

Chicago Blackhawks and New York Rangers at Top, Colorado Avalanche and Florida Panthers at Bottom

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Just before the conclusion of hockey's greatest competition, Brand Keys, Inc. (brandkeys.com), the New York-based brand and customer loyalty research consultancy, has released the results of its Sports Fan Loyalty Index of the most loyal fans in the NHL, "which represents the ultimate trophy a sports marketer can win," noted Robert Passikoff, Brand Keys founder and president.

According to 225 fans in each of the teams' own local media areas, the current 2015 NHL top 5 and bottom 5 brand loyalty rankings are as follows; last season's ranking appearing in parentheses:

Top 5

1. Chicago Blackhawks (#1)
2. New York Rangers (#2)
- Montreal Canadiens (#8)
3. St. Louis Blues (#4)
4. Boston Bruins (#2)
5. Pittsburgh Penguins (#5)

Bottom 5

30. Columbus Blue Jackets (#30) Phoenix Coyotes (#27)
29. Buffalo Sabres (#27)
28. Winnipeg Jets (#28)
27. Florida Panthers (#22)
26. Colorado Avalanche (#23)

Win-loss ratios may be the only thing when it comes to a playoff championship and the "Rule-of-thumb is that win-loss ratios contribute up to a 20% bump in a team's loyalty. To be fair to NHL fans, loyalty in 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, so winning accounts for a larger loyalty jump in hockey for a number of reasons: first, the sport moves faster than others, so there's a bit more attention paid to the Pure Entertainment driver wherein wins and losses reside. Also the scores are always a lot closer in hockey.

For the NHL, the Authenticity driver correlates highly to at-home attendance figures, and makes a slightly higher contribution to engagement and loyalty than it does for the NFL, MLB, or the NBA. The Tampa Bay Lightning who made finals this year and were in the top 60% in terms of attendance moved up from #26 last year to #8 this year.

"Additionally," said Passikoff, "While hockey fans will have their favorite players, the protective equipment makes it hard to instantly identify individual players, so Fan Bonding makes a slightly smaller contribution in this sport. But it doesn't hurt if the Tampa Bay Lightning have players like Tyler Johnson, Nikita Kucherov, Ondrej Palc, and Steven Stamkos for fans to bond with."

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

Pure Entertainment:

How well a team does and, as noted, a bit more important for professional hockey.

Authenticity:

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

Fan Bonding:

Are there players that are particularly respected and admired?

History and Tradition:

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

Of the four Major League Sports that Brand Keys tracks in its Sports Fan Loyalty Index, perhaps not surprisingly, because winning and attendance play such a large role in generating loyalty, the National Hockey League is #4 again this year. The National Football League is currently 1st followed by Major League Baseball, with the National Basketball Association in 3rd place.

Overall team rankings “no matter which league” because they are based on predictive engagement metrics, correlate with viewership and licensed merchandise sales, and in the case of hockey, attendance. 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 it.

“It was ‘The Great One’ Wayne Gretzky and, who noted that a good hockey player plays where the puck is, 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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