satisfaction. An experimental design was utilized to determine how voice (whether or not administrators solicit customers' input) and choice (whether or not customers have a role in making decisions) can alter overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Further, this study investigates how financial inputs and the degree to which a customer considers himself/herself a fan may interact with these effects. Researchers collected data from 346 subjects. Each subject received one of eight (2 voice x 2 choice x 2 price) versions of a scenario representing an adverse outcome typical of a university athletic ticket policy. Results revealed the main effects of choice and price each influenced satisfaction, as subjects were less dissatisfied when students had a role in developing the policy and when the tickets were free. Significant differences did not exist for the main effect of voice or any of the interaction effects.

## Service Fairness in Spectator Sport: The Importance of Voice and Choice on Customer Satisfaction

Considering the unique relationships between sport organizations and sport fans, it is important to investigate how an organization's dealings with its customers

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can influence satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Perceptions of fairness in a sport context may differ from that of other service industries given the emotional nature of the allegiance sport fans demonstrate towards preferred teams and athletes. This increased emotional connection with a sport entity could result in individuals experiencing a heightened degree satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on the quality of interactions they have with the sport team or athlete. This positive or negative response to the sport entity would likely differ from that associated with a service provider that does not generate the same emotional response (e.g., insurance agent or auto mechanic). In addition, sports fans may have fewer options, and sensitivity to fairness issues increases when options are limited (Seiders & Berry, 1998). If treated unfairly by a fast-food restaurant, a customer could just travel another block to the next one; however, being treated unfairly by their favorite team presents a more difficult situation. For example, a fan of the Boston Red Sox who feels he or she has been treated unfairly by the team is not likely to switch to being a fan of the New York Yankees. Also, spectator sport is experiential, limiting service recovery options. In many industries, service providers can attempt to appease dissatisfied customers by providing compensation equal to or above the value of the service failure. However, spectator sporting events are unique, and those unique experiences are difficult to replace. Therefore, this study seeks to add to the sport management literature by exploring how elements of service fairness impact the satisfaction of sport spectators.

## Service Fairness

Organizational justice has long been an important management construct, and has recently received more attention in service industries (Clemmer & Schneider, 1996; Robbins, Jeffords, & Summers, 2002; Wirtz &

Mattila, 2004) and within sport management literature (Jordan, Gillentine, & Hunt, 2004; Mahony, Riemer, Breeding, & Hums, 2006; Whisenant & Jordan, 2006). Service fairness, the customer's perception of justice in a service firm's behavior, is based on the application of organizational justice theory to service environments (Clemmer & Schneider, 1996; Seiders & Berry, 1998). This line of inquiry is becoming increasingly important as fairness perceptions have been found to influence important outcomes such as customer retention, word-of-mouth referrals, and overall service satisfaction (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997; Mattila, 2001; McCollough, Berry, & Yadav, 2000). The concept of service fairness emphasizes the idea that marketers need to consider processes and relationships rather than focusing solely on outcomes (Clemmer & Schneider, 1996).

Customers evaluate service fairness based on the same dimensions as employees in an organizational setting: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Bowen, Gilliland, & Folger, 1999). Distributive justice is based on the perceived fairness of outcomes received by an individual (Greenberg, 1990). Procedural justice is based on the fairness of policies and procedures utilized by an organization in the decision-making process (Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999). The quality of treatment and degree of explanation provided by an organization during and after the decision-making process serves as the basis for interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986). These three constructs have been shown to have both an individual and collective influence on an individual's perception of fairness (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, 2001; Jordan, Turner, & DuBord, 2007). Therefore, while distributive fairness has been extensively researched, recent findings indicate the processes used to determine the outcomes may be as significant as the outcome itself, and thus more emphasis has been placed on the other dimensions of organizational justice. Leventhal (1980) identified several factors that tended to improve an individual's perception of procedural fairness. Two of these factors, consideration of all persons affected by a decision and suppression of personal bias in the decision-making process, have direct application in a service environment (Seiders & Berry, 1998). Specifically, these two antecedents of procedural justice may address whether the organization treats a specific subgroup the same as other customer groups, and whether the needs of specific subgroups are considered. Additionally, perceptions of procedural justice are often influenced by the amount of "choice" or "voice" the individual has in the development of policies used in decision making (Thibaut & Walker, 1975).

Choice refers to the amount of involvement the consumer has in the decision-making process. Allowing customers a choice in the selection of outcomes has been shown to generate positive emotional responses (Hui & Bateson, 1991; Cranage & Sujana, 2004) and to lessen dissatisfaction when outcomes are less than expected (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003). When consumers are allowed to make an informed choice, they are likely to perceive higher control over their experience and more responsibility for the outcome (Mattila & Cranage, 2005).

Voice refers to the amount of feedback a customer is able to provide regarding the procedures and practices of a business. The ability for customers to express their views or emotions about an issue has been found to alter perceptions regarding the quality of a service provider's actions (Sparks & McColl-Kennedy, 2001) and thus be an important determinant of customer satisfaction (Goodwin & Ross, 1990). According to Lind, Kanfer, and Early (1990) voice can impact customer perceptions even when the customers' input was not connected to decision making. They contend that this effect may be due to the fact that provision of a voice gives customers the sense that they have some influence on outcomes and that their opinions are valued by the service provider.

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#### *Interactive Effects*

While an increased amount of emphasis has been placed on customer perceptions of procedural justice, it is important that an organization not disregard the influence of distributive justice. Consumers enter into an exchange with a service provider with an expectation of the quality of outcome that will be provided by the organization. This expectation is in part, determined by the degree of input (e.g., money, time, etc.) required of the consumer. A consumer who perceives an equal input-output relationship with a business will be satisfied (Goodwin & Ross, 1992), while inequity arises when an outcome is inadequate given inputs (McCollough et al., 2000). Whereas most research concerns perceptions of distributive fairness relative to compensation in a service recovery setting, little research examines fairness perceptions in situations where compensation may be neither feasible nor desirable. For example, compensation may be appropriate for a restaurant customer who has received poorly cooked food. In this case, service recovery in the form of compensation may be entirely appropriate.

However, there are many situations where service recovery may not be appropriate. Consider major sporting events such as the NCAA Final Four or Super Bowl where the organization has few tickets to distribute to its supporters. These supporters may feel their contributions to the organization merits an opportunity to purchase tickets and feel dissatisfied when they are unable to. While the organizations may have a desire to alleviate dissatisfaction, compensation may not be appropriate. Further, the majority of research in this area assumes customers have invested the same inputs (e.g., paid the same price for the meal) but received dissimilar outputs. Much less research has focused on situations where customers have provided dissimilar inputs. This is particularly relevant for the sport industry as customers often pay different amounts (e.g., multiple ticket price levels, multiple donor levels, other forms of support, etc.).

The level of distributive fairness has a potential interactive effect with procedural fairness as perceptions of outcomes can be lessened or improved based on the policies used to arrive at those outcomes (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). While most research has looked at how procedures offset perceptions of outcomes, little has looked at how distributive fairness alters the importance of procedures. Specifically, will sport spectators care about having a voice or a choice when they are not paying for tickets? Will they care more when they are paying for tickets?

In addition, various customer segments are likely to have different evaluations of service experiences (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002). This concept has been examined in non-sport settings, where fairness issues have been found to be more important among highly identified employees (DeCremer, 2005), loyal customers (Robbins & Miller, 2004), and more involved customers (Varki & Wong, 2003). Of particular interest in this study is the difference between casual and devoted fans of the sport. Given that sports fans will have varying levels of attachment or loyalty to a particular sport it is possible these diverse groups would not view fairness issues equally.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the influence of service fairness on sport spectators' levels of customer satisfaction. Specifically, this study addresses how fairness influences customer satisfaction and investigates how voice (whether or not administrators solicit customers' input) and choice (whether or not customers have a role in making policy decisions) can alter overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction of sport consumers. Further, this study investigates how financial inputs (ticket price) and the level to which a customer identifies himself/herself as a fan of the sport may interact with these effects.

## Method

### *Setting*

The student ticketing process in intercollegiate athletics provides an ideal setting for this study for several reasons. Primarily, this context reflects the limited options sports consumers face as students cannot easily obtain the same tickets elsewhere (e.g., an Auburn student who is dissatisfied with the ticket policy can't easily switch allegiance to Alabama). Limited options increase sensitivity to fairness issues (Seiders & Berry, 1998). Secondly, recovery options are limited; therefore, marketers face challenges in finding alternate ways to reduce customer dissatisfaction. Finally, the likelihood of dissatisfaction is enhanced as students often base their satisfaction judgments on ideal levels of service—not what a service provider will do, but what they should do (Greenwell, 2007). Even though the athletic department may have worked to develop a policy it feels is fair given the various constraints it faces (few schools can offer unlimited free seating in the best sections), students may still perceive the policy as unfair if it does not meet their ideal standards.

Further, allocating tickets to students is an important task as student participation contributes to game atmosphere, and revenue from ticket sales or student activity fees is often a significant source of revenue for athletic departments. In addition, students are a key target market for future season ticket sales and athletic donations. Whether the athletic department is trying to fill empty seats or allocate a scarce number of tickets to a large number of students seeking admission, it is imperative to develop procedures to increase satisfaction, future attendance, and positive word of mouth.

### *Sample*

A convenience sample was drawn from students taking classes that had a sport or activity theme. These courses were not limited to any particular major and were open to all students. This method was favored in order to target students likely to be interested in sports and be part of the athletic department's target market. A broader sample of students not in the target market was not preferred as it would have likely generated data from a large number of students with no interest in ever attending, thereby skewing the results. In order to control for potential sample selection bias due to exposure to existing policies, data was collected from students attending three different NCAA Division I universities.

### *Procedure*

Each subject was asked to read a brief description of a student ticket policy representing a potentially dissatisfying encounter. Given few athletic departments have

the flexibility to offer the “perfect” package of attributes, ticket policies at most institutions are forced to include some aspect that is displeasing to students. Therefore, the scenario was designed to represent adverse outcomes typical of university athletic ticket policies, as exchanges stimulating strong negative consumer responses are more likely to increase the relevance of customer fairness perceptions (Seiders & Berry, 1998). Through a review of the literature (Greenwell, 2007; Greenwell, Popp, Jordan, & Brownlee, 2007) and consultations with athletic administrators and students, seat location was identified as an important issue for students. Therefore, subjects were presented with a scenario in which there had been a policy change and students were now relegated to poor seat locations (see Appendix 1). A field test was administered to students to identify any ambiguities, misunderstandings or other inadequacies with the wording of the items. Further, the field test was utilized to assess the realism of the scenario and the experimental manipulations.

Each subject received one of eight different conditions (2 voice x 2 choice x 2 price). Several measures were used to ensure each experimental group was equal. First, subjects were randomly assigned to each experimental group and subjects were divided evenly among scenarios. Second, each scenario and condition had roughly the same number of subjects from each school. Third, several criteria, such as frequency of

attendance and demographic variables, were compared to make sure treatment groups were similar.

To manipulate for choice, subjects were informed, “The athletic ticket policy was developed by the athletic department in conjunction with a committee of student leaders” in one condition, while subjects were informed, “The athletic ticket policy was developed by the athletic department” in the other condition. To manipulate for voice, subjects were informed, “The athletic department solicited opinions from students when developing the policy” in one condition, and

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subjects were informed that, “The athletic department did not solicit opinions from students before developing the policy.” To manipulate levels of distributive justice, half of the subjects were informed that the tickets were free, while the other half received a scenario in which students paid a discounted price for tickets.

Subjects completing the questionnaire were asked to read the scenario and answer a series of questions. To address satisfaction/dissatisfaction with athletic department ticket office students were told, “Please indicate your satisfaction with the athletic ticket office, regard-

**Table 1.**  
**Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Customer Satisfaction (n = 346)**

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1			
Voice	-0.282	0.158	-0.093
Choice	-0.389	0.157	-0.128*
Price	-0.684	0.157	-0.226**
Fan Level	-0.082	0.047	-0.092
Step 2			
Voice	-0.094	0.267	-0.031
Choice	-0.631	0.262	-0.208*
Price	-0.706	0.272	-0.233**
Fan Level	-0.084	0.083	-0.095
Price X Voice	-0.045	0.316	-0.013
Price X Choice	0.102	0.316	0.029
Fan Level X Voice	-0.098	0.096	-0.094
Fan Level X Choice	0.117	0.094	0.112

Note:  $R^2 = 0.085$  for Step 1;  $\Delta R^2 = 0.009$  for Step 2 ( $ps < 0.644$ )

\*  $p < 0.05$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table 2.**  
**Means for Satisfaction by each Experimental Condition**

Variable	Condition	Subjects	Satisfaction
Voice	Voice	173	-0.57
	No Voice	173	-0.81
Choice	Choice	173	-0.49
	No Choice	173	-0.88
Price	Free	173	-0.34
	Pay	173	-1.03

ing the incident described in the story” using a 7-point response scale (-3 to +3 with a neutral midpoint: 0) anchored with “Very Dissatisfied” and “Very Satisfied”. In order to classify students according to how much of a fan they considered themselves, subjects were asked to rate themselves as college basketball fans (-3 to +3 scale) anchored with “Not a fan at all” and “Very loyal fan” (James & Ridinger, 2002). Subjects were also asked to provide data regarding their frequency of attendance, sex, and class rank. Finally, subjects were asked their opinion as to who should have the most influence in deciding athletic ticket policies for students.

## Results

A total of 354 subjects completed the questionnaire and 346 were useable. Overall, respondents identified themselves college basketball fans (1.57 on a 7-point scale anchored with -3 “not a fan” and +3 “very loyal fan”) who frequently attended college basketball games (1.17 on a 7-point scale anchored with -3 “never” and +3 “often”).

Hierarchical regression was conducted to determine whether differences in satisfaction existed as a function of voice and/or choice and whether there were interaction effects due to price or the degree to which the student identified as a basketball fan. Each of the independent variables (voice, choice, price, fan level) was entered into the equation in the first step to test for main effects. Interaction terms were entered in the second step to determine whether price or fan level moderated the relationships between voice and choice and satisfaction. A statistically significant change in  $R^2$  would have indicated the presence of a moderator (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Results revealed choice ( $p = .014$ ) and price ( $p < .001$ ) each influenced satisfaction, as students were less dissatisfied when students had a role in developing the policy and when the tickets were free. Significant differences did not exist for voice or fan level. When the products of the moderators and the independent vari-

ables were entered, the change in  $R^2$  was not significant, indicating neither price nor fan level moderated the relationships. Regression results are found in Table 1. Means for satisfaction by each experimental condition are found in Table 2.

## Discussion

The findings from this research indicate choice plays an important role in customer satisfaction. These findings imply marketers have to pay attention to the procedures used to develop policies or risk alienating key stakeholders. Further, this study extends existing research by applying service fairness concepts to a sport setting. Sport provides a unique context for these concepts considering the distinct nature of the stakeholders, their relationships to the service providers, and the existence of psychological inputs in addition to monetary inputs.

Results suggest including stakeholders in the decision-making process may have an effect on overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Given that numerous restrictions make it challenging to develop policies that will meet all customers’ needs, it is important to involve customers in the decision-making process in order to minimize dissatisfaction. There are two potential explanations for this effect. First, including stakeholders in the decision-making process may create ownership in the outcomes. Thus stakeholders take more responsibility in the outcomes whether they are good or bad. They may be less likely to show disapproval for the policy knowing that customers were involved its development. This supports Leventhal’s (1980) proposition that consideration of all parties impacted by a decision will likely lead to positive perceptions of procedural justice. What is especially significant is that perceptions of procedural fairness have the ability to offset disappointment with less than expected outcomes. Spectators may not like the seat they are assigned; however, if the ticketing policies are perceived to be fair, dissatisfaction with the outcome will be lessened. Second, including stakeholders in the policy development process may

alleviate unreal expectations, and reducing unreal expectations can ultimately reduce dissatisfaction (Greenwell, 2007). For example, a student may want the best possible seats and expect to receive those seats. However, the additional information that their peers (student leaders) were involved in the decision-making process yet could not generate that ideal result may indicate that result was not possible, thereby reducing the unreal expectation.

It is also important to note that in the choice scenario used in this study, students did not have complete control of the decision-making process. Rather, the decision was developed by the athletic department in conjunction with a committee of student leaders. This finding suggests organizations do not necessarily have to give stakeholders total decision control, but rather involve the group or select representatives, in the decision-making process. This establishes that the stakeholder group is valued and that their concerns were considered when formulating the policy. Again, because decision makers are considering all groups affected by a decision it is more likely to result in positive perceptions of fairness and satisfaction with policies used by the organization.

Whereas choice alleviated dissatisfaction, voice had no significant effect on overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction. This result implies that merely soliciting the opinions of a particular stakeholder group rather than involving them in the decision-making policy may not be enough to impact satisfaction/dissatisfaction in cases with adverse outcomes. Even if the stakeholders' opinions influence policy, the stakeholders may not be satisfied. It is also conceivable that voice could have an effect opposite to what was intended. In this study, subjects may have been encouraged that their input was solicited, but discouraged because there was no indication their input was used. In cases such as this, voice can actually be a negative as a failure to address problems may lead to frustration or dissatisfaction (Blodgett et al., 1997; McCollough et al., 2000). This should present a concern for marketers in that their inaction to a complaint or suggestion could generate dissatisfaction.

As expected, subjects were less dissatisfied when tickets were free; however, price did not interact with the other variables, implying choice was equally important regardless of whether or not the customers were paying for tickets. This finding suggests sport marketers have to take into account indirect inputs in addition to direct inputs (price). In this study, students may have perceived they were providing indirect monetary inputs such as tuition or student fees or indirect psychological inputs such as arena atmosphere or emotional support. Also, sports fans may view themselves

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as an important stakeholder group and thus, their concerns regarding ticket policies must be considered regardless of how much they are paying for tickets.

Further, the level at which the student considered himself or herself a fan did not influence the relationship between service fairness and satisfaction, implying respondents with different levels of fandom found fairness to be an equally important influence on their satisfaction judgments. This finding may actually imply that relationship is complex and warrants further analysis. Specifically, customers with a stronger attachment to the sport may feel more entitled and have higher expectations of a service encounter (Robbins & Miller, 2004; Seiders & Berry, 1998). However, those effects may be offset by their love of the sport and unwillingness to consider alternatives (Tyler, 1989). For example, a loyal fan, feeling deserving of great seats due to years of support, may be disappointed when the seat locations do not match expectations. However, that fan may be able to overlook that disappointment considering the lack of other similar providers and the prohibitive emotional costs of switching loyalties to another sport or another team. This would differ from a loyal restaurant customer who may express that dissatisfaction by switching to another restaurant.

In sum, this study suggests that dissatisfaction in a service such as ticketing may be alleviated by including stakeholders in the development of allocation procedures. The majority of the research in this area has focused on situations surrounding service failure and/or subsequent recovery efforts (Hoffman & Kelley, 2000; Holloway, Wang, & Parish, 2005; Huang & Lin, 2005; McCollough et al., 2000; Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Smith et al., 1999; Sparks & McColl-Kennedy, 2001). While these studies focus on post-failure service recovery strategies such as compensation and complaint management, the findings of this study extend the existing literature by suggesting more inclusive policy development may be an effective proactive strategy to reduce the potential for customer dissatisfaction. Further, findings from this study suggest the relationship between service fairness and satisfaction may be complex in sport settings due to the nature of sport customers (e.g., non-monetary inputs, fan loyalty) and the nature of the sport industry (few service alternatives).

## Limitations and Future Research

It should be noted that this study is limited in that students were used as the population for the study. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution as the subjects in the sample already had a relationship with the service provider. To further investigate, future research should examine how service fairness may influence other stakeholder groups such as season ticket subscribers, athletic donors, club members, etc.

In addition, future research should expand on the concepts of voice and choice. For example, research could investigate the degree of choice or methods of choice (group, representative, or individual). Or, future research could examine methods to improve the effect of voice. In addition, other forms of justice such as interactional justice and informational justice could be investigated as potential strategies to reduce dissatisfaction.

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## Appendix 1

### *Scenario and Experimental Conditions*

The policy used to determine how basketball tickets are allocated to students at your university has been changed. (Tickets are now free for students/Students will pay a reduced price for tickets), but season ticket buyers and the general public will get better seat locations than students. The athletic ticket policy was developed (by the athletic department in conjunction with a committee of student leaders/by the athletic department). The athletic department (solicited/did not solicit) opinions from students when developing the policy.

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