

Pittsburgh Pirates

Unlocking insight to create the ultimate fan experience

Using detailed fan segmentation and preference data sourced with explicit fan consent, the Pittsburgh Pirates effectively de-risk decisions and plan for better game-day experience.

In an effort to elevate the game-day experience, the Pittsburgh Pirates had traditionally been relying on a "try it and see" approach to improving the fan experience. Seeing the value in a repeatable customer engagement model they could use to test new initiatives and make improvements before implementation, they worked with their partner, Schmidt Market Research, to launch the Pirates Fan Council. They used advanced analytics to segment the Pirates' fan base based on their motivations to attend a game and uncovered fast, actionable insights to drive attendance and offer a tailored and improved fan experience.



With the Fan Council we can say with absolute certainty that the decisions we make reflect the feedback from our fans. This helps us continually improve and refine our programming, and aligns the business around our core purpose and vision.



Jim Alexander
Senior Director, Business Analytics & Strategy
Pittsburgh Pirates

⋮ **De-risks decisions for big and small investments**

⋮ **Accelerates experience optimization by cutting 2 weeks off decision-making timelines**

⋮ **Identifies fan experience fixes in real time**

Challenge

Creating consistency in an inherently emotional experience

Baseball is an emotional game. When your team wins, the beer is colder and the hot dogs taste better. When you're losing, the inverse is true. For the Pittsburgh Pirates, the challenge was identifying the factors they could actively manage and improve the predictability of a better fan experience at the park, such as concession sales, in-game promotions and marketing programs. Ultimately their goal was to understand the factors that are important to their fans and identify new opportunities to boost the total value of the game beyond the scoreboard.

Historically, the Pirates attempted to do that by executing initiatives, and then measuring their impact through post-implementation studies or less structured feedback. Using a "see what sticks" approach is fraught with risks. The Pittsburgh Pirates were interested in understanding if their fan segments' ballpark experience could be further improved via marketing-focused initiatives such as in-game promotions, entertainment, food service and so forth. If they could align programs with the experience preferences of each fan segment, the marketing team could tailor their promotions and communication to boost fan experience and ultimately positively impact number of visits and revenue.

Solution

Introducing a go-to source for agile fan feedback

Working with their partner, Schmidt Market Research, the Pirates Business Analytics and Strategy group introduced the Pirates Fan Council in 2017 as the go-to source for insight to guide their decision making. Made up of approximately 4,000 Pittsburgh fans, the team enjoys a 40-50% response rate in their activities even during the off-season. In 2018, they ran 2-3 studies every month on the Sparq customer insights platform that informed more effective marketing planning and fan experience events.

Richly profiled fan segmentation to better understand and tailor fan experience

In 2018 the Fan Council was leveraged to conduct extensive market segmentation. The Pirates conducted this research to determine out how to get more people to attend games from a strategic marketing perspective. They needed to better understand how to make the game experience more exciting, and look into fan preferences about entertainment, community initiatives, promotions, concessions, communications channels, and more.

Almost all (90%) of Fan Council members have one of four segments assigned to them. The initial segmentation research plan itself was run on the Fan Council with very fast turnaround—6 weeks from project initiation to delivering presentation. This is about half the time a typical segmentation would take; timelines were expedited because of access to the Fan Council.



Effective segmentation is an important part of any successful marketing strategy. The Fan Council has amplified the accuracy of our segmentation and improved marketing planning.



Kiley Cauvel
Director of Advertising &
Creative Services
Pittsburgh Pirates

About Schmidt Market Research

Schmidt Market Research was founded in 1986 in Pittsburgh PA, and has been delivering the highest quality research expertise and client service ever since. We take pride in offering a full range of services that include qualitative, quantitative, award-winning insight communities services, recruiting, and high-end telephone interviewing for hard-to-reach targets.

This fan segmentation has helped the Pirates understand the specific factors that drive attendance in each fan segment, so they can create relevant and customized programs, pre-test these programs with the segments, and then launch and track the success of these programs in market. Specifically, the team can quickly and easily engage each segment in research that uncovers insight about their media habits, purchasing habits, entertainment, and food preferences. Understanding how to segment fans on the fly will also become part of training for front line staff so that they can improve their customer service.

Keeping stakeholders engaged is key to success

Stakeholders across the organization are excited to work directly with the Fan Council to get their business questions answered. The ease of use along with flexible, robust designs and quick feedback from the segments they are most interested in, drive that engagement. In addition to presenting insights, the team also comes to stakeholders with digestible analysis and specific recommendations. On a broader scope, the Pirates Business Analytics and Strategy group have worked to put fan feedback from the Fan Council front and center. Information about the insight community and the results of the study are hosted on a central hub where everybody in the business can access. Today, top levels of the business request feedback from the Council regularly. "What do our fans think?" is a common question in management meetings.

Maintaining member engagement over time

Participating in the Fan Council is an extension of the Pittsburgh Pirates brand so it's important to consider a member engagement strategy that gets fans excited about participating in the first place and keeps fans coming back to provide feedback over time. Some of the special things they do include:

- Video welcome message from the Pirates' President
- "Ask the executives a question"
- Voting on t-shirt designs for stadium promotions
- Frequent share backs to close the loop on what the Pirates are doing with feedback
- Meet the member with stories about favorite memories at the park
- 3000th member to join the Fan Council received a private tour, signed jersey, and got to meet their favorite player

Building on what is already known

Progressive profiling of fans based on answers to questions over time and a link to the Pirate's CRM and purchase data ensures a great member experience too. The Pirates don't need to ask repetitive questions and can rely on actual purchase data rather than recall only.

The Fan Council is also representative of the Pirate's fan base. During initial invitations to join the Council, they ensured a balanced distribution from their mailing lists based on buying behavior. So the Pirates know if someone is a season ticket holder, individual buyer, lapsed buyer, group leader, or corporate package holder. This information is updated periodically to ensure activities are tailored to the right people and to inform additional analysis.

Rethinking season ticket sales

Sports teams are facing constant pressure to preserve fan loyalty and increase engagement. The simplest way to measure loyalty is through season ticket sales. Rather than the conventional one-size-fits-all approach that's been sold for decades, the Pirates are looking to package season ticket offers based on what they know about each segment from entertainment-seekers to families and die-hard fans. Insight from the Fan Council will make it possible to market tickets with a set of specific offers and experiences identified at scale. This evolution in package development is expected to have a big impact for the Pirates in 2020.

Outcome

De-risking decisions for big and small investments

The Fan Council enables fans to give feedback on a wide range of initiatives from advertising spots, new right field signage, replacing the in-park Prize Wheel with a more robust Fan Loyalty Program, T-shirt give-aways, marketing communications and more. Because the Fan Council is always on, the Pirates can get preliminary feedback on program ideas, test messaging, offers and promotions, and monitor feedback once in market for further refinements.

Accelerating experience optimization

Time to insights with the Sparq customer insights platform is much faster than traditional methodologies. The Pirates can turnaround insight within 48 hours, cutting at least 2 weeks off decision-making timelines.

Identifying areas of fan experience to fix in real-time

With a clear understanding of the factors that matter most to each segment, the Pirates track a monthly Fan Sentiment Index to stay on top of opportunities to improve critical moments of truth in the fan journey and overall experience. Using the index as a baseline they overlay additional data and results from ad-hoc in game and post-game surveys and then activate the Fan Council to dig deeper on potential issues when needed. In one instance, the monthly index indicated a trending gate and concession line issue that was impacting fan experience. These results were confirmed with details from post-game surveys and sent up to management within 24 hours of the initial flag.

Takeaways

Agile insight from Fan Council complements and augments data from multiple sources to de-risk decisions

Insight within 48 hours, cuts at least 2 weeks off decision-making timelines

Repeatable engagement and rapid, reliable fan feedback aligns the organization around an aspirational vision

Preference data from carefully segmented fans revolutionizes season ticket sales strategy; a critical revenue source

About Pittsburgh Pirates

An MLB heritage team, the Pittsburgh Pirates professional baseball team has won five World Series championships in their storied history. The Pirates, in partnership with Schmidt Market Research, are the first team in professional baseball to activate an insight community of carefully segmented fans to help them make more fan-led decisions and generate enduring fan loyalty and satisfaction.

About Vision Critical

Vision Critical builds customer trust and creates new business value through the collection and application of consent data. With its unique, relationship-based approach, Vision Critical's Sparq platform lets brands directly interact with insight communities of opted-in customers. Unlike traditional voice of customer methods, Vision Critical unlocks the real-time feedback that companies need to build better products, deliver better services, and achieve better business outcomes hand in hand with their own highly engaged, well-profiled customers.

Hundreds of high-performing organizations across multiple industries benefit from Vision Critical's technology and guidance. To learn more about Vision Critical, follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#), or visit us at www.visioncritical.com.