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The Use of Season Ticket Incentives in Major League Baseball

Kaitlin Poe
John Drea

Abstract

A study of Major League Baseball season ticket promotional incentives found that the most popular types of incentives provided to season seat holders (SSHs) were exclusive offers, complementary items, discounts, ticket options and services, and payment plans. Offering a payment plan to SSHs was positively associated with higher average game attendance. Payment plans were more commonly associated with teams with higher winning percentages over the past three seasons and with teams that filled a higher percentage of their stadium capacity. Teams that fill more of their stadium capacity were also found to offer fewer categories of season ticket incentives to SSHs.

Keywords: *Season tickets, promotional incentives, Major League Baseball, MLB, sports promotion*

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Introduction

One of the major sources of revenue for Major League Baseball (MLB) teams is ticket revenue. Ticket revenue can be subdivided into four categories: season ticket revenue (full to partial packages,) group ticket revenue (blocks of tickets for an individual game that are sold to an organization), suite and club seating revenue (exclusive seating where revenues are retained by the team), and individual game ticket revenue. Previous research has identified that winning is a significant influence on total attendance (Davis, 2009; Langhorst, 2014), though the effect of winning is different for different types of tickets. Individual game tickets are largely influenced by team performance during the current season; however, since season tickets are sold prior to the start of the season, they are influenced by the anticipation of team performance for the upcoming season (Drea et al., 2016).

For many teams, season ticket sales are the starting point for total ticket sales for a given season. There is an emphasis among most MLB teams to not only maximize full-season ticket sales, but to also get season seat holders (SSHs) to commit to renew or upgrade their season tickets as early in the off-season as possible. This enables a team to determine what its inventory of remaining tickets will be available for group and individual game sales. There is also an emphasis to focus on new SSHs acquisition and on retaining/upgrading SSHs from lower priced packages to higher priced packages in future years. A study of season ticket sales for the Pittsburgh Pirates (Mullin et al., 1993) reported that 80% of the increase in season ticket sales came from 20% of existing Pirate SSH renewing and upgrading/increasing their purchases. It is not an overstatement to suggest that season tickets are the backbone of MLB ticket sales operations.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the use of incentives for the sale and renewal of MLB season tickets—how incentives are used, the categories of incentives is use, and any evidence of their effectiveness.

Background

Season ticket sales staff typically have three primary goals¹: to increase the number of renewals, to increase the revenue stream from existing SSHs (upgraded packages or increase the number of tickets), and to expand the SSH base. It is also important to recognize that direct ticket revenue is only one part of the revenue stream tied to ticket sales. Other sources of revenue that are derived from tickets sold include concessions, parking, and auxiliary services (off-premises team properties that generate revenue from fans). Since these derived revenues are a significant addition to ticket revenue and SSHs are high volume ticket consumers, the lifetime value of SSHs is of importance to MLB ticket sales managers (Drea et al., 2017).

Overall, four factors have been identified that influence the decision to renew season tickets: administration and tangible services, team performance, social

¹Based on private conversations with MLB and college season ticket sales directors.

and related concerns, and love for sports (Chen et al., 2009). SSH satisfaction was found to be most closely correlated with the variable management of the event and facility (Chen et. al., 2009), and the two best predictors of renewal were the variables administration and tangible services and team performance.

There appears to be a difference of opinion between fans and sports marketing directors regarding which promotions are most effective at influencing attendance. Dick and Turner (2007) examined how National Basketball Association (NBA) marketing directors and NBA SSHs perceive the effectiveness of various activities (including promotional incentives for encouraging NBA season ticket renewals. Starting with a listing of twenty different promotional incentives that are used by NBA teams, promotional giveaways at the door was ranked by SSHs as the most effective promotional technique; however, this technique was ranked as #13 of 20 by the marketing directors. Partial season ticket packages were ranked #1 by NBA marketing directors, but only ranked as #5 by SSHs. The idea of a disconnect between fans and sports marketing directors over which promotions are most effective was also found by Lanzillo (2010) in a study of the effects of promotion on minor league baseball (MiLB) attendance. While the research was not limited to season tickets, minor league baseball fans indicated the most effective promotions were hat/cap giveaways (4.15 out of 5), t-shirt giveaways (4.05), and ticket discounts (3.93). MiLB team officials indicated the most effective promotions were fireworks (4.64), in-game entertainment (3.62), and ticket discounts (3.57). Fans seem to be more focused on tangible promotions, while marketing staff seem to be focused on activities that add to the entertainment value.

One of the effective uses of promotional incentives is in response to a service failure. Burton and Howard (2000) reported on effective strategies used by the Portland Trailblazers of the NBA to recover SSHs after a protracted work stoppage. These strategies included the use of gifts as a “tangible atonement for the service breakdown,” offering SSHs free attendance to a team scrimmage, and the use of all staff, the head coach, to personally calling SSHs to urge renewals. In the year following the work stoppage in which some had predicted a 20% decline in attendance, the Trailblazers sold 97.4% of their ticket inventory, in comparison to a league-wide average of 88%. Ticket exchange options have also been suggested as a way of increasing satisfaction for SSHs (Scheff, 1999), though this research was conducted for performing arts SSHs.

Female fans are an understudied area in season ticket research, yet the research that does exist suggests they may be accessible through a different promotional mix. Women are more likely than men to view attendance at sporting events as a means to spending more time with family (Davis et al., 2010). Other researchers have noted significant differences in how men and women respond to promotional incentives in sports. Hansen and Gauthier (1993) found that women purchased a greater quantity of team merchandise in comparison to men. Other research has found that in comparison to men, women are more likely to remain team loyal under adverse conditions (Fink et al., 2002). Given that women cur-

rently constitute only 30% of all “fans” of MLB (Sorilbran, 2019), developing a specific promotional mix towards this target audience is worth further study.

There has been little research into the effectiveness of the use of incentives to encourage MLB season ticket sales. One of the challenges to doing research on MLB season ticket sales and attendance is that MLB teams do not publicly share specific season ticket sales data, and the percentage of total ticket sales that are season tickets is believed to vary widely depending on the franchise. This makes it impossible to conduct a direct examination of the effects of the MLB-wide effects of specific season ticket incentives on different season ticket packages. Individual teams can conduct this research by using their own attendance and incentive data, combined with other independent variables that potentially influence attendance, such as winning percentage, day of the week, and weather (Drea, 1991); however, the lack of publicly available season ticket data from all teams makes it impossible for sports market researchers to draw MLB league-wide conclusions on the effects of season ticket incentives.

A second consideration is that many season tickets are purchased by ticket brokers and then resold to either institutional buyers such as hotels or resold in the secondary ticket market (i.e., StubHub). This means that these individuals who are sitting in season tickets seats are not the same individuals each game. The primary motive of a ticket broker in purchasing season tickets is profit, while the primary motive of an individual buying season tickets is usually related to the direct use of the seats and the entertainment value of the seats. As a result, the incentives provided by the team to the season ticket buyer do not extend to the individual who purchased the ticket on the secondary market. Since ticket brokers are motivated by profit, incentives that cannot be converted into revenue (throwing out a first pitch, MLB-TV app, etc.) are less likely to be effective.

Methodology

A review of the websites of all 30 MLB teams was conducted between January-March 2019. Data collected from each web site included the incentives provided by each team to season seat holders for three categories of season ticket packages: full season (81 games), half season (40-41 games), and 20-game packages. For the 20-game packages, no distinctions were made among the variety of 20-game packages available (e.g., 20 games chosen by the SSH, 20 games vs. division rivals, 20 games chosen by the team). Once SSH incentives were collected, six categories were created in advance: discounts, complimentary items, exclusive items for SSHs, ticket services and options, a SSH club/lounge, and miscellaneous. Incentives were placed into one of these six categories which are in Table 1.

Table 1

Categories and Examples of MLB Season Ticket Incentives

Incentive Category	Examples	# of MLB teams with 1+ of these incentives
Discounts	% off team merchandise % off game concessions Single-game ticket discounts Group tickets at a special rate Party suite discounts	27 teams
Complementary Items	Payment plans Scoreboard messages Spring training tickets On-field batting practice views SSH gifts	28 teams
Exclusives Items for SSHs	Ticket priority for postseason games Run the bases Pregame, on-field recognition Private SSH events Player autograph sessions	29 teams
Ticket Options	Unused ticket exchange Same seats for all games Online ticket management tools Ability to resell tickets SSH-only theme night presales	25 teams
SSH Lounges/Clubs	Club membership for SSH 10% off food and beverages in lounge/club	9 teams
Miscellaneous	Special Event/Concert Presale “Hit for your seat” SSH ID card Collectible pin	7 teams

Additional 2018 data was collected for each team on average game attendance, fan cost index (average cost for a family of four to see a game), win/loss percentage, market size, stadium age, and average stadium capacity filled. Market size was assessed in three ways: Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) population, Nielsen TV market size, and a subjective measure of market size (Bleacher Report) based on team operating behavior. In addition, we examined some specific incentives provided to SSH by some MLB teams: a SSH gift/promotion package; a SSH event/appreciation; a media guide, yearbook, and/or newsletter; a parking incentive (a free pass, discount or reserved area); and a free MLB-TV subscription. A summary of all variables examined can be found in Table 2.

Table 2*Variables and Scaling*

Incentive Category	Examples	# of MLB teams with 1+ of these incentives
Discounts	% off team merchandise % off game concessions Single-game ticket discounts Group tickets at a special rate Party suite discounts	27 teams
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Results

A series of independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to examine the variable average game attendance when each SSH incentive was provided, in comparison to when each incentive was not provided. Independent *t*-test results are provided in Table 3. Only one incentive, payment plans for SSHs, was found to be statistically significant ($t = 3.127$, $p = .01$) and in the expected direction (providing the incentive is associated with increased attendance. Average game attendance for the twenty-four MLB teams that offer SSHs a payment plan was 30,773, compared to 21,042 for the six MLB teams that do not provide this incentive.

Table 3

Independent Sample T-Tests, Comparing Attendance When Different Types of SSH Incentives Are Made Available

Variable	Attendance Mean if Offered	Attendance Mean if NOT Offered	T-value (sig.)
Payment Plans	30,773.67 (n=24)	21,042.17 (n=6)	3.127 (.010)
Discounts	28,467.67 (n=27)	32,064.67 (n=3)	0.577 (.615)
Complimentary	27,820.93 (n=28)	42,917.50 (n=2)	3.417 (.132)
Exclusives	28,731.07 (n=29)	31,620 (n=1)	0.310 (.759)
Ticket Options	29,298.12 (n=25)	26,743.60 (n=5)	0.552 (.604)
SSH Lounge/Club	26,512.78 (n=9)	29,819.33 (n=21)	0.949 (.357)
Miscellaneous	25,597.37 (n=8)	30,001.91 (n=22)	1.341 (.199)
SSH Appreciations	26,724.00 (n=7)	29,467.52 (n=23)	0.755 (.466)
Trips/Extra Incentives	30,118.00 (n=2)	28,735.18 (n=28)	0.235 (.848)
Misc. Gift/Promo Pack	30,490.25 (n=12)	27,718.78 (n=18)	0.806 (.429)
Events/Appreciations	25,734.50 (n=6)	29,600.58 (n=24)	1.336 (.202)
Media Guide, Yearbook, or Newsletter	32,539.50 (n=6)	27,899.33 (n=24)	1.078 (.315)
Parking Benefits (Pass, Discount, or Reserved)	25,652.72 (n=18)	33,589.33 (n=12)	2.548 (.018)
MLB-TV App	25,109.63 (n=8)	30,179.27 (n=22)	1.597 (.129)

MLB teams that provide payment plans are significantly more likely to be teams that have filled a higher percentage of stadium capacity. Teams that offer a payment plan for SSHs filled 70.96% of stadium capacity, compared to 51.27% for teams that do not offer a payment plan ($t = -2.541, p = .017$). Additionally, MLB teams that consistently win are also more likely to offer a payment plan to SSHs, in comparison to teams that do not offer a payment plan. Teams with a payment plan had a .513 winning percentage, compared to .455 for teams that do not ($t = -2.331, p = .027$). On the surface, this would initially suggest that MLB teams that win more and have higher attendance would likely have higher ticket prices, and a higher ticket prices would trigger the need for a payment plan for SSHs. While the fan cost index (FCI) (Statista, 2019) for teams with a payment plan was found to be higher than the FCI for teams without a payment plan (\$237 FCI vs. \$208 FCI), but the difference was not statistically significant ($t = -1.325, p = .196$). It is noteworthy that the FCI is likely to change from year to year for all teams in a relatively similar pattern, making the gap (\$29) between teams with and without a payment plan relatively constant from year to year.

One other variable, parking benefits, was also found to be significant; however, the means for MLB teams that provide parking benefits were lower than those who do not provide this benefit. There were several other variables where the mean attendance was actually lower when incentives were provided, including SSH events/appreciations, discounts, complimentary items, etc. The likely explanation for these findings is that teams that already have lower attendance are seeking to increase season ticket sales by offering a greater number of incentives to potential SSHs. The top four teams for percentage of stadium capacity filled (Boston, Chicago Cubs, San Francisco, and St. Louis all filled >92% of their stadium

capacities) only offer an average of incentives in 3.75 categories. By comparison, the remaining 26 MLB teams offer incentives in 4.27 categories.

One of the surprising findings is that most MLB teams do not significantly increase the number of incentives in a season ticket package as the number of games in the season ticket package increases. For example, Table 4 compares the incentives offered by the Los Angeles Dodgers, Detroit Tigers, and Cincinnati Reds for full, half, and twenty game season ticket packages. The value of the incentives provided remains relatively constant, even though the value of the season package for a given seat location substantially increases.

Table 4

Quantities of Incentives Offered to Season Seat Holders for 20, Half, and Full Season Packages for Three MLB Teams: LA Dodgers, Detroit Tigers, and Cincinnati Reds

	Los Angeles Dodgers	Detroit Tigers	Cincinnati Reds
20 game package	Discounts (2 incentives) Exclusives (3) Ticket options (2) Payment plans (2)	Discounts (7 incentives) Complimentary (3) Exclusives (6) Ticket options (3) Lounge/Club (1) Appreciations (3) Miscellaneous (1)	Complimentary (3 incentives) Exclusives (6) Ticket options (1)
TOTAL	9 SSH incentives	24 SSH incentives	10 SSH incentives
Half season package (40-41 games)	Discounts (1) Exclusives (3) Ticket options (2) Payment plans (2)	Discounts (7) Complimentary (3) Exclusive offers (6) Ticketing options (3) Lounge/Club (1) Appreciations (3) Miscellaneous (1)	Complimentary (2) Exclusives (8) Ticket options (1)
TOTAL	9 SSH incentives	24 SSH incentives	11 SSH incentives
Full season package (81 games)	Discounts (2) Exclusives (4) Ticket options (1) Payment plans (2)	Discounts (7) Complimentary (3) Exclusive offers (6) Ticketing options (3) Lounge/Club (1) Appreciations (4) Miscellaneous (1) Payment plan (1)	Complimentary (2) Exclusives (9) Ticket options (1)
TOTAL	9 SSH incentives	24 SSH incentives	12 SSH incentives

This does not mean that the actual incentives provided are identical (full season SSHs may receive different “exclusives” than 20-game SSHs), but it does indicate that the volume of incentives changes little as the number of games on a season ticket package increases.

In order to identify which season ticket-related independent variables were related to average game attendance, multiple regression (stepwise) was used, using a criterion of probability of F to enter $< .05$. (Average game attendance was used instead of total game attendance, since not all teams had 81 home games due to rain outs/postponements that were not made up if the game had no impact on the standings.) The goal was not to create a predictive model of average game attendance; rather, the purpose was to see if it was possible to isolate season ticket sales variables other than team performance (winning percentage) that contribute unique variation toward average game attendance.

It is important to recognize there is a significant limitation to this analysis, which uses regression to predict average game attendance, not season ticket sales. Average game attendance has been used as a surrogate variable because the number of season tickets sold by each MLB team is not publicly disclosed.² Predicting average game attendance would assume that season tickets as a percentage of total tickets sold is relatively constant, and anecdotal information suggests this is not likely to be a valid assumption. The present analysis serves as a starting point if such data does become available in the future.

Table 5

Stepwise Regression Results: Model Summary^a

Model Summary	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard Error of the Estimate
	.742 ^b	.550	.496	6515.03

^aDependent Variable: 2018 Average Game Attendance

^bPredictors: (Constant), 2016-18 Average Winning %, Bleacher Report Market Size Ranking, Club/Lounge

Table 6

Stepwise Regression Results: Coefficients

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	<i>B</i>	Std. Error	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)	-9266.867	12341.526		-.751	.460
2016-18 Avg. Winning %	89474.075	22955.855	.567	3.898	.001
Bleacher Report, Mkt Size	-318.461	146.195	-.310	-2.178	.039
Club/Lounge	-5533.373	2682.830	-.284	-2.063	.050

As expected, 2016-18 average winning percentage was the most important predictor of the dependent variable 2018 average game attendance (Beta = .567 in a three-predictor model), followed by the market size as assessed by Bleacher Report (Beta = -.310) and the presence of a club/lounge for SSH (Beta = -.284).

²The authors have spoken to two MLB teams as well as a representative of MLB on multiple occasions in an attempt to obtain this information, including offering to sign NDAs, but both teams deferred to MLB and MLB declined to provide the data.

As expected, larger market teams were significantly associated with higher average game attendance (Kendall's Tau-B = $-.361$, sig = $.005$). The presence of a club/lounge only for SSHs was associated with lower average attendance (26,513 attendance when a SSH club/lounge is available, compared to 29,819 average attendance when there was no SSH club/lounge available.)

Discussion/Recommendations

There are five broad categories of promotional incentives to season seat holders (SSHs) that are common for most MLB teams.

- Twenty-nine MLB teams offer exclusives available only to SSHs, such as post-season ticket priority, access to private events, autograph sessions.
- Twenty-eight MLB teams offer complimentary items, ranging from tickets to off-season activities, watching batting practice, etc.
- Twenty-seven MLB teams offer discounts on some team-controlled factor, such as discounts on concessions, individual game tickets, merchandise, etc.
- Twenty-five MLB teams offer ticket options and services for SSHs, such as mobile access, personal ticket representative, ticket exchanges.
- Twenty-three MLB teams offer payment plans for SSHs.

Within each category, however, there is variation in what promotions teams offer. As an example, the Detroit Tigers offer SSHs seven different incentives in the “discounts” category:

- A discount on the price of each ticket (compared to individual game prices)
- A season parking discount
- A discount on individual game tickets
- A discount on team merchandise
- A discount on an appearance by “Paws” (Tiger’s mascot)
- A discount to buy group tickets at the season ticket price
- An enhanced party suite discount

By comparison, the Tigers’ division rival Chicago White Sox offer only four discounts: a discount on suites, a parking discount, a discount on a party area, and a discount on individual game tickets. Another division rival, the Kansas City Royals, offers only one discount (individual game tickets). The amount of differences between teams in the types of incentives offered within categories suggests a need for research at the league level to identify what works and what does not in comparable MLB markets.

As previously noted, research into the effectiveness of promotional incentives in MiLB and NBA has suggested differences of opinions between what fans/SSHs perceive as motivators for attendance, and what team marketing personnel perceive as motivators for attendance (Dick & Turner, 2007; Lanzillo, 2010). It is also

worth noting that MLB has emphasized a need to increase diversity in its fan base and employment (Castrovince, 2018). Given the difference in beliefs by fans over “what works” in promotion and the differences in wants from diverse fans, MLB teams should be encouraged to allow fans to tailor the promotional incentives to their own needs. The Milwaukee Brewers already do this, allowing potential SSHs to choose promotional incentives from different categories based on their desires. A new full season Brewers SSH can choose one incentive from a “silver” category and one from a “blue” category, while a new 20-game SSH can choose one incentive from the “blue” category (silver and blue are team colors). These incentives are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

A Sample of the Menu of Promotional Incentives for Milwaukee Brewer SSHs (New full season SSHs choose one silver and one blue incentive. 20 game SSHs choose one blue incentive)

Silver Incentives (partial list)	Blue Incentives (partial list)
Two Diamond Box tickets for a 2019 game	A “fast pass” for kids running the bases
Taking batting practice at Miller Park	A SSH polo shirt
An autographed print of Bob Uecker or a star Brewers player (Yelich, Braun, Cain)	An autographed print of former owner/MLB commissioner Bud Selig or a star Brewers player (Hader, Aguillar)
Watching pregame batting practice on the field	A Sandlot/Cinco de Mayo theme night bobblehead pack
A family play day at Miller Park	Johnson Controls Stadium Club passes
Sliding down Bernie Brewer’s slide	Breakfast with team mascots
Movie night on the field	Movie night on the field
Luncheon with GM David Stearns	SSH refillable cup
From “Season Tickets,” 2019 (https://www/mlb.com/brewers/tickets/season-tickets).	

An additional element in the consideration of season ticket incentives is the ability of social media to increase the effectiveness of season ticket incentives. The Pittsburgh Pirates include the type of social media interactions between SSHs and the team as an input into their predictive models of which SSHs are likely to renew or buy season tickets (Vijayan, 2011). Any efforts to diversify the MLB SSH base is likely to include fans who are younger and have a greater emphasis on female fans. Both of these groups tend to be significant consumers of social media. Teams are advised to consider how social media can be used in conjunction with incentives that target under-represented groups (women, younger fans, fans of color).

Previous research into dynamic pricing (Drea & Nahlik, 2016; Sweeting, 2012) has indicated that the use of dynamic pricing typically results in an increase in profitability for teams that use it. Dynamic pricing allows ticket sellers to move closer to a market equilibrium price by increasing the price on a good that is scarce as the event horizon (game date and time) approaches. Alternatively, when there is an oversupply of tickets relative to demand, the expectation is that

dynamic pricing in the secondary market would fall. The issue is whether the same concepts would apply to SSH when the event horizon is the date when all tickets are no longer reserved for season ticket packages and therefore become available for individual purchase. While season tickets prices would not rise or fall as this event horizon approaches, some teams do provide incentives that encourage SSH to renew early. Renewal after the date in which individual game tickets go on sale may result in a lower perceived seat value, since some premium seats may no longer be available for a full or half season.

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