

APPLYING RELATIONSHIP MARKETING PRINCIPLES IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING: AN ADAPTATION OF THE EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIP TYPOLOGY

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Customer retention and the nurturing of relationships is now a top priority for most firms. As organizations face intense competition, mature markets, and shrinking margins, relationship marketing has become a necessary marketing initiative for retaining valuable customers. However, relatively little research has been conducted validating the strategy within the context of marketing within higher education, and marketing within intercollegiate athletics.

This study employs the exchange relationship typology developed by Johnson and Selnes (2004) within the context of recruiting Division I student-athletes and developing their relationship with the university. The findings illustrate how advanced relationship marketing principles can be implemented to assist universities in their daunting quest to develop successful student-athlete relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Dramatic changes in the competitive environment have prompted many firms to rethink the fundamental role of marketing. As part of this initiative, relationship marketing is proving to be a significant change in both marketing theory and practice (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Considered to be a major reshaping of the field (Webster 1992), relationship marketing may represent a genuine paradigm shift (Kotler 1991; Parvatiyar, Sheth and Whittington 1992) that organizations in the non-profit sectors may also find of great benefit.

Relationship marketing is typically described as a process of establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Berry and Parasuraman 1991; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Gronroos (2000) goes further in defining relationship marketing as the process of identifying, establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and, when necessary, terminating

relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met with mutual satisfaction. Andersen (2001) asserts that the primary purpose of relationship marketing is to reduce exchange uncertainty and enhance customer collaboration and commitment.

The importance of collaborative interactions has made the nurturing of relationships a top priority for most firms (Day 2000). Organizations have discovered that relationships with loyal customers can be extremely profitable in the long run, while lost customer relationships are often too costly to regain (Page, Pitt and Berton 1995; Reicheld 1996). Additionally, organizations with firmly committed customers and other key stakeholders can better withstand the cyclical nature of most business environments and threats from aggressive challengers.

Given the environmental changes taking place within many industries of the services sector, relationship marketing is clearly a powerful tool of differentiation. Berry and Parasuraman (1991) state that within services industries "relationships are built on the foundation of mutual commitment." Therefore, it is

anticipated that relationship marketing in the services marketing discipline will develop and be further delineated and subsequently implemented in this extremely important sector of the U.S. economy.

Relationship marketing is also making strong inroads with non-profit organizations (Gruen, Summers and Acito 2000). This is specifically true in the marketing of higher education. Mael and Ashforth (1992) found that people who participate in university activities develop a more salient identity related to the university. As a result, universities engaged in relationship marketing may expect stronger long-term relationships and higher levels of giving (Bruggink and Siddiqui 1995; Harrison, Mitchell and Peterson 1995).

Marketing within higher education also extends to intercollegiate athletics and the unique focus of recruiting, developing, and retaining student-athletes while managing respective fiscal responsibilities of a Division I athletic program. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governs 327 Division I member schools with approximately 350 paid professionals (NCAA Online 2005). In many cases, an intercollegiate athletic program may be the most visible aspect of the entire university (Sorenson 2003), and the financial implications of athletic programs can be daunting. According to data released in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, average total revenue for a Big Ten Conference athletic program in 2003-2004 was \$38.46 million with an average annual profit of \$12.27 million per program (Pennsylvania's Marketplace of Ideas 2005). Revenues generated from major sports such as football or basketball typically provide critical sources of funding for the entire athletic program given that nearly 74 percent of all student-athletes participate in non-revenue generating sports (NCAA Online 2003a).

Student-athletes and the universities at which they are enrolled operate in unique consumer-supplier capacities. Service customers are routinely present during the production of a service and contribute valuable input to the

supplier as the service is produced and simultaneously consumed. However, not only is a student-athlete the *consumer* of numerous university provided services (education, housing, meals, books, etc.), but he/she is also the *supplier* of services (athletic performance/entertainment) for the university and the *co-producer* of services essential to the operations of an athletic program.

Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) describe co-production as the extent to which the consumer is involved in the production of the association's products, services, and/or marketing. Co-production is especially evident as an inherent aspect of services marketing referred to as the inseparability between the production and consumption of the service. While existing research emphasizes the importance of the co-producing role of the customer surrounding the actual service encounter (Bowen 1986; Kelley, Donnelly and Skinner 1990), few industries reflect the tremendous depth in which the student-athlete and the university are inextricably linked.

Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner (1998) find that consumers engage in relationships to gain a variety of social benefits (including personal recognition, friendship, rapport, and social support), special treatment benefits (such as economic benefits in the form of price breaks, extra attention, and services not normally provided to non-regular customers) and confidence benefits (feelings of confidence in the service provider). A student-athlete is the quintessence of a co-producing consumer that could conceivably benefit significantly from a well-orchestrated relationship marketing program. As De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder and Iacobucci (2001) state, an understanding of the consumer is important because both parties must perceive a relationship to be mutually beneficial if the relationship is to be successful in the long-term.

As co-producers, student-athletes are naturally very involved in the exchange process. Research finds that high-involvement consumers, such as student-athletes, differ

significantly from low involvement consumers with regard to specific expectations. This consumer group typically has high expectations for service providers and believes they will be treated fairly and involved in solutions when issues threaten their success (Varki and Wong 2003).

Conditions for a well-designed relationship marketing initiative are further facilitated due to the high level of personal contact found between a university's staff and student-athletes (Pressey and Mathews 2000). Teachers, tutors, advisors, administrators, coaches, trainers, etc. can be in daily contact with student-athletes and in many cases on extremely personal levels. Opportunities for the university and student-athletes to develop strong, long-lasting relationships arise frequently and can conceivably be an integral part of a relationship marketing program.

Termination costs are another key consideration in the relationship between the student-athlete and the university. While competition for customers by rival firms can be severe (Day 2000) and costs associated with lost customers extreme, universities and student-athletes face their own set of relationship growth and retention issues. For the university, the monetary expenditures spent on recruiting, training, educating, and developing a student-athlete are difficult to estimate, but undoubtedly significant. For the student-athlete, transferring to another university may forbid him/her from competing in his/her sport for a year, require the adjustment to an entirely new institution with different academic requirements, facilities coaches and teammates. In addition, a potential opportunity cost typically associated with transferring to another school may include a delay in graduation. Considering these extremely high switching costs, there is an inherent interest on the part of both the school and the student-athlete to maintain a high quality relationship that will benefit both parties on a long-term basis (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987).

Several authors ascertain that customers can differ in their relationships with firms on a continuum from having merely transactional to highly relational bonds (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987). Relationship marketing theory suggests organizations should analyze the position of their customers on a well-developed continuum of exchanges in order to tailor the very nature of products and services offered with obvious hopes of moving a customer from one position on the continuum to the next (Anderson and Narus 1991). Over twenty-five years ago, Scanzoni (1979) identified the stages two organizations could experience during a business relationship. But it is the recent work by Johnson and Selnes (2004) that clearly delineates, via a typology of exchange relationships, the stages a consumer can go through en route to a well-established, long-term, co-producing relationship sought by both the university and its student-athletes.

The Johnson and Selnes (2004) typology consists of four exchange relationships that evolve over time. Starting with "Customers as Strangers" and progressing to "Customers as Acquaintances," then "Customers as Friends" and ultimately "Customers as Partners," the authors identify customer needs and wants unique to each stage and provide insight into how firms may accommodate the customers' progression along the continuum:

- (1) **Strangers to Acquaintances:** Strangers are customers and suppliers in a preawareness and/or pretransaction point in time. Once a transaction has taken place the supplier and customer become acquaintances.
- (2) **Acquaintances to Friends:** As firms provide unique offerings that meet more specific needs of customers their customers come to trust the uniqueness and a friendship is formed typically around a competitive advantage offered by the firm. Activities that link customers can also be unique and more difficult to imitate especially as the two parties' relationship grows.

- (3) **Friends to Partners:** Once a strong relational commitment is achieved predicated on high degree of cooperation, friends become partners with the firm. Collaborative activities form a strong bond between both the supplier and the customer and a high degree of trust serves as a cornerstone for an on-going relationship. (Johnson and Selnes 2004)

With regards to university student-athletes, NCAA standards state that an American student-athlete becomes a prospective student-athlete on the first day that he/she begins the ninth grade (NCAA Online 2003b). Only through the successful progression from prospective student-athlete (or stranger) to fully committed co-producer (or partner) can a university and student-athlete hope to fully appreciate the synergy of a committed relationship.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were implemented at a large, public, Midwestern university with a Division I athletic program. The intent of the research was to capture the university's relationship with the student-athletes sixteen months after they had first arrived on campus. The project focused on the intricate thoughts and beliefs of student-athletes as they reflect on their relationship with the university and the evolution of this relationship over time. Qualitative methods have the power to take the researcher into the minds and lives of the respondents (McCracken 1988). Throughout the research process, the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was utilized. In this study, theory evolved while research was conducted and data was collected and analyzed (Strauss and Corbin 1994). As VanMaanen (1979) succinctly states, "less theory, better facts; more facts, better theory" (p. 539).

Long Interviews

Grant McCracken's (1988) long interview approach was selected because it can generate rich, in-depth data from privacy-centered individuals living highly segmented lives, while still respecting the respondents' hectic schedules. In this way, the long interview format encouraged the sharing of information in a less structured format and yet lent itself to the busy lifestyles of student-athletes in this study. As a result, the long interview approach allowed the researchers to collect data that was both abundant and manageable.

McCracken's (1988) methodological suggestions were implemented throughout the data collection process to preserve the quality of the data. For example, each long interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, the researcher's thoughts and reactions were recorded in a journal prior to and immediately following each interview. Easier, more comfortable questions were asked at the beginning of the interview in order to establish a trusting rapport and allow for the asking of increasingly open-ended questions. A concerted effort was made to refrain from active listening as this violates the law of non-direction (McCracken 1988).

Sample

The sample group consisted of 134 student-athletes that were all part of the same incoming class and were completing the first semester of their sophomore year in college. Student-athletes in the sample group were randomly contacted via telephone and 24 individuals agreed to be interviewed in person for approximately one hour. A stratified effort to reflect the attributes and demographics (e. g., sport, gender, ethnicity) of the student-athlete cohort sample guided the otherwise random selection process. An effort was also made to interview a disproportional amount of respondents from the revenue sports (football, men's and women's basketball) since they reflect the university's largest monetary

investment. While these student-athletes were less than midway through their collegiate experience, they had experienced life as student-athletes and were able to relate positive and/or negative feelings toward the university.

Twenty-four interviews were scheduled and 19 student-athletes were present for their interviews. The respondents consisted of 12 male student-athletes and seven female student-athletes. The sample size included 13 white respondents, five African-American respondents, and one Latino respondent. The respondents participated in the following sports: wrestling, softball, women's soccer, football, men's gymnastics, baseball, women's swimming, women's volleyball, men's basketball, women's basketball, women's golf, men's cross country and track. Three respondents had recently made difficult decisions to permanently leave their teams and were included in the study to avoid potential bias of interviewing only those respondents who remained actively involved in their sport.

Data Collection

The university's academic services provided assistance for conducting the interviews. The director provided names for the members of the incoming class of student-athletes from the previous year and contact information was obtained on the university's webmail. An initial screening was conducted to determine the student-athlete's sport and year in school. For the most part, the interviews were held at the academic services building and at the training table for scholarship student-athletes.

FINDINGS

Following the long interview data collection process, transcripts for each student-athlete were carefully analyzed using the qualitative software program Atlas ti. The Typology of Exchange Relationships (Johnson and Selnes 2004) provided further guidance in the analysis process in determining which stage of the typology the respondent could be categorized: **strangers** exhibited *attraction* to the university;

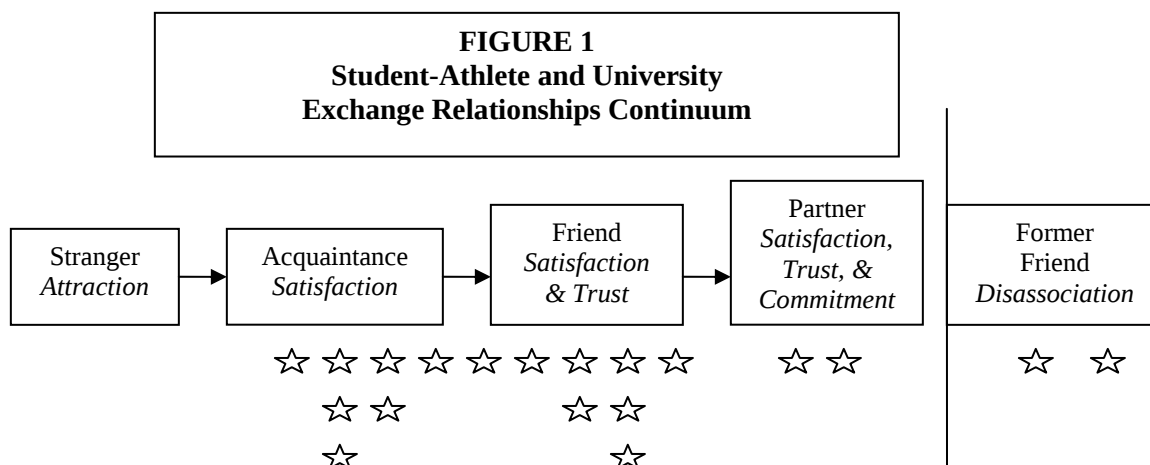
acquaintances exhibited *satisfaction*; **friends** exhibited *satisfaction and trust*; and **partners** exhibited *satisfaction, trust, and commitment*.

While exploring the student-athlete as customer of and supplier for the university, the respondents seemed to fit within a category of the Typology of Exchange Relationship (Johnson and Selnes 2004) at various levels. For example, several respondents seemed to qualify as being high in one category (e.g., high acquaintance) while being close to low in the next (e.g., low friend). See Figure 1. Given this finding, the typology would be more accurately portrayed as a continuum rather than definitive categories of consumers. Following the analysis of the transcripts, the typology was used as a relationship marketing tool to position all nineteen respondents as follows.

Stranger

During their recruitment process, each of the student-athletes interviewed was at one time a stranger and possessed a certain level of attraction toward the university and its athletic program prior to signing a national letter of intent to enroll at the institution. During the long interviews, respondents were asked to elaborate on the attributes that guided their college selection process. While all of the respondents expressed an attraction to the university as recruits, their decisions were based on a wide variety of attributes:

- (1) Preparation for a professional career
- (2) Media exposure given to team
- (3) Friend or relative is/was an alumnus
- (4) Distance from permanent home
- (5) Quality of athletic facilities
- (6) History of the sport's success at the university
- (7) Academic counseling support
- (8) Academic reputation of the department of desired major
- (9) Desired major was offered at the university
- (10) Overall academic reputation of the university's faculty
- (11) Level of athletic competition



- (12) Relationship developed with team members prior to decision
- (13) Relationship developed with coaches prior to decision
- (14) Opportunity to play right away

The above attributes varied in importance depending upon the individual respondent. In addition, while serving as a positive for one student-athlete, the same attribute could serve as a negative for another student-athlete. Some student-athletes emphasized numerous attributes in their decision to attend the university and others focused primarily upon one or two attributes.

Acquaintance

Once a recruit signs a national letter of intent to participate in a sport at the institution, they are no longer considered a stranger, but an acquaintance. Many of the respondents remained in the acquaintance category after sixteen months at the university, but some had advanced to the friend or partner stage. As garnered from the long interviews, the following factors were discovered to have influenced the student-athletes' relationship with the university at the acquaintance, friend, and partner levels:

- (1) Celebrity status
- (2) Academic support
- (3) Travel
- (4) Student-athlete academic stereotype
- (5) Coaches' philosophy
- (6) Relationship with coaches
- (7) Homesickness
- (8) Cultural change
- (9) Student-athlete paradox
- (10) Pressure to perform (sport)
- (11) Pressure to perform (academic)
- (12) Injury rehabilitation
- (13) Sickness
- (14) Depression
- (15) Time management
- (16) Travel
- (17) Finances

Using Johnson and Selnes' Typology (2004) as the analytical guideline, eight respondents qualified as acquaintances as determined by their statements in the long interviews that exhibited a basic level of satisfaction with the university. These responses indicated that they considered the university to be on parity with the industry standard for higher education and athletics. While these respondents appeared to be generally satisfied with the university, they did not exhibit a substantial amount of trust

toward the individuals with whom they had extended contact.

In order to provide insight into the discourse shared by the respondents during the long interviews, examples of student-athletes representing several positions on the continuum are provided. J.D. was a respondent who could be categorized as an acquaintance because he was generally satisfied with the university but at a basic level:

*"We have a college life that's unique,
that not many people get to do."
- J.D., football player*

J.D. had encountered many negative experiences during the short period of time that he had been at the university. Some positive experiences, however, kept his perception of the university in line with that of the industry standard. As an incoming freshman, J.D. broke his foot the first day of practice and had surgery in which a pin was placed in his foot. He returned to practice after just four weeks only to discover that the bone in his foot was breaking again and would require an additional surgery. For much of his freshman year, J.D. was expected to get from class to class wearing a boot on the injured foot, walking with the assistance of crutches, and relying on the bus for transportation. Because he felt like a "big giant with toothpicks," he eventually skipped many classes which caused his grades to suffer and increased his feelings of depression. Although he had improved each semester since the initial injury, he felt stereotyped by professors and teaching assistants who had singled him out as a "big, dumb football player." He felt a lot of pressure "from the whole nation" to perform academically and athletically. J.D. appeared to be somewhat outgoing and regretted that he did not have time to have much of a social life. Due to the regimented schedule of a student-athlete, he was able to go home for only three weeks out of the year and he admitted to getting homesick on occasion.

On the positive side, J.D. felt fortunate to be obtaining his degree from an institution with

such a strong academic reputation. It was a thrill to have the opportunity to play in such an elite conference, many times in front of 100,000 fans or more. J.D. was very proud that his team won the conference championship this year and was to compete in a prestigious bowl game. He enjoyed the celebrity involved with being a student-athlete and welcomed any opportunity to speak to the media.

While these positives appeared to keep J.D. at a minimal level of satisfaction, he could transfer to a comparable university at this point in his career without much personal cost or effort. However, J.D. did not exhibit a level of trust with the university due to the multiple injuries that he and his teammates had incurred upon their arrival to the university. Unlike respondents in the friend category, J.D. felt as if his future with the university was uncertain.

Friend

Six respondents were differentiated and considered to be in the friend category due to their expression of, not only satisfaction, but also trust toward the university. They did not, however, exhibit a strong commitment to the university at the time of the interview. The sense of trust was reflected in comments that related to three additional attributes:

- (1) Sense of belonging
- (2) Coaches' commitment to the team
- (3) Sense of family
- (4) Acceptance by teammates

According to the Typology of Exchange Relationships (Johnson and Selnes 2004), friends reach this level of trust by receiving a differentiated experience adapted to a specific segment of the market. Megan was an example of a respondent that demonstrated a high level of trust toward the university in spite of her many challenges with illness and stress, and thus was considered a friend according to the typology:

"The three coaches, they really look out for you. Our trainer is just unreal. She's like my mom away from home, so that's comforting."

When initially asked to describe what she was looking for when selecting a college to attend, Megan did not list the usual attributes such as academic reputation or a winning soccer program. She simply stated, "I wanted to be an athlete. I wanted to be a student." Her answer to the question embodies the budding relationship between the student-athlete and the university. During her official visit as a recruit, she was pleased to find that the teammates were "so welcoming and caring. It's like a little family." In spite of the many obstacles she faced at the university, Megan had a great deal of trust and respect for the university because her coaches, trainer, academic advisor, and teammates offered her much support along the way.

This support was particularly evident when she contracted mononucleosis. According to Megan, her illness was most likely compounded by emotional stress and competing in a soccer match while fighting a fever when temperatures plunged below zero degrees Fahrenheit during the match. Throughout the interview, Megan sat with her pale face downward and explained through her strained, yet steely, voice how those around her responded to her illness. Although she really wanted to continue participating, the head coach and trainer refused to let her even practice with the team until she was completely recovered. The assistant coaches and academic advisor communicated with her professors to inform them of her illness. During her recovery, teammates offered her rides to class and called her periodically when they were at the conference banquet and preparing to compete for the championship.

Despite the challenges associated with her illness, Megan exhibited satisfaction and complete trust that these individuals would help her manage the immense pressure of being both a student and an athlete. While she trusted individuals from both the academic and athletic aspects of her college experience, it appeared that one more major obstacle could profoundly alter her satisfaction and trust in the university and athletic program. Hence, Megan was considered a friend, but had not demonstrated

the commitment level to be considered a partner.

Partner

Respondents that could be categorized as partners expressed not only satisfaction, trust, but also commitment to the university. Two respondents portrayed a level of commitment toward the university after being on campus for only 16 months. Commitment was expressed in their comments relating to the following attributes:

- (1) Role acceptance
- (2) Contribution recognition
- (3) Building character
- (4) Learning the "game of life"

Partners feel they have received not just a differentiated experience, but one that is customized and adapted with resources specifically to their individual needs according to the Typology of Exchange Relationships (Johnson and Selnes 2004). Shay was an excellent example of someone who considered herself a partner of the university because she demonstrated a high level of satisfaction, trust, and commitment. This commitment was particularly evident throughout her discourse in which she often appeared to be selling the university to the researcher during the long interview.

"It's kind of like you're playing the game of softball, but you're also playing the game of life."

- Shay, softball player

Although Shay had been at the university the same amount of time as the other respondents, she exhibited an unusual amount of maturity that reflected not just satisfaction and trust, but also commitment. Shay came to the university with the unique role of building the program as a member of the first Division I softball team to ever compete at the institution. Always using "we," she spoke of the team's goals: win the conference, qualify for regional competition, and play in the world college series. Shay's positive nature and high energy level throughout the interview were contagious as

she spoke highly of the university. During the entire interview, Shay was selling the school. She explained that academics were very important to her and “knowing that this institution is one of the top ten public universities is just amazing.” She felt that this level of excellence could be found at many levels of the university and that “people will do anything in their power to help you succeed.” Coming from California, it eased the pressure of making new friends by having fifteen instant teammates. These friendships seem to have grown as she was living with five teammates at the time of the study and on many occasions, others from the team dropped by to socialize.

Due to her love of the sport and the school, she expressed a desire to stay on after her eligibility was finished and coach as a graduate assistant coach. At this point in her career, Shay believed that she had already been rewarded “ten times over.” Part of the reason was because the experience had taught her so much about “the game of life.” She learned how to navigate the highs and lows, obstacles and triumphs, particularly related to her recent leg injury. As a catcher, Shay had participated in every game during the year prior to the interview and suffered a stress fracture that required her to wear a boot for seven weeks. This experience taught her how to bounce back from a mental downfall which she believed would benefit her long after she has graduated from the university.

Shay appeared to be someone who had come full circle and already expressed a desire to give back to the university as a committed partner. As one of the softball team’s inaugural members, she felt ownership with the program early on and seized the opportunity to set team records her first year. Upon graduation, she would like to remain a part of the university’s program as a graduate coach and hopefully advance within the field. It appears as if her relationship with the university and athletic program will remain strong in the future, unlike two other respondents that were interviewed.

Former Friend

Following their freshman year of eligibility, two respondents were clearly dissatisfied with their athletic teams and chose to leave their respective programs. These individuals were categorized as former friends because although they chose to remain at the university (unlike individuals who transfer or simply leave the institution), they were no longer enrolled as student-athletes of the university. Rick is an example of a respondent that left the athletic program for several reasons, including injury and illness.

“But you’d think for a sport like cross country where the kids are outside running all the time, they’d be able to get like a hoodie, something of that sort. But they don’t give them anything.”

- Rick, men’s cross country

In stark contrast to Shay’s exuberance toward the university, Rick was sullen and pale as he spoke of his experience as a student-athlete. The previous summer, he made the decision to leave the team for a variety of reasons. Feeling the pressure to perform, Rick ran on an injured hamstring and worsened the injury which still causes him pain. In addition, Rick contracted mononucleosis which he felt was primarily due to training outside in cold weather without proper running gear. He felt lingering resentment toward the university due to the disparity in athletic apparel given to revenue generating sports as compared to the non-revenue generating sports.

While Rick continued to share a house with other cross country student-athletes and considered them his friends, he severed his relationship with the athletic program and did not feel the cross country team was treated fairly by the university. The trust in the relationship was gone. Even though Rick did not seem vindictive during the interview, it was clear that he would have negative comments about his experience if a potential recruit were to seek his input. As a former friend, Rick certainly did not exhibit satisfaction, trust or

commitment toward the university and most likely would not offer support to the athletic program upon graduation.

Additional Findings

As a result of using qualitative methods to delve deeper into the student-athletes' thoughts about their relationship with the university, considerations and concerns were brought to light that had not previously been considered. For example, all 19 respondents spoke at length about injuries and/or illnesses that greatly affected their feelings toward their student-athlete collegiate experience. It seemed regrettable that most did not feel they had anyone with whom to talk as the injuries and/or illnesses often plunged them into a state of depression. Most of the respondents stated that they did not feel that friends or family could relate to what they were going through and did not want to show weakness to teammates or coaches for fear of losing playing time. As a result, many struggled emotionally and academically through the rehabilitation period and came back to participate before their bodies were ready.

IMPLICATIONS

Johnson and Selnes' (2004) Typology of Exchange Relationships highlights the importance of having a relationship orientation that facilitates the deepening of customer knowledge. Because the typology is found to be more of a continuum than a pure step-wise progression from one stage to another, clear stage-by-stage distinctions cannot be made. The respondents' placement on the continuum could be more accurately identified with the development and implementation of a survey designed specifically from the information garnered from this study.

Student-athletes can realistically have similar negative experiences at virtually any of the stages, resulting in student-athletes who become former friends of the university. Both actual and opportunity costs resulting from a relationship that either falls short of the partner

category or results in a former friend can be extremely detrimental to both the student-athlete and the university. It is therefore in the best interest of university personnel to recognize the general position along the continuum of each student-athlete, address the risks that can impede progress, and do what is necessary to assist student-athletes in their progression toward the position of partners.

According to Day (2000), the ability of an organization to create and maintain integral relationships with their most valuable customers is a unique competitive tool that can be mastered with three critical elements. First, a relationship orientation must exist within the organization. Second, the organization must keep deepening and utilizing its knowledge of these customers. Third, the key processes must be internally integrated and externally aligned with the processes of their customers. Each of these elements requires effective communication between the provider and the beneficiary, regardless of the beneficiary's position on the typology continuum. Just as communication plays a critical role in providing an understanding of the exchange partners' intentions and capabilities (Andersen 2001), communication to prospective student-athletes provides the foundation for a meaningful relationship and the means by which the relationship can develop through the typology continuum.

From Stranger to Acquaintance

Most student-athletes are, by definition, initially strangers to the university. While some may be aware of the university and its academic and athletic reputations, exposure to the university typically begins with the recruitment process. Division I student-athletes are typically recruited, and often times quite heavily, by a large number of competing schools. It is imperative that university personnel closely consider those factors that significantly impact a prospective student-athletes initial commitment decision, as well as those factors that can have significant impact upon a student after they have signed a letter of intent and have

moved on toward the acquaintance stage of the continuum.

Because individual student-athletes have unique needs and wants regarding their academic and athletic careers, those involved in the recruiting process must be cognizant of each student-athlete's aspirations and concerns. Great care must be taken, however, to present the university with complete honesty. Misrepresenting the university, the university's expectations of its student-athletes, student-athlete services that are offered, etc. could severely hamper a student-athlete's progression through the continuum.

What attracts a particular student-athlete to a university while in the stranger stage can vary dramatically even among student-athletes who compete on the same team. University personnel must make it a point to learn, understand, and clearly document the circumstances surrounding individual student-athletes so that the service experience offered to them can be appropriately tailored to meet specific needs, wants, expectations, and aspirations. Student-athlete satisfaction occurs only when expectations are met or exceeded, and this requires a level of organizational learning. Selnes and Sallis (2003) suggest that a university and student-athlete can improve their joint learning activities by facilitating information exchange, developing common learning arenas, and updating their behavior accordingly. In addition, learning within a beneficiary-provider setting cannot be mandated by either party, rather learning depends on both parties' willingness to cooperate in joint learning activities.

From Acquaintance to Friend

The initial adjustment to life as a college student-athlete, particularly one competing at the Division I level, can be traumatic. Extreme pressure to perform athletically and academically, and at a much higher level than high school, is often more than many student-athletes are prepared to manage. Being apart from family and friends, often times for the first

time in their life and in an entirely new cultural setting, can lead to a host of issues including depression. University personnel should also be aware that failure to deliver on any of the promises established while the student-athlete was a stranger can quickly result in a student-athlete who becomes a former friend. Therefore, student-athletes must be very satisfied with their university experience and the willingness of university personnel to assist them with their trials before they can completely trust the university and successfully matriculate to the friend stage of the continuum.

Trust is typically developed over a period of time during which a service provider consistently provides services which are equal or superior to the expectations of the customer. While communication is a prerequisite for building trust among exchange partners (Anderson and Narus 1990), greater quality and sharing of information influence the success of relationships (Mohr and Spekman 1994) and provide a central part of the relationship atmosphere (Hallen and Sandstrom 1991). Therefore, the means of communication between university personnel and the student-athlete may play a decisive role in the relationship marketing process (Andersen 2001) and should be given careful consideration. Any communication should be designed to acquire specific knowledge of the student-athlete's situation in order to customize or personalize efforts to meet his/her needs. The more personal the service, the greater the inclination towards effective communication, and the greater the potential for the use of relationship marketing (Pressey and Mathews 2000).

University personnel must also be aware of student-athletes who experience changes in coaching staffs, switch academic majors, sustain serious physical injuries, or experience other significant events that can dramatically alter the services being offered by the university and those being provided by the student. The university will be trusted only if it meets not only the initial promises offered

during the stranger stage, but any others made throughout the entire typology continuum.

From Friend to Partner

A committed student-athlete who is truly satisfied with the university, and trusts university personnel to deliver on the promises made throughout his/her time at the university has the potential of becoming a partner. The strong bond formed between the university and the student-athlete serves as the cornerstone for an on-going relationship that can ultimately benefit both the university and the student-athlete.

For a student-athlete to reach the final level of the typology and become a partner, the university must obtain specific knowledge of the student-athlete's needs as well as their idiosyncratic investments in order to develop satisfaction, trust, and commitment. This requires much more detailed knowledge of the student-athlete's situation and self-actualization needs. Such close relationships can be created through social networks when a collaborative partnership is desired (Day 2000). Intercollegiate athletics can capitalize on the reality that a service encounter is also a social encounter. The strongest relationships can be formed when the processes of two partners are jointly designed and managed. This will involve helping student-athletes recognize and progress toward their career goals as they deliver on the field of competition and in the classroom. As stated by Day (2000), instrumental to this process is the ability to get early input, share information more fully, and achieve smooth integration. Thus, universities must facilitate the future professional dreams of the student-athletes beyond their playing days in order for them to truly become a partner with the university.

Partners also exhibit a long-term commitment to the university from which countless benefits can be achieved by both parties. Student-athletes and university personnel should be regularly reminded of these long-term benefits so that the focus of the relationship can

occasionally shift from the short-term (e.g., the next game), to payback that both parties can expect in years to come.

Partners require satisfaction, trust, and commitment. And, "commitment and trust are the key drivers of cooperative relationships" (Hunt and Morgan 1994, p. 24). Wilson (1995), Dwyer et al., (1987), Scanzoni (1979) and Ring and Van de Van (1992) confirm that all relationships require trust to help them develop. Trust is so important to relational exchange that Spekman (1988, p. 79) refers to it as "the cornerstone of the strategic partnership." Kalafatis and Miller (1998), Beaton and Beaton (1995) and Russbult and Buunk (1993) also support this claim and identify commitment as an essential ingredient for long-term relationships. Achrol (1991) states that trust is a major determinant of relationship commitment. Commitment (a required characteristic in the partner stage of the typology) entails vulnerability. For this reason, customers will seek only trustworthy partners (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Thus, only student-athletes who feel they can completely entrust their futures to the university will progress to the highest level of the typology.

In order to cultivate this trust, universities must recognize the sizable investment they have made in attracting and retaining student-athletes and provide them with every opportunity to be successful during their collegiate and professional careers. Student-athletes involved in the study frequently mentioned how their university experience was preparing them for the "game of life," implying of course, that they understood the long-term implications of their trials. University personnel may want to look closely at their student-athletes' perspectives and provide an experience that lays the groundwork for a partnered relationship that can last well beyond the "conference championships." While product marketers seek brand loyalty primarily through nonpersonalized means (e.g., imagery), services marketers must focus on relationship marketing to remain competitive and personalized contact

is a valuable tool (Berry and Parasuraman 1991).

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