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# Satisfaction as a predictor of football club members' intentions

## Keywords

satisfaction  
sporting clubs  
members

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## Executive summary

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The satisfaction of members with paid memberships is not well researched, but it is increasingly important as many organisations move towards adopting this form of relationship with their customers. Specifically, as sporting organisations seek to become more professional and self-funding, they are operating paid

## Abstract

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A survey of almost 8,000 season ticket holders of Australian Football League clubs suggests that a combination of tangible (ticketing arrangements) and intangible (feelings of personal involvement) aspects have the greatest influence on the satisfaction of members and their intentions regarding future membership.

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membership schemes as a way of raising both revenue and the profile of the organisation. Past research has established that sporting club members are highly involved with the product and highly unlikely ever to switch teams (only to reduce their commitment). Given these intricacies, the factors



influencing the satisfaction of sporting club members and its relationship with future intentions could be expected to be markedly different from most transactional markets. This study examines the relative influence on the overall satisfaction of members of some common aspects of the membership package of eight (out of a total of 16) Australian Football League clubs. A survey of almost 8,000 members suggests that a combination of tangible (ticketing arrangements) and intangible (feelings of personal involvement) aspects have the greatest influence on satisfaction. On-field performance, despite being associated with fan attitudes and behaviours in the past, is not a strong influence on member satisfaction levels. Links between satisfaction and future rejoining intentions also are not strong, suggesting that continuing loyalty exists independently of perceived service standards for many members.

## Introduction

Paid membership programmes now provide a stable source of revenue for a wide range of both profit and non-profit based organisations (e.g. sporting clubs, political parties, theatre companies and art museums). Although many of these organisations have a mix of both paid members and casual customers, members are particularly important due to the continuing nature of their consumption and substantial overall expenditure. For non-profit organisations, membership schemes have become increasingly important as a way to combat rising competition in most sectors (e.g. the sports or charity sectors) and declining public funding (Hayes & Slater, 2003).

The importance of retaining customers, particularly members, to profitability and market share has been well documented (Oliver, 1997). However, studies of paid memberships are limited (Bhattacharya, 1998), but this number has grown recently reflecting increased acceptance of the importance of membership schemes (e.g. Gruen, Summers & Acito, 2000; Johnson & Garbarino, 2001). Many of the

organisations adopting membership schemes, due to their sporting, religious, political or social nature, are likely also to entail a high degree of consumer identification (Underwood, Bond & Baer, 2001) and involvement (Gibson, Willming & Holdnak, 2002; Voss & Voss, 2000).

This study looks at the various influences on member satisfaction of the offerings of eight professional Australian Rules Football clubs, of the 16 which comprise the Australian Football League (hereafter the AFL). Australian Rules is the largest football code in Australia, and the AFL competition has attendances of over 6.3 million a year and over 460,000 paid club members (around one in every 40 Australians). The elements of the membership product which influence member satisfaction in high involvement membership scenarios such as these, are not well understood. Studies in this area have focussed on one organisation in one time period – e.g. the single season studies by McDonald, 2002 (one sporting club), Garbarino & Johnson, 1999 (one Theatre Company) or Gruen, Summers and Acito, 2000 (one professional association). Bhattacharaya's (1998) study of lapsed museum members over five years is a notable exception, which informed the study reported here.

With aspects such as team success, production schedules, personnel and venues changing every year, a longitudinal analysis or analysis across a range of similar organisations is required. This study undertakes such research, comparing the influence of various components of the membership offering, and external factors such as on-field performance, across eight of the 16 AFL clubs. The high churn (lapsing member) rates often present in membership schemes (22-27% in the AFL) further justify such a study. The consequential relationships between satisfaction and future behavioural intentions are also examined to test the relevance of the satisfaction concept to member-based sporting organisations.

Consumer satisfaction research is now a heavily studied area, both commercially and academically, with well-defined constructs and measures.

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Conventional marketing theory holds that there is a strong relationship between perceived service quality and satisfaction, and this has been supported previously in a sport context (Madrigal, 1995; Murray & Howat, 2002). With membership services, though, the exchange is very different from a single consumer-organisation interaction, and thus it would be expected that satisfaction with membership schemes would be driven by, and result in, different factors to traditional consumer behaviour. Most obvious is that with a membership scheme, the member pays in advance for services, often committing to a bulk purchase (e.g. a season-ticket) although single purchases are available easily. In most membership schemes, discounts are possible on elements like admission prices, but this discount is only realised if usage is frequent.

For the AFL clubs studied here, many members attended fewer than half of all games to which they were entitled, and they were, therefore, paying substantially more per game attended by being a member rather than a casual attendee. Comparative studies that have looked at members versus casual customers of the same organisations have found consistently that members are different, both in the antecedents of their behaviour and in terms of their behaviour itself (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Bhattacharya, 1998).

Adding further complexity to this situation is the competitive nature of sporting clubs and the unknown influence that 'winning' has on member satisfaction and attitudes. Researchers have long speculated on the impact of on-field performance (be it short or long-term success) on the satisfaction of fans and their future sports consumption (commonly measured in terms of attendance). However, the relationship may not be as strong as is often suggested (DeSchrive & Jensen, 2002), particularly in the popular press (Quick, 2000). While some have suggested that winning is the ultimate 'marketing strategy' for sporting clubs (Mawson & Coan, 1994), with members the challenge may be to provide a satisfying membership experience irrespective of team results. Most research into this issue tends to focus on the

results of one game (Madrigal, 1995; 2003) or one season (McDonald, 2002). This study allows a comparison of the relationship between on-field success and member satisfaction in a more comprehensive manner than previous studies by researching a range of clubs with differing on-field experiences.

## Method

In-depth interviewing with up to 15 members of each of the eight clubs was undertaken in order to determine the main aspects of the membership product and to inform the questionnaire development. The questionnaire for each club ranged from 92 to 105 questions. However, due to a high degree of similarity in club products, 79 of these questions were common across all clubs. These common questions form the basis of the analysis presented here. Undertaking a mail census of the full membership lists (averaging over 28,000 per club in 2003) was not feasible, due to a restricted budget. Instead, all members of each club were invited to complete an online questionnaire linked prominently to each club's home website and promoted actively by the clubs in newsletters and emails. Up to one third of club members were active on the email list. Entry to the websites was secure, with members needing to enter their membership numbers and surnames to gain access. This process was used also to prevent multiple responses from the same individual. Each website was active for two weeks.

Each AFL club membership package was broken down into the following elements:

- ticketing (e.g. seating, packages offered, convenience)
- service to members (e.g. helpfulness of staff, complaint handling)
- club communications (e.g. magazine content, email updates)
- on-field performance (e.g. number of games won, coaching performance)

- club administration (e.g. board performance, financial management)
- club involvement (e.g. voting rights, recognition of members)
- home ground (e.g. standard of facilities, parking).

## Results

In total, 7,974 members completed a questionnaire. When the combined respondents were compared to the overall profile of the full list of each club's members, no meaningful differences were found. This suggests that the sampling process was not biased. Non-response bias was also checked through a comparison of early and late responses (Churchill 1979) and none was found. With such a large number of respondents, and the demographics of those respondents matching closely the characteristics of the overall club member population, it could be asserted confidently that this sample, and the results derived from analysis of it, are

representative of the membership base as a whole.

Ratings of satisfaction were obtained using an 11-point (0–10) scale with an instruction like "Taking all of this into account, how satisfied are you with your [Club name] membership package for the 2003 season?" (0 = "extremely dissatisfied", 10 = "extremely satisfied"). Future intentions were measured using the 11-point Juster scale, a measure of probability found to be more accurate than purchase likelihood measures (Brennan & Esslemont, 1994). Individual response levels for each club are shown in Table 1. Overall reported satisfaction levels with these different components varied markedly (see Table 1), from a high of 8.0 for the home ground to a low of 4.9 for on-field performance. Overall satisfaction, on average, was rated at 7.4.

Some statistical issues must be taken into account when conducting satisfaction analysis of this nature. In a regression such as the one conducted here, where satisfaction with part of the offering is to be correlated with a measure of overall satisfaction, a

**TABLE 1** Overall satisfaction as predicted by satisfaction with components – comparison of individual clubs' multiple regression weights and overall results

CLUB	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	ALL CLUBS COMBINED		
	BETA	BETA	BETA	BETA	BETA	BETA	BETA	BETA	BETA	MEAN	SD
Q23 OVERALL SATISFACTION – TICKETING	0.21	0.19	0.20	0.23	0.24	0.19	0.20	0.18	0.21	7.4	1.6
Q30 OVERALL SATISFACTION – SERVICE TO MEMBERS	0.20	0.05	0.17	0.12	0.12	0.20	0.22	0.17	0.16	7.3	1.8
Q40 OVERALL SATISFACTION – COMMUNICATION	0.26	0.12	0.18	0.17	0.20	0.15	0.19	0.27	0.19	6.8	1.8
Q46 OVERALL SATISFACTION – ON-FIELD PERFORMANCE	0.10	0.03	0.08	0.04	0.13	0.09	0.08	0.10	0.12	4.9	2.7
Q56 OVERALL SATISFACTION – INVOLVEMENT	0.12	0.26	0.17	0.22	0.21	0.16	0.20	0.16	0.19	6.5	2.0
Q61 OVERALL SATISFACTION – CLUB ADMINISTRATION	0.05	0.16	0.09	0.11	0.06	0.12	0.07	0.12	0.10	6.9	2.0
Q67 OVERALL SATISFACTION – THE HOME GROUND	0.17	0.24	0.23	0.19	0.19	0.21	0.15	0.11	0.17	8.0	1.6
Q68 OVERALL SATISFACTION										7.4	1.6
R-SQUARED (ADJ)	0.66	0.61	0.62	0.62	0.68	0.63	0.62	0.62	0.66		
SAMPLE SIZE (TOTAL)	948	563	1,471	738	696	1,351	1,689	518	7,974		
SAMPLE SIZE (EFFECTIVE LISTWISE DELETION)	651	430	1,065	555	517	897	1,151	350	5,616		

degree of multi-collinearity can be expected. The data here was inspected for signs of multi-collinearity using the two-step process suggested by Hair et al (1998). Although there were correlations between these items ranging up to 0.68, inspection of the VIF and Condition Index scores suggested no multi-collinearity in these regression results. The other concern when analysing data such as this is how best to treat missing data. Of the three main options for handling missing data in regression analysis – mean replacement, pairwise deletion and listwise deletion, listwise deletion is the most conservative method and is often favoured with large data sets. It was, therefore, employed in all the analysis reported here.

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between the satisfaction ratings given to the individual components of the offering and the rating given to the membership service as a whole. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. Overall, the model explains over 60% of the variance in overall satisfaction ratings – a high level of predictive ability for this type of research setting. This

analysis shows that all six components of the membership product contribute to overall satisfaction, with three components in particular having the strongest influences on overall satisfaction (ticketing and facilities, communication and club involvement). On-field performance, specifically, is only a moderate influence on the overall satisfaction of members. Interestingly, the four components controlled directly by the membership department of the clubs – ticketing, club involvement, service to members and communications – were stronger influences than the two factors ‘external’ to it – on-field performance and club administration.

In assessing the relationship between satisfaction levels and intended future behaviours, correlation analysis was undertaken. The results (Table 2) suggest that whilst expectations were correlated strongly with overall satisfaction, satisfaction was in turn correlated only moderately with measures of intention to repurchase next year, and perceptions of value, and correlated only weakly with ‘up-tiering’ and positive advocacy.

**TABLE 2** Correlation between satisfaction, expectations, attitudes and intentions (all clubs combined)

VARIABLE	MEAN	OVERALL SATISFACTION	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Q68 OVERALL SATISFACTION	7.2	1.00	0.79
Q69 OVERALL EXPECTATIONS	6.8	0.79	1.00
Q70 LIKELIHOOD OF REJOINING AT THE SAME MEMBERSHIP LEVEL NEXT YEAR	8.5	0.42	0.38
Q71 LIKELIHOOD OF INCREASING MEMBERSHIP LEVEL NEXT YEAR	2.7	0.18	0.18
Q73 PRICE PAID FOR MEMBERSHIP PACKAGE IS FAIR	7.4	0.56	0.51
Q74 ENCOURAGE EVERY CLUB SUPPORTER TO JOIN AS A MEMBER (ADVOCACY)	8.0	0.29	0.27
Q75 BEING A MEMBER IS A DONATION TO THE CLUB MORE THAN A PURCHASE	7.7	0.17	0.16
Q76 MEMBERSHIP PACKAGE REPRESENTS GOOD VALUE	7.5	0.63	0.58

ALL CORRELATIONS (PEARSON'S) ARE SIGNIFICANT AT THE 0.01 LEVEL (2-TAILED). LISTWISE N = 4,082.



## Conclusion

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It is rare to be able to study so many 'competitors' in one industry at one time. The results shown here are highly consistent across the organisations studied (Table 1). They provide support for various past studies, contradict others and allow some direction to be given to managers of membership programmes (specifically sports-related). The conventional notions that satisfaction is correlated positively with increases in desired behaviours and attitudes such as advocacy, intentions to rejoin and up-grade and perceptions of value, are all confirmed, but not as strongly as may have been expected. Encouragingly, these relationships are being weakened by the almost universal tendency of members to engage in positive behaviours and hold positive attitudes irrespective of satisfaction levels. This enduring loyalty can be explained in part by the lack of switching options, but also by a desire to feel more connected with the organisation, which is something membership promises.

In line with other notable studies in the area (e.g. Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), the findings suggest that satisfaction is influenced by a combination of identifiable service aspects and intangible feelings of involvement and affinity with the organisation. It has been suggested previously that feelings of personal involvement are a major motive for joining and remaining as a member, and can explain the satisfaction-intended behaviour discrepancies (Shank, 2002). Engendering feelings of personal involvement is, however, the directly controllable area in which the clubs were perceived to be performing most poorly (mean = 6.5, std dev. = 2.0).

Looking ahead, many clubs in this league (and around the world) are now faced with demand for memberships that exceeds ticket availability. A major way to grow memberships beyond ticket (seating) capacity would seem to be by offering a highly-involving membership experience that satisfies irrespective of on-field performance and whether members view 'live' in person or at a distance. Despite the oft-written-about importance of winning

(e.g. Daughtrey & Stotlar, 2000), it is clear that any relationship between on-field success, member satisfaction and future intentions is weak. There is little support for the assertion that winning is a useful 'marketing strategy', for although it plays a role in attracting members, alone it is unlikely to keep them. Instead of relying principally on on-field performances when assessing their level of satisfaction with the clubs' membership packages, factors such as the speed and convenience of ticketing, the seats provided and the standard of communications provided are far more influential for members. This supports the past findings (Van Leeuwin et al, 2001; McDonald, 2002) and suggests that sporting clubs do have substantial control over the level of satisfaction that members feel. It does provide a sharp contrast to recent findings in the superannuation industry, though, where members were focused heavily on simple tangible measures of performance, such as short-term returns (McDonald, Darbyshire & Vieceli, 2003). It also suggests that the action of 'basking in reflected glory' (Sebastian & Bristow, 2000) may be approached with a long-term perspective once supporters become members. The continuing challenge for clubs is to provide a holistic membership experience that is satisfying even when the teams' performances are not.

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