

“WE WILL ...”: USING COMMUNITY RELATIONS TO BUILD THE PITTSBURGH PIRATES BRAND

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INTRODUCTION

Community Relations (CR) programs, a component of Public Relations, are a permanent fixture of any minor or major US-based professional sport organization. They involve “outreach-type programs” initiated by a sport league, a team, and/or individual players (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton., 2000, p. 320). Common examples include educational programs, youth foundations, minority-focused initiatives, and charities. The benefits of CR programs are more long-term and their impact on the bottom-line is not always evident or easily measurable. However, CR programs can prove beneficial for a sport organization by helping increase awareness levels, generate feelings of goodwill in the community, and strengthen the sport property’s fan base through increased levels of fan identification (Mullin et al., 2000). However, despite their wide presence and benefits, not much research has focused specifically on CR programs and their short- and long-term impact on sport brands.

The concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) can lend a useful platform on which to examine Community Relations initiatives and their value to sport organizations. Even though both CSR and CRM have been topics of extensive investigation in mainstream disciplines (e.g., Bloom, Hussein, & Szykman, 1995; Carroll, 1999), it is only recently that such studies have appeared in the sport management literature (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Irwin, Lachowetz, & Clark, 2003; Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell, & Clark, 2003; Roy & Graeff, 2003). Similar to Community Relations, Cause-Related Marketing Programs (CRMP) can support brand building efforts of an organization by increasing awareness levels, improving the brand’s image and credibility, creating positive feelings toward the brand, and offering a sense of brand community and an opportunity for consumers to become engaged with the brand (Keller, 2003). In their study of CRMP implemented in sport, Lachowetz and Gladden (2003) proposed a framework that links CRMP to brand associations, and suggested that, if strategically designed and executed, CRMP can have positive effects on brand image and brand loyalty.

METHODS

Sport-related branding studies have repeatedly relied on Aaker’s (1991) work on brand equity to examine branding efforts of sport organizations (e.g., Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998). Aaker (1991) proposed that the equity of a brand is a function of four main components, namely (a) brand loyalty, (b) name awareness, (c) perceived quality, and (d) brand associations. Using those four components as a platform, this study examines how team-initiated CR programs can positively influence each of those components and, consequently, strengthen brand equity. More specifically, the present study focuses on the Community Relations programs of the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball franchise and explores: (1) the role of the Pirates’ CR programs within the team’s overall brand management strategy and (2) the perceived benefits of those initiatives.

The Pittsburgh Pirates are a Major League Baseball (MLB) franchise located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, home also to the NFL’s Pittsburgh Steelers and the NHL’s Pittsburgh Penguins. Over their 120-year history the Pirates have won five MLB titles (the last one in 1979), but have not experienced much success recently. In fact, the Pirates franchise is currently in the midst of 14 straight losing (sub-.500 record) seasons. In 2001 the team moved into their new 38,496-seat facility, the PNC Park, where they have since averaged

between 1.6 million and 2 million fans in attendance over the 81-game home schedule, despite the lackluster record. In preparation for the 2006 season, the Pirates unveiled a new marketing campaign which was centered on four values (perseverance, resilience, youthfulness and improvement) and used the slogan “We will ...” (Reynolds, 2006). Advertisements were created with players and other franchise personnel claiming “We will compete,” “We will persevere,” and “We will excite” (Kovacevic, 2007). This new slogan was part of the team’s latest brand positioning strategy.

Data for this study were gathered through primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included semi-structured personal interviews with current and former team officials who have been directly involved with the design and execution of the team’s branding efforts and/or with the team’s CR initiatives. In addition, a number of secondary sources, such as media campaigns material, web pages, newspaper articles, and other regional and national publications, were compiled. Data from both sources were content-analyzed to gain an understanding of the team’s branding strategy and to gauge the role that CR initiatives serve in that process.

RESULTS

The results are organized in two sections: The first describes the Pittsburgh Pirates CR programs; the second discusses the Pirates’ overall brand management strategy, with an emphasis on the role of their CR programs in the brand building efforts of the organization.

The Pittsburgh Pirates maintain an elaborate Community Relations program. Their activities are organized in three groups: (a) Pirates Charities; (b) Pirates in the Community; and (c) Minority Partnerships, with beneficiaries ranging from youth, athletes and general fans to health-related institutions/causes and community businesses. According to information on the team’s website, “The Pittsburgh Pirates recognize the responsibility we have to the community and remain aggressive with our community outreach partnerships and programs ... to make a positive impact throughout the greater Pittsburgh region” (“Pirates in the Community,” n.d.)

The franchise’s brand management strategy is focused on four aspects: awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance (T. Schuldt, personal communication, October 27, 2006). Those four aspects are seen as steps on a fan “emotional connection” scale. According to team officials, there are two avenues to move fans on that scale: charitable, community activities and connection with the players and product; both of which can be delivered through CR programs.

DISCUSSION

Given the increased emphasis and resources allocated to CR initiatives, a better understanding of how those efforts complement and strengthen sport organizations’ branding strategies could prove beneficial for sport marketers. This study suggests that Community Relations initiatives can drive brand management efforts by generating awareness for the team; by projecting the image of a quality organization that cares for their fans and the extended community; and by strengthening the relationship with current and potential customers. In the case of the Pittsburgh Pirates, CR programs are considered an integral part of the team’s brand (re-)building efforts that help deliver core brand attributes and create a positive brand perception.

Lastly, this presentation will also address implications of the findings for European-based sport organizations that might not have organized Community Relations departments or initiatives.

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