

Home fare advantage: An examination of the role of food and beverages in Atlanta sport fans' sport experience

Introduction

In May 2017, the AMB Group, owners of the National Football League's (NFL) Atlanta Falcons and Major League Soccer's (MLS) Atlanta United, garnered headlines by announcing major changes to their food and beverage service at Mercedes-Benz Stadium (MBS). First, the move from the Georgia Dome to MBS allowed for a large increase in concession points of sale (64%) and beer taps (1,264; Rovell, 2018). Additionally, AMB Group reduced concession prices as part of the MBS "Fan First Menu," making the facility's concessions the lowest-priced food and beverages in major professional sports (Rovell, 2016). These two measures detailed a commitment to cost, efficiency, and faster service of concessions for patrons of the facility.

In addition to these elements, AMB Group placed emphasis on greater quality and variety of concessions such as elaborate chef-made hamburgers, sandwiches, and salads as well as notable local and regional brands including Chick-fil-A, Jim 'N Nick's, and Sublime Doughnuts appeared at MBS (Figueras, 2018). Such enhancement of food and beverage quality and variety is not unique within professional sports as organizations throughout major and minor league professional sports have introduced varieties of new food and beverage options in recent years (Slavich, Rufer, & Greenhalgh, 2018). However, the combination of quality and variety along with reduced price and improved service is, to date, unique to MBS. With the organization's stated primary goal to use food and beverages to improve the overall fan experience (Muret, 2016), the purpose of the current study is to examine factors that contribute to fans' overall experience. Thus, the study is framed around the following research questions:

RQ1: What are fans' perceptions of various component of MBS' improved food and beverage operations?

RQ2: How do fans' perceptions of MBS' food and beverage operations compare to other facility/event food and beverage operations?

RQ3: What role do food and beverages play in fans' overall MBS sport experience?

Literature Review

Previous investigations into the role of concessions within the sport experience has exhibited fans' displeasure with price, quality, variety, and service of food and beverage operations. Early research of the topic by Wakefield and Sloan (1995) revealed college football fans possessed dissatisfaction with concession pricing and desired for more variety and higher quality. Similarly, college basketball fans (Kahle, Aiken, Dalakas, & Duncan, 2003; Kelley & Turley, 2001) and Australian sport fans (Parry, Hall, & Baxter, 2017) found concessions were unimportant and unsatisfactory. Finally, Slavich, Dwyer, and Rufer (2017) surveyed international sports fans who also gave low ratings to sporting events' concessions. While the results of early studies on concessions should not be surprising due to the lack of focus by sport

organizations, recent findings have not supported the current emphasis on food and beverage quality and variety throughout sports.

Method and Analysis

The current study will look to ascertain MBS event spectators' perceptions of food and beverages, and specifically, which factors (e.g., quality, variety, price, service, etc.) are of most importance. A multi-method data collection process will be employed. Data collection will involve on-site distribution of open-ended surveys to spectators attending Atlanta United home games during Summer 2019. Data will be collected at multiple games by the research team and feature systematic random sampling to ensure a representative sample of participants. Follow-up interviews with select individuals will then occur following on-site data collection. The follow-up interviews will be designed to address research team questions developed from initial survey responses. The research team anticipates to collect 50-75 surveys with 15-20 follow-up interviews. Access to United games, as well as incentive to participate in follow-up interviews will be attained through existing relationships between the research team and AMB Group.

Data analyses will occur in two stages. First, survey responses will independently analyzed by each member of the research team to determine themes. These themes will then drive the determination of the questions for the follow-up interviews. Interviews will similarly be analyzed by each member of the research team to confirm themes.

Results and Implications

The AMB Group has invested significant financial and human resources toward improvement of food and beverage operations. Further, the recent emphasis of food and beverages across sports as well as the specific focus on the AMB Group's method and success are of great focus to other sport organizations who view MBS' food and beverage operations as a potential model to replicate. Understanding this rationale, the opportunity to collect in-depth data from spectators attending MBS events is of great value to the sport industry.

The results of the data collected should yield several findings. First, results should shed light on the factors of food and beverage operations that are of most importance to MBS event spectators. The research team also expects to learn how event spectators are affected cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally. By seeking spectators' perceptions of comparison event food and beverage operations, results should yield which factors of concessions operations may impact spectator attendance behavior. While the study's results may not be generalizable, the research team believes the data collected from the on-site surveys as well as the follow-up interviews will provide results that will exhibit the true impact of MBS' food and beverage operations. The research team aims to utilize the results to design a follow-up, quantitative survey for use at MBS and other facilities and anticipate possessing a practical and far-reaching impact.

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