

CORPORATE REPUTATION: A SPORT CONSUMER ANALYSIS

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Context

Given increasingly volatile and competitive markets (Kosnik, 1989) one of the most prominent and pervasive concepts discussed within management frameworks today is that of corporate social responsibility (CSR), and the broader concept of corporate reputation (CR) (Kitchen & Laurence, 2003; Martin, 2002). Discussed as the overarching perception of a company's honest and trustworthiness (Brown, 2000), corporate reputation can be broadly defined by the complex and interrelated measures of: 'emotional appeal', 'financial performance', 'products and services', 'social responsibility', 'vision and leadership', and 'workplace environment' (Kosnik, 1989). The most important interpretation of corporate reputation is that of key consumers and constituents which can serve as a most valuable predictor of marketplace success (Davies, 2003; Fombrun, 1996).

The implications of corporate reputation are particularly relevant to the sports industry, where sport organizations have long been sensitive to public relations and strategic corporate positioning (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2000). Further, corporate reputation, as determined by target consumers, clearly resonates with the sport industry, given the importance of consumer behaviour as examined in previous sport management literature (Funk et al., 2002; Mahony et al., 2000).

Thus, this research examined the perceptions of corporate reputation of selected sport organizations by key target markets, namely, Generation Y, which includes the pre-teen and teen market (aged 14-17 years) and is well acknowledged as a large and powerful consumer cohort within the sport marketplace (Bradish, Lathrop, Stevens and Sedgwick, 2000). Specifically, the purposes of this study were to a) investigate Generation Y youth's perception of corporate reputations of sport organizations; b) to assess perceptions by target consumers regarding corporate reputation positioning strategies; and c) to link assessments of corporate reputation to perceived consumption decisions.

Methods and Results

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 1,127 Generation Y youth across Canada (47 % response rate), representing a cross-section of Generation Y. The survey instrument consisted of seventy-five multiple-choice and open-ended questions designed to examine the socio-cultural, psychological, and consumer profile of youth and sport (Bradish, Lathrop, Stevens and Sedgwick, 2000). Within this survey, questions were asked to measure the perceptions of corporate responsibility.

For the purposes of this paper, data was collected from four questions related to corporate reputation. Six themes of corporate reputation (Kosnik, 1989) were used as a priori categories in which to code responses from descriptors. Data analysis involved a) data coding and categorical aggregation using frequency counts, as well as direct interpretation and b) triangulation by the research team. Results included the categories of total sample, gender, and, activity level interests. In addition, comparisons with consumption decisions related to corporate image were also analyzed.

There was no significant difference between genders ($n=1,072$) for consumption related to the corporate reputation of a sport corporation. However, the data indicated that girls had a more positive attitude towards responsible companies than boys ($\chi=13.295$, $df=3$, $p<.05$). In addition, there was a gender difference in views regarding what companies should do to improve their corporate image ($n=1083$). Girls indicated sport goods companies should support health and women's issues, whereas boys indicated companies should support sport issues ($\chi= 54.743$, $df=4$, $p<.05$).

Unlike the gender comparison, the findings showed a significant difference in the relation between purchase decisions and companies which sponsor sport according to youth activity level ($n=1,062$). In terms of what sporting goods companies should support to improve their corporate image ($n=1,075$), high activity youth indicated sport issues more often than expected and environmental and women's

issues less often than expected. On the other hand, average activity level youth indicated environmental issues more often than expected, yet indicated sport issues less often than expected. Low activity youth indicated sport issues less often than expected ($\chi=24.914$, $df=8$, $p<.05$).

The results revealed important implications and findings for sport management and marketing relative to the important measures of corporate reputation. Specifically, the results yield information related to gender and activity levels of sport consumers, and corresponding marketing strategies for communicating to this important and aware cohort will be discussed.

Discussion/Conclusions

Results from this study of Generation Y youth reveal important understandings of the perception of the sport industry, and indicates that sport organizations are viewed by key demographic target markets primarily as corporate beings, as opposed to community actors. The presentation of this study will discuss the important concept of corporate reputation as applied to sport management, and will offer important implications for the study and practice of sport marketing. Further, this presentation will also present important considerations for future research in this area.

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