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Kalamazoo Wings Student Participation Campaign

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Kalamazoo Wings Student Participation Campaign

“Experience the action with the future athletes of tomorrow”

By: Kelly Hughes
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Popkova
Western Michigan University
Lee Honors College Thesis
Spring 2017

Foreword and Acknowledgment

Dear Kalamazoo Wings Front Office,

I would like to take the time to thank you for giving me the opportunity to work with the Kalamazoo Wings Hockey Club to help fix the problem of low attendance among college students, particularly at Western Michigan University.

Working with the Kalamazoo Wings for the past two seasons, I noticed a trend in the fan recruitment efforts. In-game activities, fan experiences, and advertisements have been created to draw in college students in the past, yet the number of student tickets sold rarely resulted in the desired return. The Kalamazoo Wings have always strived to sell tickets to their top three target markets, one being millennials. Noticing the disconnect between the Front Office and college students at Western Michigan University, I have conducted my own research and came up with ways to accomplish the company's goal. I designed the campaign to increase the participation among Western Michigan University students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games.

After a semester of research, data analysis, and creative thinking, I have come up with a detailed plan of objectives, strategies, and tactics specifically tailored to Western Michigan University students.

This plan was developed as a result of a Lee Honors College thesis exercise and simulation and not done directly for the client, but as a practical application of teaching methods. The client is

welcome to use the information and plan enclosed, but the implementation plan is up to the sole discretion of the client.

Sincerely,

Kelly Hughes

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Executive Summary

This public relations campaign is to increase participation of Western Michigan University students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games. The *millennial audience represents 25-30% of many professional sports teams' overall revenue base (Fisher 2015). Western Michigan University students have low participation at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games since they do not even make up 1% of the fans that attend Kalamazoo Wings games. The campaign goal is to increase participation of Western Michigan University students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games by 25% by May 2018. **Millennial: A person reaching young adulthood in the early 21st century.*

My research has indicated that the focus of the campaign would be to increase participation among Western Michigan University students due to the fact that 92% of students have attended 0-5 Kalamazoo Wings games. After establishing a clear direction for the campaign, I crafted objectives for each target public based on the research findings.

My target public (Western Michigan University students) is divided into two groups being lower-level students and upper-level students. The three objectives are:

- A. *By May 2018, increase the participation of Western Michigan University lower-level students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games by 25%.*
- B. *By May 2018, increase the participation of Western Michigan University upper-level students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games by 25%.*

C. By May 2018, increase the Kalamazoo Wings social media engagement with Western Michigan University students by 10% .

The campaign uses innovative marketing strategies to increase participation at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games among Western Michigan University students. A budget plan was not calculated for this campaign due to the fact that the marketing budget for the 2017-2018 season is unknown at this time. The price of the strategies could vary tremendously based on the execution of the Kalamazoo Wings Front Office.

It is recommended that an evaluation plan is developed to evaluate the overall goal of the campaign, as well as other methods to evaluate each individual strategy. The Kalamazoo Wings Front Office will then have the ability to examine whether the goal was achieved and which strategies contributed the most to this goal.

Company Information

Wings Event Center, owned and operated by Greenleaf Hospitality Group, is home to the minor league hockey team Kalamazoo Wings, widely known as the K-Wings. The franchise began in 1974 and have played in the International Hockey League and United Hockey League before joining the East Coast Hockey League, which they currently compete in. The K-Wings are affiliated with the Syracuse Crunch of the American Hockey League (AHL) and the Tampa Bay Lightning of the National Hockey League (NHL). The K-Wings are known for their specialty colored ice games, where the ice is dyed a color corresponding with a holiday and the team

proceeds to play a hockey game on it. The most common is the St. Patrick's Day "World Famous Green Ice Game". Wings Event Center can accommodate 5,131 people during hockey games.

Kalamazoo Wings Game Ticket Options

There are a variety of different ticket options the K-Wings offer to customers to appeal to the many demographics surrounding Kalamazoo.

- Single Game Tickets
- Flexi Tickets
- Season Tickets
- Half Season Tickets
- Friends and Family Deal
- Ticket Packages
- Grout Outings

Cost Factors

A number of different costs are associated with attending Kalamazoo Wings hockey games; some costs are more visible than others. Below is a list of potential costs affiliated with attending a game:

- Game ticket
- Parking fee
- Food
- Beverages
- Merchandise

Competitors

The competitors were based on what activities or sporting events college students in Kalamazoo are doing instead of attending Kalamazoo Wings hockey games. Below are the various forms of competition:

Western Michigan University Hockey- Students get into WMU hockey games for free with their Bronco ID card. These games typically fall on weekend nights, in many cases, the same nights as K-Wings games.

College Nightlife- Bars, clubs, and house parties within walking distance to K-College and WMU are very convenient and cheap options for weekend activities for students.

Downtown Kalamazoo- Downtown Kalamazoo is known for its many restaurants, events, and festivals that are a huge competitor for the K-Wings.

Grand Rapids Griffins- Although the Grand Rapids Griffins play 50 miles away, their involvement in a more competitive league and affiliation with the Detroit Red Wings becomes appealing to college students in Kalamazoo.

Mission and Vision

The mission and vision statement of the Kalamazoo Wings Hockey Club directly reflects that of their umbrella company known as the Greenleaf Hospitality Group (GHG). The mission statement of GHG is to “Align our talents to deliver an engaging experience to our Greenleaf Hospitality Group family, our guests, and our community.”

The vision of GHG is to “be the first choice in dining, hospitality, and entertainment”.

Values

GHG prides themselves on their focus on the following five categories:

- **Talent:** Greenleaf Hospitality Group is committed to selecting and developing world class talent. We are great by choice and as a talent-based organization, your talent and passion drive our company’s success. Our rigorous selection process allows us to find the right talent for our various business units and also match the candidate’s profile to our service culture.
- **Service:** Greenleaf Hospitality offers a variety of products, but our #1 product is service. The guest experience is extremely important to our company and we send our associates through a variety of service training classes when they begin their journey with our company. These classes provide practical experiences and knowledge for providing personalized guests experiences that can be applied immediately in their respective business unit.
- **Engagement:** Engaging our associates with a competitive compensation package and a variety of associate-focused incentive programs help us retain our talent and cultivate our service culture. Every associate's professional growth and development plan is driven by the associate’s interests. We work with the associate to identify their passion points and gauge their expertise to provide a road map for their development.
- **Community:** Greenleaf Hospitality’s strong sense of community both within the organization and its relationship to the Kalamazoo area are symbiotic. A thriving local

community means a great environment for our associates to work, live and play as well as grow our business.

- **Sustainability:** We support not only green initiatives, we believe in long term investment towards sustainability from a holistic perspective. Greenleaf Hospitality Group embraces the core value of “Treat It Like You Own It”. This illustrates our emphasis on being a good steward of natural resources and work-life balance.

Communication Practices

The Kalamazoo Wings practice their communication efforts both internally and externally. Internally, within GHG, the main source of communication is email. With hundreds of employees, it is the easiest way to stay connected and informed.

There are many different forms of external communication that the Kalamazoo Wings use to inform external publics of games, promotions, and other relevant information. The external communication practices include:

- Social Media- *Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat*
- Website- *www.kwings.com*
- Radio- *1660 AM The Fan*
- Billboards
- Email

Situation Analysis

The Kalamazoo Wings Front Office faces setbacks due to the poor participation among Western Michigan University students at their games. According to Fisher (2015), “The entire sports and entertainment industry is fervently trying to find ways to more deeply reach consumers now in their teens to mid-30s. For many teams, leagues and ticket sellers, the millennial audience represents a quarter to a third of their overall revenue base.” The millennial audience will continue to grow to be the majority of the industry’s target market as baby boomers die off and Generation X’s age, so the Kalamazoo Wings need to make changes to stay competitive in the entertainment industry.

Within the past two Kalamazoo Wings seasons, only 1,155 student tickets have been purchased according to the Box Office. The Kalamazoo Wings average around 2,500 tickets sold a game and there are 36 home games a season. This means student tickets don’t even make up 1% of the fans that attend Kalamazoo Wings hockey games. This is a real problem because countless advertising dollars and promotions are spent and designed to target college students and they are currently ineffective. The Kalamazoo Wings Front Office can target college students more effectively if the reasons why students do not attend Kalamazoo Wings game are determined, along with the factors that would influence students to attend more games.

Focusing this campaign to increase participation at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games is crucial because the data I collected found that 62% of Western Michigan University students have never been to a Kalamazoo Wings games and an additional 30% have only been to 1-5 games. 100% of the participants that have attended a game rated their experience as either *Extremely Satisfied*,

Somewhat Satisfied, or Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied, so I am confident that if we can get college students in the doors once, they will come back in the future.

Problem Statement

The *millennial audience represents 25-30% of many professional sports teams' overall revenue base. Western Michigan University students have low participation at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games since they do not even make up 1% of the fans that attend Kalamazoo Wings games.

**Millennial: A person reaching young adulthood in the early 21st century.*

Primary Research Plan

The objective of my primary research was to obtain key information explaining why Western Michigan University college students do not regularly attend Kalamazoo Wings hockey games. Aside from Kalamazoo Wings student attendance, I wanted to know if the student targeted advertisements were reaching that market because marketing plays a key role in fan recruitment. The quantitative data I collect, along with the quantitative data the Box Office is providing, will give me a better understanding of the situation, which in turn will help address the low student attendance issue for the Kalamazoo Wings.

Research Questions

The two research questions listed below, assisted in determining why there is low participation among Western Michigan University students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games.

1. Why do Western Michigan University students attend or not attend Kalamazoo Wings hockey games?

It is important to become aware of the competitors that are consuming market share for student activities. Additionally, if the reasoning is due to unsatisfactory experiences at Kalamazoo Wings games, those results are beneficial to make adjustments in the future.

2. What factors would influence students to attend more games?

While many students may not currently attend Kalamazoo Wings games, knowing what factors could potentially increase student ticket sales is extremely crucial.

3. Are Kalamazoo Wings advertisements reaching the desired student target market?

The Kalamazoo Wings frequently spend marketing dollars on advertisements to target college students. If those advertisements are not being seen by the desired target market, company money is being wasted and new ways to target the college demographic will need to be determined.

Methods

Participants: Data from 115 Western Michigan University students was collected from my survey on Qualtrics. Additional qualitative research was conducted through 10 interviews with new participants.

Materials

A survey on Qualtrics was created and distributed to students attending Western Michigan University to obtain the necessary information. Students were asked to complete the survey in person, in class, and on university/college student body Facebook pages.

Procedure

After obtaining secondary research from the Wings Event Center Box Office, I conducted primary research through a survey on Qualtrics and in-person interviews to collect data from a sample of Western Michigan University students. The questions for the survey and interviews were specific to the problem at hand and tailored precisely for the targeted publics.

The survey was handed out face-to-face on campus and in my classes and electronically on the Western Michigan University “Class of 20XX” Facebook pages. I was responsible for collecting over 100 survey responses and conducting 10 interviews with Western Michigan University students.

Each answer and question in the survey was categorized so that I could analyze the results of the sample. The survey contained open-ended, multiple choice, and Likert-type questions relating to the Kalamazoo Wings and demographics of those participating. An initial release of the survey took place to analyze the results and appropriate modifications were made before final data collection.

Key Findings

I collected survey data from 115 Western Michigan University students and interview data from 10 Western Michigan University students. My findings show many similar trends amongst WMU students. An important limitation to keep in mind is that this is not a representative sample and I recommend that the Kalamazoo Wings Front Office conducts further research.

- Only **25%** of students are aware that the Kalamazoo Wings offer a discount for student tickets, yet **62%** said a cheap ticket would influence them to attend more Kalamazoo Wings games.
- **18%** of the participants do not know who the Kalamazoo Wings are.
- **62%** of students have never been to a Kalamazoo Wings game and **30%** have been to 1-5 games.
- **76%** of participants said a “Fan Zone” consisting of 2 tickets, 3 draft beer tickets, a food basket to share, and 2 souvenirs for \$40 would appeal to them.
- **100%** of participants who have attended a Kalamazoo Wings game rated their experience as either *Extremely Satisfied*, *Somewhat Satisfied*, or *Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied*.
- The top factor that would influence students to attend more Kalamazoo Wings games is if *more college students were in attendance*. The next highest factors were *cheaper ticket*, *promotions pertaining more towards college students*, *cheaper drinks*, and *cheaper food*.
- Participants ranging 18-20 years old stated that they’d be more influenced to attend more Kalamazoo Wings games if *more college students were in attendance*, *promotions pertaining more towards college students*, and *cheaper ticket*.
- A majority of students are most comfortable paying between **\$11-\$20** at a sporting event.
- **51%** of students have not seen Kalamazoo Wings advertisements in the past 6 months.
- Amongst the **48%** of students that have seen advertisements in the past 6 months, the top two forms were via Facebook and Billboard.
- **71%** of participants were female and **29%** were male.

- The age of participants ranged from 18-25 year of age, creating an even bell curve that was most common amongst 21 year olds.
- An interviewee reiterated the influencing factor of needing more students in attendance by saying, *“It’s similar to how college students know which bar to go to for each day of the week. People go because there are specials and it is guaranteed to be packed with people my age. I don’t want to go to a hockey game that is a majority of families and older people.”*

Primary Public

The target publics of this campaign are lower-level and upper-level students that attend Western Michigan University. Lower-level students are defined by traditional students in their Freshman and Sophomores years of college and upper-level students are those in their Junior year or above. Separating the public into sub-groups has allowed me to further tailor the strategies to match the differentiations found in the key findings of my research. Participants ranging from 18-20 years old stated that they would be influenced to attend more Kalamazoo Wings games if more college students were in attendance, there were cheaper tickets, and more giveaways pertaining to college students. Those over 21 had a much heavier focus on cheaper drinks and cheaper food, which is why the target public was separated into two sub-groups.

Goal

“Increase participation of Western Michigan University students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games by 25% by May 2018.”

Although my research has indicated that there is a strong need for more awareness of the Kalamazoo Wings among WMU students, ticket sales are the ultimate goal and strategies can be implemented to increase awareness and participation simultaneously. After establishing a clear direction for my campaign I crafted objectives for each target public based on what I found.

Campaign Theme

“Experience the action with the future athletes of tomorrow”

Objective A

“By May 2018, increase the participation of Western Michigan University lower-level students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games by 25%.”

Target Public: Lower-level students are classified as first and second year students. If traditional college students, these individuals are typically between the ages of 18-20.

Key Messages

- \$10 student tickets are offered all season long with a college ID, being an inexpensive entertainment event to attend.
- The engaging atmosphere and game themes invite students less than 21 years of age to enjoy a night out that does not require consuming alcohol.
- Free bus transportation to games makes it convenient for students in the dorms or without vehicles.

- College students are invited to participate in intermission activities ranging from bubble soccer to shooting for a chance to win a four-wheeler.

Strategy I: Host a Western Michigan University themed Kalamazoo Wings game offering a co-branded giveaway, student discounted ticket, and free transportation to and from the game.

Tactics:

- Get WMU approval to create co-branded giveaway. If non-applicable, choose a Kalamazoo Wings giveaway item with Western Michigan University school colors incorporated.
- Contact and pay a transportation company to have buses make continuous routes to and from Wings Event Center from a designated location near campus.
- Heavily advertise at Western Michigan University dormitories through flyers and in-person tabling.
- Create social media content to advertise the event to students online. (In collaboration with the “Objective C” Brand Ambassadors)

All of the top factors that would influence lower-level Western Michigan University students to attend more Kalamazoo Wings hockey games would be met by hosting a WMU themed game.

This designated night would reassure students that other college students would be in attendance and would include a promotional giveaway pertaining to college students and a discounted ticket.

The upgraded free transportation would be an added on incentive for students who cannot provide their own transportation.

Objective B

“By May 2018, increase the participation of Western Michigan University upper-level students at Kalamazoo Wings hockey games by 25%.”

Target Public: Upper-level students are traditionally students in their third year or more in an undergraduate program.

Key Messages

- Frequent beer specials allow college students 21 and older to drink responsibly on a budget.
- \$10 student tickets are offered all season long with a college ID.
- College students are targeted to participate in intermission activities ranging from bubble soccer to shooting for a chance to win a four-wheeler.
- Free bus transportation to games makes it convenient for students consuming alcohol to have a safe ride home.

Strategy II: Host a career fair at Wings Event Center with neighboring sports teams for Western Michigan University college students.

Tactics:

- Reach out to sports teams in Michigan to find representatives to come to Kalamazoo to speak and recruit (if applicable).

- Create an agenda allowing representatives to give insight to students wanting to pursue a career in sports followed by an open-house style career fair to speak to those representatives who are recruiting for internship positions.
- Speak to Sports Management classes and sports related RSOs about the benefits of attending the career fair.
- Heavily advertise the event on WMU campus and social media sites.
- Charge \$15 entry fee for career fair which includes a ticket to the Kalamazoo Wings game for the home game following the event.

Upper-level students are closer to graduating and entering the workforce than lower-level students are, so this career fair would be appealing to those interested in a career in the sports industry or students just interested in networking with professionals. By charging \$15 for the event, students will essentially be paying \$5 for the career fair since student tickets to the game are \$10. The career fair will not be a costly event to host, so the Kalamazoo Wings will attract a new audience of students to attend, while still charging the student price for tickets. Upper-level students expressed that the top factors that would influence them to attend more games were more students in attendance, cheaper drinks, and cheaper food. By hosting the career fair on a Friday, Friday games always offer \$2 beer and \$2 hotdogs, so hosting a career fair on Friday will allow students to experience a Friday night game, satisfying their needs for cheaper food/drinks and potentially advertising that weekend special to students who were unaware.

Objective C

“By May 2018, increase the Kalamazoo Wings social media engagement with Western Michigan University students by 10%.”

Target Public: This objective targets both lower-level and upper-level Western Michigan University students.

Key Messages:

- Regardless of age, college students are avid social media users.
- Interactions and engagements via social media are free or cost a minimal price if chosen to pay for a boost in exposure.
- The Kalamazoo Wings are active on countless social media sites, but are not targeting college students correctly.

Strategy III: Hire influential Western Michigan University students as social media Brand Ambassadors for the Kalamazoo Wings hockey team.

Tactics:

- Create a survey or interview current WMU students to gain insight on which individuals are the most influential to their peers.
- Check to make sure they have a large social media following and presence.
- Contact individuals and “hire” 10 social media Brand Ambassadors through an agreeable contract outlining the job description and requirements.

- Give each student a personal code redeemable for discounts on tickets, merchandise, and concession items.
- Work with Food and Beverage management and Marketing department to create feasible discounts and giveaways to offer.
- Create a program outline for the 2017/2018 season with deadlines for Brand Ambassadors to complete certain tasks.
- Brand Ambassadors will be paid based on the number of times the code is used, click-throughs to links, or for accomplishing other social media related tasks.

I have seen countless companies use Brand Ambassadors to promote their business and individuals are willing to do so to increase their “following” and social media presence. A huge advantage is only paying Brand Ambassadors for completed assignments and positive performance. If they are completing the tasks designed by the Kalamazoo Wings, they will receive compensation. If they are not only completing the assignments, but having their followers redeem the Brand Ambassadors codes and attending games, they will receive additional incentives and compensation. This will save the Kalamazoo Wings money by not paying additional employees to do work hourly and only when they are getting a return on the investment.

Budget

As previously mentioned, I was unable to create a budget plan due to the fact that the budgets for the 2017-2018 have not yet been determined and it is not easily obtainable information. Having worked at Wings Event Center for two years, I am aware of the broad range of funds that is

acceptable to spend on events and campaigns and I kept that in mind when crafting the objectives, strategies, and tactics. Each strategy is feasible for the Kalamazoo Wings Front Office and the organization could save even more money if they gained sponsorship from new or returning sponsors.

Evaluation

I highly recommend that the Kalamazoo Wings Front Office creates an appropriate evaluation plan to test if the strategies explained above were effective towards reaching the objectives. Similarly, an evaluation method should be determined to see if the overall goal of the campaign was achieved. Having a strong relationship with the Box Office may be a great option to gain progress reports and evaluations of the amount of tickets sold for games and career fairs designed for Western Michigan University students.

Conclusion

The strengths of this campaign are the strategies designed for each specific public. The career fair has the potential to attract hundreds of college students across West Michigan and have them experience a Kalamazoo Wings game at the same time. The Western Michigan University themed game would hit every main factor that lower-level students stated as influencing them to attend more Kalamazoo Wings games. If implemented correctly, there is no reason that game should not have a sold out crowd. Lastly, the Brand Ambassadors will effectively raise awareness and participation at Kalamazoo Wings games and will hopefully decrease the number of Western Michigan University students who do not know about the Kalamazoo Wings are. This campaign has the opportunity to increase participation among Western Michigan University

students at Kalamazoo Wings games and will hopefully have those students be recurring fans for years to come.

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