

How Much Do We Know about Concession Management? What Outsourcing Can Explain About Concession Management

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Abstract

Ironically, in spite of the important roles of a concession as perceived by sport teams, concession management has not been seriously explored by researchers. Thus, this study will provide a better understanding of concession management by focusing on the concept of outsourcing. Specifically, this descriptive study will investigate the motives of outsourcing and the decision making factors during the bidding process. This study reveals that the team outsources its concession management to a service provider mainly due to the expertise that the service provider can bring to the team. It also considers the important role that experience plays in choosing a service provider. This study further discusses theoretical and practical implications regarding concession management by applying the concept of outsourcing.

Introduction

While it is easy to view a concession stand in the stadium as a place just for a hot dog and beer, this stand is not merely about food and beverage. It plays key roles for a sport team, mainly, in two different ways. The consumption of concession food and beverage is an important part of game day experience sport teams offer and is a great source of revenue. Along with ticket sales and advertising, revenue from concessions is one of the top sources of revenue for some teams (Bigelow, 2004). For example, the University of Michigan generated approximately \$3.2 million in gross food revenue at all sport facilities including \$2.5 million alone from Michigan Stadium in 2009 (Muret, 2010a). Nevertheless, concession management historically has not been seriously investigated by the scholars in sport management; hence, the purpose of this descriptive study was to discuss concession management of one Major League Baseball (MLB) team.

To do so, theoretically the concept of outsourcing was employed to further discuss the concession in sport.

Concession Management

Previously, there have been some efforts in the field of sport management which indicated the importance of concessions for the sport teams (Kelly & Turley, 2001; Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). In spite of their academic contributions to the body of literature, the focus of these studies was brand management for the sport team noting the important role of concession as one of the components for better brand management for the team. However, as a subject matter, concession and its management have not been truly investigated by scholars. To our knowledge, Bigelow's (2004) chapter 'sales of foodservice and souvenir concessions' from Howard and Crompton's textbook, *Sport Finance* in 2004 is the only study. His work truly provided a wide range of information about concession from its history, trend and management to finance. Besides Bigelow's (2004) work, in spite of the awareness of the importance of concession for the sport teams, scholars have been reluctant to investigate the operation of concession in sport. The importance of concession may be understood in two different veins. First, as sport teams have started to emphasize overall game-day experience rather than simply winning and losing, which sport teams cannot control, better concession operation was considered important to provide quality game-day experience to the fans (Kelly & Turley, 2001; Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). For instance, sport teams upgraded their concession service by offering a wide range of food selection, different price options, quality food, menu flexibility, and overall great customer service to the fans. Secondly, in an effort to maximize revenues, sport teams actively explored ways in which food and beverage service could be a great source of revenue (Bigelow, 2004). Maximization of concession sales starts from an increase in per capita which indicates the average spending on concession per customer and is a good indicator of concession performance (Bigelow, 2004). Per capita can be determined by the following:

$$\text{Per Capita} = \text{Gross Concession Sales} / \text{Actual Turnstile Attendance}$$

Table 1 Food service per capita spending (2010)

Sport Property	Low (1999)	High (1999)	Low (2010)	High (2010)
Major League Baseball	\$5.50	\$12.00	\$9.00	\$20.00
Major League Soccer	N/A	N/A	\$5.00	\$15.00
Minor League Baseball	\$2.75	\$6.25	\$5.00	\$15.00
National Basketball Association	\$4.50	\$10.00	\$8.50	\$20.00
National Football League	\$6.00	\$15.00	\$11.00	\$20.00
National Hockey League	\$5.00	\$12.00	\$8.50	\$20.00

Note: Data compiled by The Bigelow Companies, Inc. Kansas City, MO.

Traditionally, sport teams have utilized either an in-house or outsourcing option to operate concessions (Bigelow, 2004). The in-house option refers to when the team manages its own concession, whereas the outsourcing indicates the use of an external party called a service provider to perform the concession management for the team. The contract between the team and service provider varies (Hilgedick, 2010). Usually, under the outsourcing option, the team receives a commission which ranges from 35% to 50% of the gross net sales from the service provider (Bigelow, 2004). As Table 2 shows, a majority of professional sport teams outsource their food and beverage service to the service providers like the Center Plate, Delaware North, Levy, or Aramark. Unlike professional sports teams, collegiate sports have not generated huge revenues out of concession mainly due to the low disposable income by fans attending the game and a limited sale of alcohol in college sports venues (Howard & Crompton, 2004). Recently however, it has not been surprising to see many athletic departments consider outsourcing concession management. One example is the University of Norte Dame which has been keeping concession management in-house but is considering hiring a service provider and is talking to number of different service providers currently in the market (Muret, 2010b). Given that outsourcing is a dominant form of concession management by sport teams, outsourcing will be further explored to better understand concession management in sport.

Table 2 Food service operation (2004)

Sport Property	Outsourcing	In-House
Major League Baseball	97%	3%
National Basketball Association	87%	13%
National Football League	94%	6%
National Hockey League	83%	17%

Note: Data compiled by The Bigelow Companies, Inc. Kansas City, MO.

Outsourcing

For many decades, outsourcing has become one of the most prevalent business decisions that show unstoppable growth across the industry. According to the Gartner Group, the worldwide spending on business process outsourcing will grow to \$239 billion by 2012 (Gartner Annual Report, 2008). Outsourcing is a strategic business decision to contract out traditional in-house operation(s) to the external third party hired through the contract (Busi, 2008). In other words, outsourcing is transfer of a certain operation to the external firm. There are a host of studies about outsourcing motives, and previous studies show a number of different organization motives of outsourcing such as, cost minimization (Coward, 2003; Kumar & Eickhoff, 2006; Kumar, Aquino, & Anderson, 2007; Rajan & Srivastava, 2007), quality improvement (Baldwing, Irani, & Love 2001; Elmuti & Kathawala, 2000; Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2000), and resource access (Clott, 2004; Kumar & Eickhoff, 2006; Mukherji & Ramachandran, 2007). The organization does not have to spend time or money to develop the talent around the operation because that operation can be outsourced to the external firm that specializes in that operation. Instead, the organization can focus on its core areas.

Outsourcing has become a popular business decision by a sport organization. Outsourcing has been employed for concession management (Muret, 2010a), ticket sales (Lombardo & Smith, 2009), merchandise sales (Muret, 2009a), facility management (Muret, 2010c), human resources (Adler, 2003) and/or media relations (Ourand & Smith,

2010). Accordingly, outsourcing as a subject of research has been examined by several scholars in sport management (Bouchert, 2010; Burden & Li, 2005; 2009; Burden, Li, Masiu, & Savini, 2006; Li & Burden, 2002; 2004; Lee, 2010; Lee & Walsh, 2011). Li and Burden (2002) indicated sport marketing is one of the most commonly outsourced operations by the intercollegiate sport organization noting that more than 50% of intercollegiate sport organizations outsource their marketing operation to the specialized firm. Burden and Li also (2009) noted that more than 40% of minor league sport teams outsource their marketing operation.

When it comes to motives of outsourcing in sport, there are several reasons for outsourcing in sport. Lee and Walsh (2011) examined sport marketing outsourcing decision making factors in intercollegiate sport and found that maximization of revenue is the most important factor for outsourcing. This result is consistent with previous a study conducted by Li and Burden (2002) where they also found that athletic departments outsource sport marketing operations in hopes of revenue maximization. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research about concession management outsourcing in sport management literature. Given the prevalence of outsourcing of concession management by the sport team, the study about outsourcing concession operations in sport management is recommended. To explore this subject, a case of Major League Baseball (MLB) team which outsources its concession management for years is discussed. Specifically, there are two reasons for this descriptive study: first, to examine the motives of concession management outsourcing and second, to investigate the selection process of the service provider.

Description of the Case

For the purpose of the descriptive study, there was an interview with the Vice President of Food and Beverage Service of one MLB team for approximately 90 minutes. There were follow up calls and emails as the study was progressed. This team was chosen for the study because the team is currently outsourcing its concession management and, importantly, it is the only team in the MLB that has a VP specifically for the food and beverage service, thus, it is believed that he could provide helpful insights for this study. The VP is an expert in the area of concession management and has other experience

which makes him the ideal person for this position. Prior to taking this position as a full time, he provided consulting service to the team and became fulltime in 2007. This former chef previously held many different managerial positions in the hospitality and entertainment industry, which clearly indicates his expertise in the area of food and beverage service, hospitality, and the culinary industry. With the team, the VP works with the service provider to ensure that the best food and beverage service are delivered to the fans during the season as well as during the off the season for other social events in the stadium. Overall, he acts as a liaison for the team and is responsible for management of the food and beverage service in the stadium. In addition, the VP puts the outsourcing contract out to the bid to seek the best partnership with the appropriate service provider in the market. This situation will provide additional information for the outsourcing selection for this study.

In the interview, the VP mentioned that the idea of concession management outsourcing is not new; rather, it has been out there for decades. As for the motives for outsourcing, he clearly provided a primary reason for outsourcing, to bring expertise in management. A service provider which includes an experienced staff, from a leader to a manager, a so chef to a head chef, is knowledgeable about food, beverage, and hospitality and customer service. While the service provider handles their expertise, the team can focus on its traditional core areas; the VP described “we do baseball, they do beverage.” Also cost minimization was another reason to outsource, and he noted that it would cost more not to outsource as concession management was not the team’s specialized area. The team would have to spend more time and money to learn and develop the capability to manage the concession. Lastly, ‘transfer the risks’ was mentioned. The VP said “if something bad happens with alcohol, the service provider deals with it as opposed to the team. It would not look good if we got into alcohol control.”

The VP mentioned about the selection of a right service provider. The bidding process for concession management is similar to other outsourcing bidding processes such as information system (IS) outsourcing (Chaudhury, Nam, & Rao, 1995; Nam, Chaudhury, & Rao, 1995). Once the decision to outsource is made, the team develops the request-for-proposal (RFP) and opens the bid. Internally, the team analyzes selected prospective bidders by asking themselves questions like: “Can they bring what we are

looking for?” “What else can they bring?” “What are the costs and benefit tradeoffs?” “How is their previous experience with other teams?” “What is their infrastructure?” “How is their reputation in the market?,” and so forth. Then, selected prospective bidders do the presentations, and the team goes through a series of discussion and negotiations about the details such as competency, infrastructure, policies, equipment, standards, and, most importantly, commission. Several decision making factors, including reputation, credibility, and integrity of the candidates are considered by the team.

Discussion

There are four reasons for outsourcing concession management in this case: expertise the service provider can bring, focus on core areas, cost minimization, and risks mitigation. The sport team outsources due to the expertise the service provider can offer to the team. It is consistent with previous research about outsourcing which supports outsourcing as a vehicle of bringing expertise (Baldwing, Irani, & Love 2001; Elmuti & Kathawala, 2000; Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2000). There are several examples of expertise the service provider can offer to the sport team. With the expertise the service provider has, and that the team usually does not have, they can provide better services like upgraded menus and food packages, digital concession signs and spacious concession stands for the fans. For example, the Arsenal Football Club (FC) in England worked with the service provider to effectively accommodate beer sales (Muret, 2009b). Soccer fans in the stadium usually flock to the concession for beer during the intermission. The team and service provider implemented the new system in order to expedite pouring the beer for the fans by also working with a beverage equipment company. According to Muret (2009b), this expedited pouring system can produce 31,000 pints during the half time at the Emirates Stadium, a home of Arsenal FC. This example proves that the service provider can provide expertise in the area of concession management by working with the team, and this expertise is the foundation of better service to the fans. It also simultaneously maximizes revenues.

The VP noted that the team clearly saw the expertise during the game day. Hundreds of employees from the service provider work during the game day at the

kitchen, concessions, luxury suites and management office to provide good customer service, which is not traditionally the core area for the team. Specifically, the service provider offers their expertise to elevate per capita. Per capita for a general concession areas is different from per capita for club seating or luxury suite areas, thus the service provider brings their expertise to increase the per capita by focusing on specific wants and needs from each seating area. To do so, the service provider has different leadership teams responsible for each seating area. While specific per capita information is not available, the VP mentioned that the team developed their own evaluation system based on previous records regarding an opponent, weather, season, team performance, and so forth to elevate overall per capita of each game. Overall, by outsourcing, they not only experienced sales increase but, more importantly, established overall well organized and structured concession management systems.

By outsourcing, the organization not only can expect expertise but also remain focused on their specialized areas (Wilcocks, Feeny, & Olson, 2006). Outsourcing concession management allows the team to focus on its own specialized areas, in other words “do the baseball”. In fact, focus on core areas as a benefit of outsourcing also generates another benefit. Outsourcing has a cost reduction value (Coward, 2003; Kumar & Eickhoff, 2006; Kumar, Aquino, & Anderson, 2007; Rajan & Srivastava, 2007). If the operation was kept in-house, the team had to learn about concession management because they did not have enough knowledge about it, hire the right person to manage the concession operation, educate the person employed by the team and closely manage and monitor a daily operation besides baseball operation (Gonzalez, Gasco, & Llopis, 2008). All of these cost a significant amount of time and money for the team, thus, the outsourcing option minimizes production costs for the team as they can simply transfer its operation to the service provider.

The organization outsources certain operations to minimize the risk by sharing or transferring it with the service holder according to previous studies (Greer, Youngboold, & Gray, 1999; Kremic, Tukul, & Rom, 2006). The VP provided a hypothetical example of an alcohol related issue, an accident involving intoxicated fans at the ballpark. Since the team doesn't want to get involved with an issue like this because it is beyond their expertise and doesn't look good for the team from a publicity standpoint, the

responsibility for this incident can be shared or transferred to the service provider by outsourcing. Therefore, one of the benefits of outsourcing is to minimize risk.

Regarding the selection of the service provider, the VP briefly mentioned a bidding process and pointed out several factors the team considers when it comes to the selection of the appropriate service provider: reputation, credibility and integrity. Wang (2002) found that reputation is an important decision making factor for selecting the best service provider in software outsourcing, and this case is consistent with Wang's (2002) study. The VP maintained that by and large experienced service providers are more likely to carry the three factors. Indeed, experience is a critical factor during the bidding process. Previously, Loh and Venkatraman (1992) found from their outsourcing study that the organizations searched for an experienced low cost service provider during the bidding process. The decision making of service providers of concession management outsourcing is very consistent with what the previous studies found out.

Theoretical Implication

According to the case, three theoretical foundations about outsourcing should be discussed for further understanding of concession management outsourcing in sport: transaction cost theory, agency theory and resource-based theory. Transaction costs refer to any costs generated for the completion of an exchange of goods or services between the parties involved in the transaction (Bolumole, Frankel, & Naslund, 2007), and the transaction cost theory centralizes on the concept of minimizing the costs and argues that the organization seeks profit maximization by minimizing the transaction costs (Williams, 1975). According to transaction costs economics, outsourcing is a business decision for reducing transaction costs (Williams, 1975; 1985). Transaction cost theory is commonly used as a theoretical framework for the outsourcing studies (Bahli & Rivard, 2003; Ellram, Tate, & Billington, 2008; McCarthy & Anagnostou, 2003; Wang, 2002; Williamson, 2008; Zhao & Calantone, 2003), and the theory proposes that the organization works to reduce transaction costs which includes both direct costs and associated support costs to maintain and enhance organizational effectiveness. As the VP mentioned, the primary reason for outsourcing is to minimize the operation costs of

concession. The in-house option costs more than the outsourcing option to the team, so by outsourcing the team can minimize and reduce operating costs associated with the concession operation.

Another theory quite often employed for outsourcing research is agency theory. This theory states that when the organization (principal) hires the third party (agent), it creates an agency relationship which justifies strategic alliances between the organizations (Fama, 1980; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Agency relationship theorists usually examine problems stemming from this relationship, for instance, potential conflicts between the principal and agent. Specifically, the potential conflicts may arise because of the organization's worry about loss of control. The loss of control by the organization is known as one of the potential disadvantages of the outsourcing (Bahli & Rivard, 2003). Previous studies about outsourcing in sport also showed concern over possible loss of managerial control due to outsourcing (Bouchet, 2010; Burden & Li, 2005; Lee, 2010; Lee & Walsh, 2011). The case, however, does not show major concern over the disadvantages as the team is closely monitoring, controlling and managing daily operation of the concession. The VP noted that "hot dog and beer has got our (the team) stamp on it. So what we do is say okay, we're going to be very involved. Where most ballparks say, okay, you win the bid, here it (the key of the kitchen) is. You pay us and you run the operation. We work very closely with our food service provider." Unlike most teams who simply "hand over the key of the kitchen," he closely monitors, controls and manages the service provider's daily operation.

Lastly, resource-based theory argues that the organization considers outsourcing as a way to acquire competitive advantages in the market by securing resources from an external environment in order to maintain or enhance operational performance (Bolumole et al., 2007; Rungtusanatham et al., 2003). Based on this perspective, decision making of outsourcing by the organization is to maximize the profit using external resources available through the service provider. In other words, this perspective highlights a resource acquisition through outsourcing. In fact, maximization of revenue through outsourcing is the most influential motive of outsourcing in the context of sport according to previous studies (Lee & Walsh, 2011; Li & Burden, 2002), and this study supports this notion.

Practical Implication

Clearly concession management outsourcing is a widespread business decision in sport. However, outsourcing has to be seriously considered by the organization as it is a strategic form of investment. Despite the advantages of outsourcing, outsourcing inherently carries its risks as it is a complicated process by two parties which are seeking different economic motives. While outsourcing helps reduce operation costs for the organization, it does not guarantee it due to risks associated with management costs. Hidden costs or unexpected costs incurred after the outsourcing contract was made (Bryson and Sullivan, 2003; McCarthy and Anagnostou; 2004), and cost escalation commonly occurs (Bahli & Rivard, 2003; Klepper & Jones, 1998; Lacity & Hirschheim, 1993). Accordingly, Bahli and Rivard (2003) noted that cost escalation occurs because of a lack of expertise with an outsourced activity or a lack of expertise by the service provider, and these situations may cause potential disputes or litigation between the parties as the organizations are not able to meet the business needs through outsourcing. A lack of expertise with the outsourced activity leads to poor performance and may also negatively affect profit. Consequently, the organization may want to get out of the outsourcing contract which also requires contractual amendments or renegotiation and switching services provider, all of which generates cost escalation for the organization (Bahli & Rivard, 2003; Klepper & Jones, 1998). Another form of risk is called “shrinking.” This is a situation where the service provider intentionally underperforms. One reason for shrinking is a disagreement or dissatisfaction with the commission or incentive the service provider receives from the organization (Aron, Clemons, & Reddi, 2005).

There are several helpful practical implications for the sport team. Due to the risks associated with outsourcing, the sport team should have an expert like the VP of this study who is familiar with overall concession management. The expert will be a key person between the team and service provider in terms of communication and collaboration so that the expert will have an integral role in managing overall food and beverage service for the team. In addition, as Key (1995) suggested, a team of experts who can continuously evaluate and monitor the service provider’s performance is recommended for effective and successful outsourcing. Simultaneously, in order to avoid

shrinking, close monitoring and managing is necessary as monitoring entails better management of outsourcing (Aron et al., 2005). Dual sourcing, which is a multiple service provider strategy, may be considered by the team as well (Bahli & Rivard, 2003). By doing so, the team can seek a high level of performance from the multiple service providers through competitiveness. The service provider can stay away from complacency to always deliver the higher quality to outperform other service holders (Currie & Willcocks, 1998).

Future Research

Given the lack of studies about concession management, several lines of research, specifically regarding outsourcing, can be suggested. First, while outsourcing is a dominant form of concession management, there are still teams that prefer an in-house operation. The Arizona Cardinals recently brought the concession management back to in-house. In literature, Burden and Li (2005) argued that there are several circumstantial factors affecting the decision of sport marketing outsourcing for the athletic department. Circumstantial factors should be carefully considered because these factors affect the organization's philosophy, goals, mission and overall strategic management, which ultimately influence what, when, how long, and, most importantly, whether to outsource or not (Butler, 2000). Similarly, once the sport team decides to outsource its concession management, the team needs to also contemplate the level of outsourcing. Some teams outsource general concession management but still provide the food and beverage services for luxury suites. While some teams completely outsource concession operations, some teams, like in this case, prefer outsourcing a majority of its operation while holding overall management power about its operation. The outsourcing decision does not fit every organization; it may be a great business decision for some teams but not for the other teams. The sport teams should seriously contemplate outsourcing by examining their unique situational factors to come to the best business decision. Thus, given many teams do not have enough knowledge about concession outsourcing, the outsourcing decision-making model available to sport teams will provide a great amount of knowledge.

Given outsourcing is a form of strategic investment, an outsourcing evaluation model should be recommended for future studies. There are several studies about outsourcing evaluation available for study. Literature from IS showcases efforts to develop outsourcing evaluation procedures (Chen, Chou, & Lin, 2007) using performance (Grover, Cheon, & Teng, 1996), economic, strategic, profit, partnership quality, and satisfaction (Grover, Cheon, & Teng, 1996; Saunders, Gebelt, & Hu, 1997). In addition economic benefits, outsourcing operating costs, contracts and vendor management (Chen, Chou, & Lin, 2007) are included. Because there are no such studies in sport management, future studies investigating concession outsourcing evaluation is suggested.

Conclusion

Outsourcing concession management is a quite common business decision made by sport teams, yet researchers have been reluctant about the study of its business operation. This study investigated the concession management in sport industry by applying the concept of outsourcing. Concession plays a crucial role in that it is one of the components of a fan's game day experience and is a huge source of revenue to the team. As the VP in this study noted, "people come to the ballpark and they want experiences, and we want to be able to take care of those culinary needs that they have." It is important to meet the wants and needs of fans in the stadium, and the quality of the food service offered by the service oriented concession has to be seriously considered and managed in order to maximize the revenue for the team.

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