

Project B*B: Developmental processes of fan loyalty for the professional baseball team 'The Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters'

Eiichi Someya, National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology

Muneo Kitajima, National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology

Hirotsugu Tabira, U'eyes Design Inc.

Tadabiko Kajikawa, U'eyes Design Inc.

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A loyal fan (repeater) of a professional baseball team has his/her own history in arriving at his/her current fan stage. He/she would have started from a pre-fan stage, passed through the fan stage, and ultimately reached the current loyal-fan stage. Pre-fan stage refers to the situation where he/she knows little about the team or at the most he/she pays a certain amount of attention to the team and/or has some interest in the team. However, his/her attitude toward the team is passive, and no aggressive actions are exerted. Starting from this pre-fan stage, a person would advance to the fan stage. A person is considered in the fan stage when he/she aggressively desires to have a relationship with the team. For example, a fan-stage person displays emotions towards the results of the games, and starts to become interested in watching live games at the stadium. However, he/she does not have much interest in the information of the team. A fan-stage person advances to a loyal fan by breaking through the passive characteristics of the fan-stage fan. A loyal-stage fan aggressively collects information on the team, goes to the stadium to watch live games when his/her time allows or more positively by arranging his/her activities by placing top priority on watching live games at the stadium.

This paper reports an ethnographical study that was conducted to understand the structure of the developmental process, i.e., how a person evolves from the pre-fan stage to the fan stage, and ultimately to the loyal fan stage. The study looks at the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters, which moved to Sapporo-city on Hokkaido Island in 2004 and hosts games at the Sapporo-Dome Stadium. Since moving to Hokkaido, the Fighters have continuously increased their number of registered fans, which reached 74,974 as of September 30, 2008. A large majority of fans, who are now counted as loyal fans, or repeaters, were not loyal fans at the beginning of the 2004 regular season. Most of them were at the pre-fan stage.

This study selected nine loyal fans having different histories of evolution from 3,686 registered fans who replied to a set of questionnaires for screening delivered in June 2008. These nine fans were asked to watch three designated games in July, August, and September and to attend structured interview sessions after watching each game. See the companion papers for the background of the study and the outline of the design of the field study [1,2]. The following describes results of the analysis of the evidence collected in the interview sessions that focused on the triggers that caused them to step up a stage, namely, from pre-fan stage to fan stage, and from fan stage to loyal fan stage, and the conditions that made or make them stay in their respective stage.

Stepping up from the pre-fan stage to the fan stage: Three cases were found in the interviews: 'Retirement of a star player' and 'expectation of the league championship.' In the 2006 regular season, two events triggered three participants who had little knowledge about professional baseball and another three participants who had knowledge about professional baseball but did not have interest in it to step up to the fan stage. One event was the then-star player, outfielder Tsuyoshi Shinjo, announced his retirement, relatively early in the regular season. This news was reported frequently in various media. The other was that the Fighters were in the first championship race of the league and Japan's professional baseball leagues. 'Watch the fans cheering.' Two participants who had little knowledge about professional baseball and a participant who had little interest in professional baseball stepped up to the fan stage by watching live cheering in the stadium. 'Know the players and the team' and 'unexpected talent of players outside baseball.' Irrespective of the knowledge level of professional baseball, knowing players and the team triggered the participants to step up to the fan stage. Three participants who knew professional baseball reacted to the players' behavior outside baseball, causing them to step up to the fan stage.

Stepping up from the fan stage to the loyal fan stage: Ten cases were found in the interviews. 'Watching live games at the stadium', 'Knowing the rules of baseball' and 'knowing the team', 'Watching games by oneself', 'one's wife became a fan by following his lead', 'communication with his/her friends at the stadium', or 'meeting persons who visited the stadium.' The common feature of these triggers is establishing an environment where he/she could watch the games at the stadium comfortably with his/her acquaintances, e.g., the person's wife, his/her friends, etc., whoever contributes to building a relationship with him/her when he/she watches the games at the stadium. 'Presence of players who always come to his/her mind.' Participants who had little knowledge about baseball or professional baseball, participants who were fans of other

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professional baseball teams, and those who became fans at the end of the regular seasons tended to find opportunities that should provide information about the players, teams, and whatever about the Fighters. These participants were eager to attend the off-season events such as talk-shows and advanced to loyal fans in the next regular season. 'Collecting the Fighters' goods', 'Recording and/or collecting events of live games as proof of watching them', 'Expectation of the climax series and the Nippon series', some of them are just dying to watch those series, 'Communication with the other fans when watching live games', 'Network community' that he/she accesses during live games for exchanging information, posting opinions, etc., 'Seeing the players closely, e.g., visiting camp in Okinawa', and 'the ones who have special interest (or ones who are always following pro-baseball) say that their best interest is to see the live action on a professional field.

This study revealed histories of the nine participants that demonstrate how the participants climbed the steps of fan stages, from the pre-fan stage to the fan stage, and ultimately to the loyal-fan stage. Three features were identified that triggered the participants to step up from the fan stage, and ten features that triggered the participants to step up from the fan stage to the loyal-fan stage were identified. These features should suggest possible paths that potential loyal fans should follow and should provide valuable hints for designing efficient fan services that help potential fans to step up comfortably to the loyal fan stage.

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