

## 2017 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XV)

### **Riding out the Storm: Analyzing MS 150 Participant Behavior in the Wake of a Natural Disaster**

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**4:30-4:55 PM, Wilber/Colonial**

**25-minute oral presentation**

**(including questions)**

In 2016, American's donated a record-setting \$373 billion, an increase of approximately \$35 million from 2015 (Fessler, 2016). Charity sport events have become a common and proven resource development scheme for non-profit organizations (Bennett, Mousley, Kitchin, & Ali-Choudhury, 2007; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2009; Scott & Solomon, 2003). Managerial goals associated with charity-based sporting events include producing event publicity, creating and maintaining relationships with sponsors, generating awareness about a specific cause, and inspiring community engagement (Ruperto & Kerr, 2009).

The National MS Society (NMSS) is an example of a non-profit that has used sport based events to raise capital for their cause ("Sponsor Recap," 2016). The NMSS currently coordinates six different types of sport based events nationally ("Get Involved," 2016). In 2016, the NMSS invested \$122 million to provide affected individuals and their families with resources and information necessary to cope with multiple sclerosis and devoted an additional \$54 million to support 380 research projects globally ("Sponsor Recap," 2016).

One of the NMSS's sporting events is the Professional Golf Association (PGA) TOUR Cycle to the Shore, one of 85 rides sponsored by the organization that collectively attract over 100,000 riders nationally. The event is held in Jacksonville, Florida and consists of a 150-mile bicycle ride to Daytona Beach and back, with shorter duration ride options also available. In 2016, 1,200 cyclists and 200 volunteers participated in the event. The event route features long stretches of Florida's historic highway A1A running along the Atlantic Ocean coastline. The event regularly draws over a thousand riders and raises about \$1 million in donations. The PGA TOUR provides the use of their property for start/finish activities, monetary support, and matching donations for their corporate team. In addition to the PGA TOUR, the event captured approximately \$100,000 in sponsor donations, and an additional \$50,000 in in-kind donations (Gregg, Pierce, Sweeney, & Lee, 2015; E. Mills, personal communication, November 29, 2016; "Sponsor Recap," 2016).

In 2016, the event was scheduled to take place on October 22 and 23. Just over two weeks prior, however, Hurricane Matthew, at one point a Category five storm, struck Florida's East Coast (Monroe, 2016). While the storm weakened just before making landfall, the damage was extensive (Pantazi, 2016). Large segments of highway A1A and adjacent properties were washed into the Atlantic Ocean. Downed trees and debris clogged roadways (Martin, 2016). The storm also destroyed the course for the Cycle to the Shore, forcing race organizers to make difficult decisions. The purpose of this developing research is to identify how natural disasters affect charity based sporting events' participant retention that are altered, rather than canceled.

With the understanding that canceling any charity event causes a decrease in fundraising and corporate sponsorship for future events, NMSS officials worked with their course organizers, Promoter Line to determine if it was feasible to hold the event (E. Mills, personal communication, November 29, 2016). Four alternative routes were explored (E. Mills, personal communication, November 29, 2016). Promoter Line and the NMSS selected an out and back loop in one of the same counties the original ride was to be held. The ride was shortened from two days to one; participants were informed via electronic communication that the ride would continue (E. Mills, personal communication, November 29, 2016).

A logistic regression analysis of three years of ride data identified significant variables that influence participant retention. Findings indicated distance traveled to the event, age, ride distance, funds raised, and team membership

## 2017 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XV)

had a significant impact on rider retention. Following the 2017 ride, data will be analyzed and compared to previous years to determine if altering the ride route impacted rider retention. This research will add to the existing body of knowledge related to charity based sporting events, preventing charity based sporting event fatigue, as well as the influence of natural disasters on the future success of non-profit organizations.

### References

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