

Research provides a new picture of ticket scalpers

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Ticket scalpers outside Chase Field in downtown Phoenix have developed a system of "co-opetition," acting professionally and working together to set prices that are in line with market standards, an ASU research team found. Credit: Dru Bloomfield via public-domain.pictures

You've heard the stereotype of ticket scalpers – that they're lone wolves waiting to prey on people with overpriced access to the events we want to see. Pretty accurate, right? Well, maybe not.

A new study coming out of Arizona State University's Center for Organization Research and Design (CORD) suggests otherwise.

The research found that competing scalpers in Phoenix have developed working relationships that help them move product and assist the people buying tickets by providing a professional environment and prices that are in line with market standards.

Yes, scalpers are helping people pay fair prices to enter baseball games.

That's what Barry Bozeman found. The Arizona Centennial Professor of Technology Policy and Public Management for CORD led a team on scalping reconnaissance at Phoenix's Chase Field, home of the Arizona Diamondbacks.

"I've been going to baseball games and buying tickets from ticket scalpers for years," he said. "I thought, 'This is really interesting – they're cooperating with mutual respect but at the same time competing like crazy.' "

The practice is called co-opetition, and Bozeman, along with CORD senior research assistant Gabel Taggart, studied it outside Chase Field as competing scalpers would argue with each other one minute, then work together to get a customer the seat he or she wanted.

"I thought it would be an interesting case study," Bozeman said. "And it would allow me to go to a lot of baseball games."

The friendly business between "clans," as Bozeman called them, doesn't just help scalpers sell tickets. The working relationships also set a standard of professionalism that is policed by each clan.

For example, Bozeman said during the course of his research he didn't have any scalpers take advantage of him or treat him in a way that wasn't courteous and tactful. Various members of the clans admonished rogue scalpers who defied the standards.

Another interesting discovery: The scalpers don't fight online ticket resellers such as StubHub; they embrace them.

The scalpers, who were casually interviewed by Bozeman's team as they purchased tickets, said they use StubHub to help determine ticket prices.

Bozeman's team, which included CORD researchers Kevin Todd and Neil Fowler, checked StubHub after each scalping purchase to verify price trends. Every time the prices were on par with or below StubHub listings.

This is good news for Diamondback fans looking to score a seat at the last minute. But what about in other markets outside Phoenix, where scalping might be illegal?

"I think you'll find pretty much the same arrangement," Bozeman said. "I don't think what we found is an unusual Phoenix syndrome."

Which means it might be time to update that stereotype about ticket scalpers.

Provided by Arizona State University

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