

What is a fan really worth?

W. P. Carey sports business expert Daniel McIntosh explains how teams turn game-day energy into lasting loyalty and revenue

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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As football teams around the country begin their seasons, it's a good time to ask a bigger question about college and professional sports: What is a fan really worth?

For sports organizations, the answer starts with the ticket, but it doesn't end there. Fans buy parking, concessions and merchandise. They attract sponsors, bolster media products and help create the atmosphere that makes live sports feel different from almost anything else.

[Daniel McIntosh](#), faculty director of the [sports business program](#) and a teaching professor in the [Department of Marketing](#) at Arizona State University's [W. P. Carey School of Business](#), studies the business of sports and the evolving relationship between teams and their audiences. He says the most valuable fans are not simply customers who show up once. They are people who form emotional connections, return year after year, and bring others into the experience.

That relationship is increasingly shaped by data. Teams track purchasing habits, preferences and engagement patterns to better understand who their fans are and how to reach them. The goal, McIntosh says, is to move from broad promotions to more personalized experiences.

Technology has only accelerated that shift. Mobile tickets, app-based concessions, social media, behind-the-scenes content and real-time updates have made the fan relationship nearly constant, extending far beyond the stadium and game day.

In the following Q&A with ASU News, McIntosh explains how teams measure fan value, why loyalty often begins early, and what fans should understand about the business strategies behind the messages, offers and experiences designed for them.

Note: The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Question: How do sports organizations think about the value of a fan beyond the price of a ticket?

Answer: If you think about your most memorable sports experiences, yes, what happened on the field mattered, but what you probably remember most is how it felt. You remember the roar of the crowd, the high-fives and hugs with your friends, and the atmosphere and emotion surrounding the event. That's the value of the fan. Fans create the atmosphere. And that's true not just in the

stadium, but at home as well. A packed stadium also makes the broadcast product much better, which affects fans watching from home.

Financially, the ticket price is just one part of the revenue picture. There's total game-day revenue, which includes parking, concessions and merchandise. Then there are secondary revenue sources, such as sponsorships and licensing, that become more valuable because fans are in attendance. Sponsors and media partners are really buying access to attention, emotion and positive association.

From there, teams start thinking not just about the fan today, but about the fan of tomorrow and how they can grow that relationship. If you first bought a single-game ticket or got in free as a student, can they get you to buy a multigame plan or season tickets? If you bought two tickets, can they get you to buy four and bring friends? If you bought upper-deck seats, maybe you'd be interested in seats at a higher price point with more comfortable seating or additional amenities. That's the difference between the transactional value of a fan and the lifetime value of a fan. Ultimately, that's how teams think about their fans.

Q: What kinds of data are teams collecting about fans, and how does that information shape marketing, promotions and the game-day experience?

A: The goal is to collect as much information about a fan as possible. That includes the types, quantities and prices of tickets they purchase, their concession preferences, their favorite players and even the types of merchandise they might be interested in. All that data helps teams create fan personas: the avid fan, the social fan, the casual fan, the single-game buyer or the family-outing fan. The goal is to build the clearest possible picture of each type of fan, so the messaging is more relevant.

Where things are headed is true one-to-one marketing, where messages and offers are tailored to each individual fan. What does that look like? I think we all recognize that every Netflix homepage is different. I get served sports and documentaries, while someone else gets movies that match their interests. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. Personalization only becomes a problem when it doesn't add value to the experience. That's when it starts to feel invasive, and teams are very mindful of walking that line.

Q: How do teams try to turn casual or occasional fans into loyal, long-term supporters?

A: This is the key part: How do we create lifelong fans? The Arizona Diamondbacks had a great program where they sponsored Little League teams. When I played Little League, I was a Toronto Blue Jay. For no other reason than wearing that uniform, I became a Blue Jays fan when I was young.

The Diamondbacks looked at that and said, "This is silly. Why are our current and future fans wearing the colors of another team?" So they created their youth jersey program. Instead of wearing other teams' uniforms, kids wore Diamondbacks colors. You'd have Diamondbacks Red versus Diamondbacks Black on one field and Diamondbacks Purple versus Diamondbacks Gray on another. It was a smart idea because the Diamondbacks became part of your childhood from a very young age, and that builds a lasting connection.

That's really the goal: to build a genuine connection between fans and teams. Loyalty is built through repeated emotional touchpoints, not a single interaction. That's why traditions matter so

much, and why creating early, affordable entry points into the fan experience is so important.

Q: In today's sports economy, how important are revenue streams such as merchandise, sponsorships, media rights, fantasy sports and betting in measuring a fan's value?

A: The answer is, it depends. I know, I know, but let me explain why. Only a few sports teams make detailed financial information public, which gives us a look into their revenue mix. The Green Bay Packers are one of those teams. In their most recent annual report, they reported that \$453 million of their \$753 million in revenue came from national sources, primarily media rights and leaguewide sponsorship deals. Local revenue made up the rest, but that gives you a sense of the distribution. Roughly 60% of their revenue came from national-level sources.

That mix isn't the same across every league. Generally speaking, the further you move from major professional leagues, the smaller the percentage of national revenue becomes compared with local revenue. For example, a high school football team might operate almost entirely on ticket sales and fundraising because it doesn't have media rights deals in place. So the sources of value really depend on the level of sports. In the NFL, media rights are the dominant revenue source. In college athletics, the minor leagues, high school sports and niche sports, local attendance, sponsorships, donors, fundraising and community engagement become much more important.

You also mentioned fantasy sports and sports betting. Both can increase engagement by giving fans a reason to watch games they otherwise might not watch. At the same time, they can shift part of the fan relationship away from team loyalty and toward individual players, prop bets and event outcomes. That creates both opportunities and challenges, and it's something teams have to consider when they look at the overall value of their fan base.

Q: How has technology changed the relationship between teams and fans, both inside the stadium and away from it?

A: Technology has given teams the opportunity to connect with fans on a near-constant basis. Through websites, mobile apps, push notifications and social media, teams can communicate with fans year-round. That simply wasn't possible, or cost effective, before the digital revolution.

It also gives teams the ability to tell stories at a much more granular level than ever before. As the number of media platforms has grown, so has the demand for content. Think about shows like "Hard Knocks," "Drive to Survive" or even "Basketball Wives." They give fans behind-the-scenes access and help deepen their connection with teams and athletes beyond what happens during the game.

At the same time, fans expect information instantly. The days of waiting until the 7 p.m. "SportsCenter" to get your sports news are gone. Today it's social media, breaking-news alerts and personalities like Shams Charania and Pat McAfee delivering updates in real time.

Beyond media, technology has changed the game-day experience itself. Digital tickets, cashless concessions, mobile ordering and app-based seat upgrades have changed how fans experience live events. In many ways, the goal is to reduce friction so fans can spend more time enjoying the event and less time waiting in line.

Q: What should fans understand about the business strategies behind the messages, offers and experiences that teams design for them?

A: Fans should understand that these messages are ultimately designed to drive revenue. However, the best organizations recognize that simply asking fans to spend more money is only a short-term strategy. Long-term success comes from creating experiences and offers that fans actually value.

The best teams focus on reducing friction, increasing engagement and improving the fan experience. When they do that well, revenue naturally follows because fans are more likely to come back, spend more and remain loyal over time.

Ultimately, fans should ask themselves one simple question: Is this making my experience better, or is it simply making it easier for the team to sell to me? The organizations that consistently answer that question well are the ones that build lasting relationships with their fans.

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