

Brand Keys 2014 Sports Fan Loyalty Index Scores NHL Team Loyalty

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Gliding through first two rounds and into the conference finals and playoffs of the 2014 Stanley Cup has hockey fans on the edge of their seats. The Stanley Cup – commissioned in 1892 and named for Lord Stanley of Preston, then-Governor General of Canada – is the championship trophy awarded annually to the National Hockey League winner at the conclusion of the finals.

And, just before the conclusion of hockey's greatest competition, Brand Keys (brandkeys.com), the New York-based brand and customer loyalty research consultancy, has released the results of its' Sports Fan Loyalty Index for the most loyal fans in the NHL, – noted Robert Passikoff, Brand Keys founder and president. According to 150 fans in each of the teams' own DMAs, the current 2014 NHL top-5 and bottom-5 brand loyalty rankings are as follows (last season's ranking appear in parentheses):

Top-5

1. Chicago Blackhawks (#2)
2. New York Rangers (#1)
3. Boston Bruins (#2)
4. San Jose Sharks and St. Louis Blues (#3 and #6)
5. Pittsburgh Penguins, Detroit Red Wings and Philadelphia Flyers (#4, #5, and #5)

Bottom-5

30. New York Islanders (#30)
29. Columbus Blue Jackets (#29)
28. Phoenix Coyotes and Winnipeg Jets (#28 and #27)
27. Buffalo Sabres (#23)
26. Tampa Bay Lightning (#26)

Win-loss ratios may be the only thing when it comes to a playoff championship, but when it comes to loyalty it's not the only thing. – Rule-of-thumb is that win-loss ratios can contribute up to a 20% bump in a team's loyalty. But to be fair to NHL fans, professional hockey is a little different from other Major League Sports, – said Passikoff. – Its contribution to loyalty is higher for the NHL, about 10% more, for a number of reasons: first, the sport moves faster than the others, so more attention is necessarily paid to the Pure Entertainment driver where wins and losses reside. For the NHL, the Authenticity driver correlates very highly to at-home attendance figures, and makes a slightly higher contribution to engagement and loyalty than for the NFL, MLB or NBA.

– Additionally, – said Passikoff, – while hockey fans have their favorite players, the protective equipment makes it hard to instantaneously identify individuals, with the possible exception of the goalie, so Fan Bonding makes a slightly smaller contribution in the case of this sport.

So while the final scores and game attendance tend to contribute more to loyalty for professional hockey, all of the emotionally-based, predictive drivers must be taken into account when measuring NHL team loyalty. The four emotional drivers of fan loyalty are:

Pure Entertainment:

How well a team does and, as noted, a bit more for hockey. But also contributing – how exciting is their play?

Authenticity:

How well they play as a team and do fans show up to root for the home team.

Fan Bonding:

Are there players that are particularly respected and admired?

History and Tradition:

Is the game and the team part of fans' and community rituals, institutions and beliefs?

Of the four Major League Sports Brand Keys tracks in its' Sports Fan Loyalty Index, perhaps not surprisingly because

winning and attendance plays such a large role in generating loyalty, the National Hockey League is #4 again this year. The National Football League is currently #1, followed by Major League Baseball, with the National Basketball Association in third, place.

Overall team rankings “no matter which league” because they are based on predictive engagement metrics, correlate with viewership and licensed merchandise sales. And, since rankings can be influenced depending upon how loyalty drivers are managed, it’s critical that NHL team marketers act as strategically off the ice as the players do on the ice.

“It was ‘The Great One’ Wayne Gretzky who noted that a good hockey player plays where the puck is, while a great player plays to where the puck is going to be. Great sports marketers know that same maxim can be applied to fan loyalty too,” said Passikoff. “Particularly if you have the right metrics in place.”

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