

# **TWENTY20 CRICKET: PROACTIVE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CRICKET – A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY**

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## **Context**

Sports organisations in the UK and worldwide, at both club and governing body levels, are increasingly realising that high quality public relations strategies can be a critical success factor in achieving long-term business success. Many sports marketing commentators have observed that sports organisations are often prevented from fulfilling their business potential by the symptoms of what Theodore Levitt (1960 45-56) termed 'marketing myopia'. Marketing myopia in sport can be identified by the following familiar characteristics: a focus on producing and selling goods and services; the belief that winning absolves all other sins; confusion between promotions and marketing; and a short-sighted focus on quick return investments. The addition of long term relationship management and public relations strategies offer an extensive range of measurable competitive advantage benefits which are beginning to be realised by sports organisations. Cricket is one sport that has begun to include proactive public relations strategies in its marketing and communications armoury with some significant success, and this paper deals with one specific example – Twenty20 cricket.

In June 2003, domestic UK professional cricket experienced its most profound change since the introduction of limited overs cricket in the 1960s with the launch of the Twenty20 Cup. This new format was developed and introduced on the basis of extensive market research carried out by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB). Reserving judgement on the new format, Cricket Australia (CA) waited to see the measurement of public response in the UK before introducing the game towards the end of 2004. As in the UK, the Australian public have shown they have an appetite for this shorter form of the game and on consecutive nights in January 2005 capacity crowds were reported both at the Adelaide Oval and the WACA where on January 12<sup>th</sup>, the first domestic sell-out since 1981 was recorded. This paper is a qualitative critical evaluation and analysis of current attitudes to Twenty20 cricket in the UK and Australia. It is the outcome of research begun in December 2004 and ongoing at the time of writing.

## **Methods**

The research interest is to analyse current opinion about Twenty20 cricket in both the UK and Australia, in order to determine its effectiveness as an example of proactive sports public relations. Because Twenty20 cricket is very much an extension to the core product of cricket, an additional benefit from this research will be a greater insight into potential future developments for the short format of the game. Due to the open-ended nature of the study, an ethnographic approach was considered most appropriate. According to Maylor and Blackmon (2005:4), ethnography is much better at finding out about meaning rather than measurement. At the time of submitting the abstract, the study was a work in progress, so the final results will be presented at the conference.

Primary research was deemed to be of most value and opinions were sought in interviews from the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the 18 UK First Class Counties, professional players, coaches, club marketing personnel and supporters. In the UK, the sample size was 50, which though relatively small, in the context of this research, was highly representative. The research was replicated with Australian counterparts, but with a smaller sample based exclusively in Queensland. A study into the potential appeal of Twenty20 cricket commissioned by Cricket Australia was used as a useful secondary source, while UK and Australian print media reports about Twenty20 cricket, Internet searches and public relations and sports marketing theory were searched to provide the theoretical basis necessary to underpin the findings.

## Results

A key factor to emerge from the research is that, despite the widespread initial reservations expressed by cricket traditionalists, Twenty20 cricket is meeting with remarkable success in both Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Its success clearly shows that, in order to remain relevant and reach new audiences, the sports product can be differentiated and extended in similar ways to other consumer products. Twenty20 cricket is a result of what Peters and Waterman (1982:156) described as “staying close to the customer”. Most stakeholder publics were clearly identified and communicated with during the research stages, demonstrating that Grunig’s (1992:40) two-way symmetrical communication strategy can and does work. The capacity crowds are evidence of the demand for this new form of cricket. When the tournament began in England in 2003, a third of the paying customers had never attended a live cricket match before. The fact that large numbers of supporters have watched more than one game of this type provides clear evidence that publics will display long-term loyalty and repeat purchase behaviour to a company, brand or service if a relationally-based grounding is applied in the form of effective sports public relations practice.

## Discussion/Implications

The UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) defined public relations as being about reputation - the result of what organisations do, what they say and what others say about them. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (<http://www.cipr.co.uk/direct/looking.asp?v1=what>). Sports organisations recognise that they use sports marketing strategies, but research consistently shows that much of what they do and call marketing is, in fact, public relations. Surprisingly few sports organisations employ qualified public relations personnel and if they acknowledge public relations as an aspect of their business, it is generally apparent in the very limited context of publicity and media relations. Public relations has a much wider remit, as has been demonstrated by Twenty20 cricket. The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) describes public relations as being little more than effective communications (<http://www.pria.com.au/aboutus>). This straightforward explanation forms the basis of the appeal of Twenty20 cricket: the game in its shortest form, targeted to appeal to families with children, the colour, the atmosphere, the fun and the excitement all communicating a consistent message about cricket and that is, amongst other things its adaptability and its relationship building capabilities. Shilbury et al (2003:8) supported the view that public relations needs to become an integral feature of sports communication as they see “the public relations function as a very important aspect of the promotional mix.” It is suggested that Twenty20 cricket is a model of excellent sports public relations practice that other sports could follow.

## References

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