A-League champions Brisbane Roar. Over 1/3 of their fans attend because of friends and family.

So why don't they come?

Daniel Lock and Kevin Filo believe that learning from non-fans is an essential means in leveraging consumption.

The study of sport consumers has morphed into a key fascination for academics and practitioners, a fascination that stems from a continued interest in understanding why people choose to commit to and identity with sporting teams.

Much of this research is driven by the practical knowledge that highly identified and committed fans spend more money on team products, attend more games, display their affiliation overtly and define a large part of their social identity through a sporting team. To date, researchers have explored the motives, demographics, habits, rituals, identification and attachment of sport fans in attempts to provide information on the best means to develop fan bases.

However, by focussing on fans or existing consumers only, non-fans, who present a potential font of information, are excluded. In considering the benefits of exploring a spectrum of consumers from fans to non-fans it is important to focus on three questions: how are the perceptions and attitudes of non-fans different to fans?; what leads to neutral and negative perceptions of teams?; and what can teams learn from this approach?

Earlier this year we published an 'awareness spectrum' in an article, '*The downside of being irrelevant and aloof*'

in the *Sport Management Review*. This conceptual framework was developed to understand the diverse range of perceptions and attitudes which exist in relation to sporting teams. It built on previous work *(by Funk and James)* that provided a framework of processes that operate in the transition of non-fans into fans through four stages of psychological connection. Funk and James, 2001 article, *The Psychological Continuum Model* (PCM) [also published in the *Sport Management Review*] identified four stages in an individual's psychological connection to sport; awareness; attraction; attachment and allegiance - a series of processes, which lead to increased levels of psychological connection with teams. The processes leading to increases in psychological

connection are a vital consideration in developing a loyal fan base. Another key area of understanding relates to the reasons that people do not transition up the PCM stages to become a fan.

Previously awareness was considered as a space that non-fans inhabited prior to the progression to an attraction to attend games. However, we have found that 'aware' consumers hold an array of perceptions about sporting teams, which range from positive and engaged through to negative and disengaged. Positive perceptions correlate with the transition to positive team-based outcomes including fanship and identification. Yet, this forms only one piece of a broader puzzle. We have found that people with neutral perceptions of a team respond apathetically and negative perceivers will respond by trying to actively separate themselves from sporting teams (disidentify). Each of the three perceptions and outcomes described provide disparate behaviours in relation to sporting teams, which is why understanding how they occur is important.

Since the 1970s research into sport consumers has frequently reported the importance of success in the development of fan identification. There is the 'basking in reflected glory' phenomena, whereby fans overtly associated themselves with a winning team. This well trodden theory highlighted a core team characteristic (success), which led to positive team perceptions and consequently, identification. Other examples include teams, which are perceived as having a positive impact on the community in which they are based, a star player, or another positive attribute. But, in the crowded Australian marketplace positive perceptions tell one third of the story, which leads to a core question: what happens when perceptions of sporting teams are neutral, or negative?

Neutral perceptions are fascinating on two levels: First, because they are generally ignored in studies of sport consumers; and second, in all the studies that we have conducted so far, apathy represents the largest cross-section of the respondents. Apathy includes individuals that do not identify

or disidentify and occurs for two primary reasons: first, when the characteristics of the sport or team are beyond personal interests; second, because the individual does not perceive any benefit from identification or disidentification. Apathy becomes interesting because essentially it defines a group of the market that lack sufficient motivation to attend on their own.

Sporting grounds Australia-wide are proliferated with apathetic consumers who are cajoled into attending by some external force, such as: friends, family members or a canny piece of advertising. A recent project conducted at Griffith University with the A-League's Brisbane Roar, showed that 36% of respondents reported that friends or family were the major reason that they attended. Apathetic consumers that lack the external force to catalyse attendance will not attend. A separate study with Manly United Football Club of the NSW Premier League highlighted two further apathetic traits.

First, because of a lack of internal motivation to attend, the apathetic group reported time, family or distance constraints, which inhibited attendance. This directly contrasts with people who adjust their weekly plans and schedule to accommodate match attendance *(Lock, Taylor, Funk & Darcy, In press)*.

Second, the apathetic group also reported a lack of knowledge about game times and a dearth of friends and family to attend with.

For teams and clubs, this represents a core area for marketing activity and ticketing efforts. We know that identified fans will cajole their friends to attend. We also understand that the friends who are cajoled into attending are most likely apathetic. However, other research has demonstrated that attending games and directly experiencing the atmosphere, spectacle and excitement is sufficient to develop identification or allegiance *(Funk & Pastore, 2000)*. Clubs need to be aware of this and reward fans that spruik the club to their friends and family. Additionally, they need to provide

ticketing initiatives, which reward friendship groups who buy tickets together.

While apathy leads to a lack of feeling toward sporting teams or clubs, negative perceptions are sufficient for some people to actively boycott organisations. A glance at sporting clubs around the world seems to support this notion, best illustrated by FC United of Manchester *(pictured above)*. The corporatisation of the English Premier League, foreign ownership and increasing disconnection led a group of Manchester United fans to disidentify from the club they had supported for decades and develop their own team – one which represented the community and the values deemed to be important. In the research we have conducted to date, our data has confirmed the notion that negative perceptions form when the perceptions of a team's values and characteristics are incongruent with those of the individual.

In a study of a community based sport club in Sydney, we observed a few factors, which led to negative perceptions. A salient example related to the club's role in the local community. Respondents deemed the club to have a distinct responsibility to give back to the local community in which it was based. This involved an expectation that the club would recruit and develop local players (from within the local association region). Each expectation related back to the core facet that the club in question was part funded by community participants'

registration fees. Because these value based expectations were not met, this led to negative perceptions.

This example becomes more interesting when adding context to the perception. Historically, the club in question recruited more than 50% of its players from outside of the local community. However, at the time of survey, 14 of 18 first team members were recruited from and developed via the club's development system. This finding underlines the importance of research. Perceptions are psychological creations and, as such, are based upon the judgement of a group based on the information available. In the example described, the core value that the negative perception formed around was misperceived. While the recruitment and development strategies of the club were a problem historically, efforts to improve the development of local talent had been achieved. The problem for the club post this project was promoting the local talent at the club and highlighting the value they place on developing local juniors to shift the existing perception.

For sport and leisure organisations, developing an understanding of why people have a neutral perception, which leads to apathy, or a negative perception, which leads to disidentification, can be a highly confronting experience.

The Awareness Spectrum is grounded in a desire to learn how team or club values are perceived and how this influences the likelihood of fanship and consumption. For those who want to develop attachment and allegiance to their team, club or product its framework cannot be ignored.

Dr Daniel Lock and Dr Kevin Filo are both Lecturers at Griffith University in the Griffith Business School, Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management. Both authors represent the Centre of Tourism Sport and Service Innovation at Griffith University.

Fans back Sydney Olympic in the NSW Premier League (below) while Olympic's Under 15s team defend against Blacktown FC in the NSW Premier Youth League (opposite).