

# STREET & SMITH'S **SportsBusiness** **JOURNAL**

## **Survey: NASCAR sponsors shouldn't ignore fall**

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NASCAR sponsors are neglecting the sport's core fan base by focusing so much marketing activation at the beginning of the year instead of the summer and fall months, according to research from **marketing and public relations giant Taylor.**

The agency began sharing its survey of avid NASCAR fans in the last few weeks with top teams like Hendrick Motorsports and Joe Gibbs Racing; its brand clients, which include Ask.com, Diageo (Crown Royal) and Gillette, among others; and the sport's governing body.

The survey of 1,648 consumers showed that a majority of fans pay the closest attention to the sport in the fall during the Chase for the Sprint Cup, a time when sponsor activation is often at its nadir. The traditional approach of spending heavily in the early part of the season — there's always a rush to make a big splash at Daytona — is very likely misguided, the survey showed.

**“What we often see is a follow-the-herd mentality,” said Brett Jewkes, managing partner in Taylor’s Chicago office, of sponsor activation. “Everybody thinks about going big at Daytona, then it tapers around the middle of the year and when football comes it mostly goes black. But that’s marketing against an old template as opposed to when fans are most interested. There’s way less activation in the fall and that’s where we’re seeing unmet consumer needs.”**

Taylor's survey was administered by Greenfield Online during the first week in October and sought to address common perceptions about the sport's fan base. The Taylor Knowledge Center, the agency's own research team, developed the questions and organized the results, which showed that 80 percent of the fans are most interested in the summer and fall months, while only 20 percent said their interest peaked in the spring.

“We see a lot of studies like this and for the most part, it's same old, same old, but Taylor's study makes some bold statements and, if verified, it's pretty compelling,” said Tim Considine, general manager of Sprint's title sponsorship with NASCAR. Sprint is not a Taylor client, but Taylor shared an early version of the study with Considine because of Sprint's standing in the sport.

“As far as the seasonality of the fan interest, that was information we had not seen before,” Considine said.

TV ratings are significantly higher in the spring and tend to gradually drop during the summer and fall as football begins, but that apparently doesn't mean that NASCAR fans aren't interested.

Some sponsors also scale back their activation because their car doesn't make the Chase.

"TV ratings are just one metric," Jewkes said. "They're still going online, they're still reading about NASCAR in the paper, they're still watching the standings in the fall. And what's happening is that sponsors aren't talking to them as much."

The survey also revealed:

Nearly half of those in the 18- to 34-year-old demographic say they want to support the sponsors for their favorite driver, but they have a hard time supporting more than one primary sponsor. Older fans weren't as objectionable to multiple primary sponsors.

Fans still want news about their favorite driver through traditional channels of local news and newspapers. Forty-three percent say they look to mainstream media, 40 percent go to NASCAR-generated media, mostly NASCAR.com, and 11 percent seek information from the driver or team Web page. The other 6 percent go to social media outlets like Facebook or Twitter.

"That so many fans still look for NASCAR from their local news and newspaper was startling," Considine said.

Fifty-seven percent say the economy has affected their plans to attend a race, but people who typically go to five or more races say the economy has not affected their plans.

Not only do the majority say Dale Earnhardt Jr. is their favorite driver, he's also the second-favorite driver among fans who like someone else. Earnhardt, Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart, Mark Martin and Jimmie Johnson, not surprisingly, were the most popular, in that order. Kyle Busch rated among the top five favorites in the male and female 18-24 demo, while being the least liked in the male 45-55, 55-64 and 65-plus categories.

The fans of these drivers, while sharing an affinity for the sport, are likely very different in how they consume NASCAR content. Taylor contends that there is no true "NASCAR fan base," but a collection of unique fan segments.

"Sponsors too often take the approach that they're going to capture all NASCAR fans," Jewkes said. "But what we see is that there are massive shifts across demographic groups. Each fan segment is unique, with different ways of consuming the sport."

"The starting point should be the sponsor's driver and making sure that group is predisposed to hearing your message. I don't see a lot of people being careful to do that, but that's where you can carve out a sweet spot."

Taylor will begin sharing deeper information from the survey with partners over the course of December and early 2010 as more data is collected.