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*The Role of Consumers in Creating Experiences  
by Organisers of Sports Events*

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Rola konsumentów w kreowaniu doświadczeń przez organizatorów wydarzeń sportowych

**Key words:** experiential marketing; sports events; emotions, satisfaction

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### **Introduction**

The concept of experiential marketing is based on the assumption that companies may achieve competitive advantage through building relationships with customers, by providing them with pleasant, unforgettable experiences (sensations). A market where experiential marketing can be applied with a high probability of success is the market of sports events. It is related to the tremendous role of emotions accompanying the consumption process, i.e. participation in sports events, as well as numerous direct interactions between the service provider and the service recipient.

The process of creating experiences on the market of sports events is profoundly influenced by spectators; therefore, organisers should place considerable weight on the management of relations with spectators.

The underlying objectives of the article are: the identification of the roles played by consumers on the sports events market, the establishment of their influence on the level of the induced and experienced sensations, as well as a possibility of

shaping consumers' attitudes by sports events organisers. In its empirical part, the article is based on the author's multiannual ethnographic research, supplemented by individual in-depth interviews.

## 1. Experiential marketing

The concept of experiential marketing (other terms used in literature are: "experiential economy", "economy of experiences", or "customer experience management") assumes building and developing relationships between a company and its customers, based on emotions caused by significant experiences, which arise in the course of co-creation and consumption [Sundbo and Sørensen 2013, p. 12; Pine and Gilmore 1998, p. 99].

In the presently developing era of experiences, when the economy of leisure time is evolving into the economy of experiences, providing emotions is becoming a key factor of success in business [Kacprzak et al. 2015, p. 32]. Today's consumers more and more often replace seeking the answer to the question: "what don't I have yet?" with the attempt to reply the question: "what haven't I experienced yet?" [Boguszewicz-Kreft 2013, p. 39]. The consumer attitude of this sort opens a new competitive perspective for businesses. By means of a differently composed set of marketing instruments, which stimulate consumers' imagination and provide emotional or spiritual sensations, along with a long-lasting feeling of nostalgia after the consumption ends, not only can a company attract consumers' attention, but also win their long-lasting loyalty [Grundey 2008, p. 145].

Experiential marketing, as a new trend in the more broadly understood, classic marketing orientation, is based on the premises which set the framework of its operation.

Here are the basic premises of this concept:

- The present consumers' needs related to possession are being replaced with the needs related to excitement or contemplation;
- Consumers buy products or services not as much due to their physical characteristics as because of the emotional sensations accompanying consumption;
- Consumers are ready to engage in the process of co-creation of values, partially accepting the responsibility for the ultimate effect of the creation;
- Consumers communicate with one another, exchanging information and building communities around brands;
- Marketing communication referring to consumers' feelings and emotions is more effective than arguments based on logical and rational foundations;
- Consumer behavior related to the purchase and the consumption of products can be used in the corporate marketing strategy as an effective method of market penetration.

It needs to be kept in mind that a consumer's experiences are subjective in nature, can vary over time and be caused by various stimuli, not always in accordance with a company's expectations. It presents difficulties in the experience management, as not all elements related to the sphere of emotions are tangible and controllable [Dobiegała-Korona 2015, p. 324].

The evolutionary changes taking place in the present experiential economy affect the relationship between a company and its customers. The value which is the hidden subject of a trade exchange is not solely provided by the company, as it is jointly created with the consumers, who more often than not are involved in relationship networks with one another [Pine and Gilmore 2011, p. 36]. These changes take place in various ways and to a large extent depend on the industry, the type of the offered products, as well as the target market segment.

Therefore, it should be stated that the previous behaviour of economic entities on the market, based on the passive attitude of consumers towards producers as value creators, is being replaced with the concept of the market understood as a forum. In the light of this concept, the process of value creation partly takes place in the company and partly – on the market as the location of exchange [Rupik 2010, p. 334]. At present, value is created in the process of numerous interactions between companies and consumers, whereas the market is becoming a space for gaining experiences and sensations, as well as for co-creation.

According to Christensen [2013], end-users have a growing ability to create their own experiences, which is graphically presented in Figure 1. On the basis of Porter's five forces model, it can be concluded that there is a gradual growth in the consumers' purchasing power in relation to businesses.

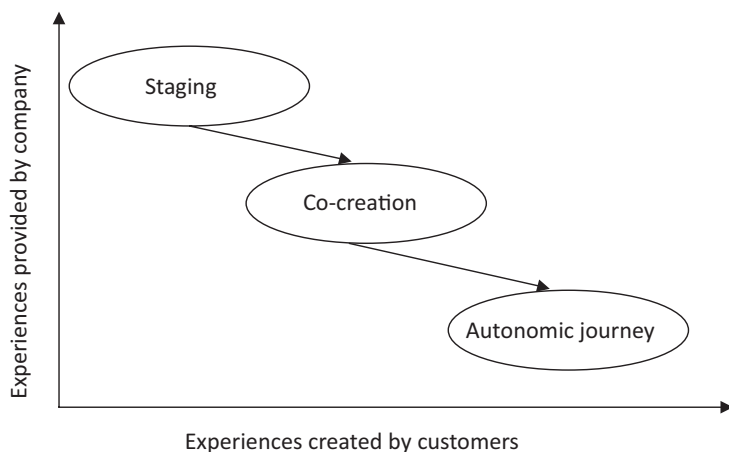


Figure 1. Creation of experiences by entities engaged in the trade exchange process

Source: Christensen [2013].

Some authors [Arnould et al. 2002, p. 78; Davis and Longoria 2003, p. 24; Tynan and McKechnie 2009, p. 510] underline the need for a process approach to consumer experience management. According to Verhoef et al. [2009, p. 35], a consumer may experience emotions not only during the purchase and the consumption, but also before the purchase and after the consumption ends. This fact increases a company's chance for building a strong relationship with its customers, provided that it manages to induce unforgettable emotions and sensations at each phase of the purchase process (Figure 2).

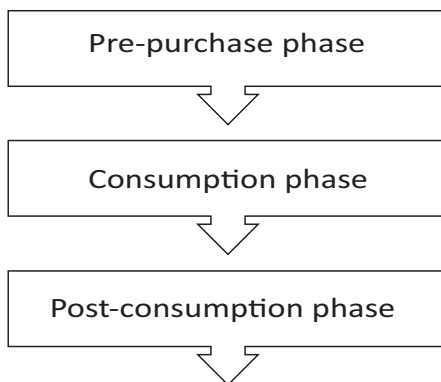


Figure 2. Three-phase process of experience absorption

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Davis and Longoria [2003].

The effectiveness of experiential marketing increases not only if a company takes into account the above mentioned three-phase experience absorption process, but also on condition that consumers will show an active attitude, for instance, through the earlier mentioned co-creation of values. A lower level of engagement on their part and a passive approach substantially shortens the period of experiencing emotions.

The biggest chances for a successful application of the experiential marketing concept appear when both the providers and the recipients are actively engaged in the exchange and the creation process and the product consumption take place publicly and stimulates strong emotions [Mallen and Adams 2013, p. 6]. A market which fulfils all the conditions mentioned above is the sports events market, which is a part of the more broadly defined leisure time industry [Freitas 2009, p. 48].

## 2. Determinants of creating experiences on the sports events market

From the perspective of marketing, a sports event is a basic product offered on the sports market. It can be regarded as a hybrid – a mixture of material goods and services and, more importantly from the point of view of the problem addressed in

this article, it is consumed collectively, as 98% of spectators watch sports events with a group of friends. The spectacularity of events grows if the sports performance reaches a high level. Such events attract to sports arenas and television sets large numbers of spectators, who by watching sports people's achievements fulfil their own leisure time needs. Extensive studies show that these needs are most frequently related to: entertainment, relaxing, stress reduction, escape from daily routine and spending time with friends [Greenwell et al. 2014, p. 9]. Today's leisure time industry is undergoing a stage of vigorous development, so consumers have a growing variety of options for experiencing pleasure, not only in the sphere of sports. Therefore, organisers of sports events are looking for new solutions which would make watching sports events even more attractive. The concept of experiential marketing facilitates these endeavours, though the effectiveness of its application depends on matching its general principles to the specifics of the sports market.

One of the most significant features of the sports events market are the unpredictable results of sports people's endeavours. All leisure events, including sports events, are unique due to their non-material nature. For example, in the case of artistic events, such as concerts, their uniqueness results from the way a particular musical piece is performed, or from the selection of musical works to be included in the performance. As for sports events, the ultimate result of the competition is impossible to predict by the organiser. It is equally difficult to predict the course of the participants' endeavours and their involvement or determination in fighting for victory. Consequently, a sports events organiser cannot guarantee the spectators a predictable level of emotions, which is possible in the case of cultural events, or the sales of luxury products.

Besides the unpredictability of sports, another factor determining the scale and the intensity of emotions is the spectators' behaviour during a competition [Schwarz and Hunter 2008, p. 120]. It is equally impossible for organisers to predict the spectators' cheering. It is worthwhile to look into the phenomenon of the public consumption of sports events and the spectators' behavior, due to its high potential in the context of experiential marketing.

### **3. Research methodology and findings**

Owing to his long-time interest in the sports market, the author has conducted ethnographic research aimed at gathering information on the observed phenomena and processes, analysing them and finding cause-and-effect relationships among them. These objectives have been achieved through, among others, systematic observations (participant and non-participant) of sports events viewers, with a particular emphasis on their interactions, mutual relationships, induction of particular behaviours, as well as developing long-lasting opinions and beliefs. Moreover, for the sake of the objective presented in the Introduction, community interviews were

conducted with 16 participants of sports events. The interviews were qualitative in nature, and were conducted on the basis of an earlier prepared script based on the three-phase experience absorption process proposed by Davis and Longoria [2003]. Discussions with the interviewees focused on the following issues:

- Pre-consumption phase: emotions related to the forthcoming sports event;
- Consumption phase: stimulators of emotions and sensations experienced while watching a sports event;
- Post-consumption phase: intensity and long-lasting of the experienced emotions after a sports event is finished.

With a view to identifying the determinants of participants' emotions, the focus was on the role of the viewers and their behavior in the process of creating the value of a sports event.

The collected empirical material, confronted with literature dealing with experiential marketing, allowed for formulating a few interesting observations related to the induction and the experience of emotions and sensations by participants of sports events.

In the respondents' opinion, organisers of sports events use experiential marketing long before an event, when their actions primarily focus on its promotion. At that time excitement and tension which accompany awaiting a sports event are stimulated. Spectators are encouraged to participate through:

- images (e.g. photographs of earlier events, photos of famous players, pictures of cheering crowds);
- slogans (e.g. together for victory, strong together, duel of giants);
- fragments of video materials (e.g. the best actions of a match, the finish of a race, determination of struggling players);
- communicating the stakes of a competition (e.g. National Championship, the Final of Champions League).

Marketing actions taking place before an event are primarily aimed at arousing the viewers' expectations as to what will be happening in the sports arena. The main determinants of a product's attractiveness, which in this case is a sports event, is creating a visualisation of the event by the organisers, as well as an exchange of opinions and recommendations between the participants. At this stage, sports fans play a double role: that of recipients of promotional messages and of ambassadors encouraging other people to participate.

During a sports event the spectators watching the players' endeavours are subject to various types of stimuli, which shape their perception and reception of the ongoing event. These could be sound signals, illuminations, the choreography of the performance, watching the confrontation of players from opposing teams, etc. The symbolism and the joint celebration are also of great significance, as the recipients of the events not only absorb what is happening in the sports arena, but also respond to the stimuli by sending back their own messages. The multi-faceted, parallel stimulation which takes place during sports events is the reason why the consumers'

experiences are very deep and long remembered. They play the role of consumers and creators at the same time.

The majority of relationships between service recipients and service providers on the market of mass events belongs to the sphere of emotions. Most frequently these are positive emotions, such as: joy, fun, delight, fascination. However, negative emotions sometimes also appear, especially in situations when the viewers' favorite team loses a game. In some cases, the viewers' engagement may not only have an emotional character, but be even spiritual in nature. This is the case when the sports person appearing in the event is a true idol for the spectators and meeting them gives the viewers a deep feeling of communion with someone exceptional, worth imitating and identifying with.

Consumption of art and sports events takes place in public [Schmitt 2010, p. 63]. It is a very significant fact in the context of experiential marketing, as the recipients not only receive stimuli, but also send their own stimuli to other participants of the event. In this way, a special atmosphere is actively created by the viewers, who, at the same time, are the actors of the spectacle. Without the spontaneously responding fans, the spectacle would not be so attractive, as they are its integral and valuable part. In social psychology, this phenomenon is called deindividuation, which is understood as the loss of self-awareness and self-control in groups, which leads to a higher impulsiveness and very deep emotions. What is more, without the audience, its reactions and its engagement in the creation of the spectacle, such a high level of immersion and the state of flow of both the spectators and the players would not be possible. Both these states: of immersion and of flow, which were researched as early as in the 1980s by Csikszentmihalyi, are related to very strong emotional sensations, which are at the core of the concept of experiential marketing [Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p. 36].

The organisers should make sure that the viewers take home a baggage of new, exciting experiences, which will contribute to their positive evaluation of the event and encourage them to recommend its next edition to other sport fans. The surveyed respondents emphasized the organisers' marketing actions, aimed at evoking a feeling of nostalgia and long-lasting memories of the excitement experienced during the event. Thus, the viewers' emotional connection with the event lasts much longer than just the few hours spent in the sports arena. Examples of such marketing actions are: experts' comments and analyses, interviews with players and coaches, press articles and photographs, moderated discussions on the Internet forums, or, particularly at international events, gadgets sold as souvenirs. Participants of the interviews claimed that the social media also help prolong emotions after an event, as they can be used for exchanging the viewers' impressions. The social media are an increasingly frequently used Customer to Customer (C2C) communication channel, sustaining the emotions experienced while jointly watching sports people's endeavours. By using the social media to discuss an event with other participants, the customers strengthen and prolong their emotions related to the sports event.

## Conclusions

Based on the conducted observations of the function of the participants of sports events in creating experiences, it can be concluded that their role is particularly significant during the consumption of this marketing product. Not only do they play the role of the service recipients, but also, mostly through their behaviour, are partly responsible for its attractiveness. Their role is directly related to creating experiences and emotional sensations, the values most appreciated by consumers. In the period before an event it is mainly the organiser who is responsible for the consumers' experiences management, whereas the consumers' role is remarkably limited. It results from their attitude of awaiting the event a lack of willingness to get involved.

Due to the growing ease of communication, the number of consumers willing to participate in sustaining the experiences after an event is also increasing. The great readiness for sharing opinions is one of the characteristics of Generations Y and Z, to which the majority of today's participants of sports events belong. However, the duration of emotions in the post-consumption phase still largely depends on the event organiser.

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### **The Role of Consumers in Creating Experiences by Organisers of Sports Events**

Sports events are one of the two basic product categories on the sports market. From the point of view of the participants, their value directly depends on the intensity of experiences and emotions they provide. The organisers of sports events are responsible for creating these experiences, but it would not be possible without an active participation of the viewers. The conducted research shows that the participation of consumers – sports events spectators – is varied in different phases of the experience absorption model. The consumers play the key role in the consumption phase and a slightly smaller, though increasing one, in the post-consumption phase, whereas their role in the pre-consumption phase is limited.

### **Rola konsumentów w kreowaniu doświadczeń przez organizatorów wydarzeń sportowych**

Wydarzenia sportowe należą do jednej z dwóch podstawowych kategorii produktów na rynku sportu. Ich wartość z punktu widzenia nabywców jest tym większa, im więcej dostarczają im wrażeń i doznań. Za kreowanie doświadczeń ponoszą odpowiedzialność organizatorzy wydarzeń sportowych, jednak nie byłoby to możliwe bez aktywnego udziału widzów. Przeprowadzone badania prowadzą do wniosku, że udział nabywców (uczestników imprez sportowych) w poszczególnych fazach modelu absorpcji doświadczeń jest zróżnicowany. Największą rolę w kreowaniu doznań nabywcy odgrywają w fazie konsumpcji, nieco mniejszą (choć rosnącą) – w fazie pokonsumpcyjnej, natomiast ograniczoną – w fazie przedkonsumpcyjnej.