

Fans for Life: The Importance of Kids Clubs in College Athletics

4 MIN READ



Attendance at college athletics events is declining. Even the juggernaut that is college football is in a slow, but steady downward spiral – with attendance at its [lowest point in 22 years](#).

It's hard to deny the benefits of the living room experience: free parking, ice cold beer in your own fridge, clean bathrooms, 4K ultra HD TVs, strong WiFi signal and more.

Yet it's equally difficult to deny the incredible excitement of the in-venue experience as you cheer on your favorite team with 50,000+ of your closest friends. Think high-fives. Gameday traditions. Belting out your team's fight song after a sweet win over a bitter rival. These are shared experiences that are hard to top.

Yet how can schools boost attendance and actually get more fans out to their games?

I'd argue that college athletics departments should shift some of their focus to the long game and pay more attention to their youngest fans – kids aged 12 and under.

The creation of a kids club program – or advancing it if you've already got one – should be the centerpiece of this cradle-to-grave marketing strategy, with the long-term goal of developing diehards and creating fans for life.

Let's take a step back for a minute. Right now, it's trendy in #sportsbiz to focus on Millennials to help boost attendance. Teams are creating monthly subscriptions. We're seeing lower concession prices, new in-venue lounges and stronger WiFi. These types of 'Millennial magnets' are sweeping the nation.

With all these differentiators, are we still missing something?

In some cases, yes. Why? Because we can't ignore that Millennials are becoming parents – and they are looking for fun experiences to share with their kids. That's 10.8-million U.S. households with multiple potential attendees!

But is it too late? I don't think so. With some of your time and attention focused in the right place, kids will be begging their parents to go to the game as they transition into lifelong fans.

A critical part of the 'long game' is focusing more on the fan experience and investment in the future.

If your kids club includes game tickets, stop severely limiting options by having tons of blackout dates and offering seats in the nosebleeds. Instead, carve out blocks that will give kids a taste of what it's like to sit in great seats at a family-friendly game time. They'll be hooked and parents will have a hard time saying no when they want to return.

This also creates great shareable moments that will very likely get posted on social media – increasing your organic marketing reach to a very desirable look-alike audience.

It's also important to think beyond the gameday experience. Invite kids and their families to your campus for venue tours, sports clinics, viewing parties with spirit squads, photos with your mascot and autograph sessions with student-athletes.

In addition to creating an incredible fan experience for kids club members, use this as an opportunity to collect another form of currency – fan data. This is a prime opportunity to start building customer profiles that can be strengthened as kids club members grow into young adults and eventually college students.

A strong CRM allows you to take action on the data collected too. Use marketing automation to send your kids club members – or their parents, depending on the account's communications preferences – a ticket offer or merchandise discount on their birthday. Create a customer moment by offering a seat upgrade when they scan into the venue. Invite them to participate in a summer sports camp held on campus. The possibilities are limited only by your own imagination.

The brand affinity established during childhood is what paves the way to lifelong relationships between fans and their favorite teams. Nurturing this relationship with customers over many years creates passionate and loyal fans. And remember that today's kids club members are tomorrow's season ticket holders and major donors.