sport management

Attracting diverse fans: The importance of workforce diversity and an organisational culture of diversity

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Aim of paper and research questions

In adopting a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the purpose of our study was to understand the factors that attract a diverse fan base to National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) events.

Literature review

Sport teams and clubs have increasingly sought innovative approaches to generating revenues and attracting fans to their events (see Howard & Crompton, 2004). Interestingly, one approach in particular oftentimes gets overlooked: attracting and maintaining a diverse fan base. There are several potential benefits to attracting a diverse fan base. First, being that the "average" fan for college athletic events is a White male earning over $50,000 annually ("Fan Frenzy", 2007), attracting fans beyond this demographic means larger crowds. Second, and related to the second point, increased attendance translates into greater revenues generated for the sport organisation. Given the difficult financial situations in which most of these entities find themselves (Fulks, 2008), any extra revenues would come as a welcome site. And finally, others have pointed to the need to make sport and sport spectatorship available and open to all persons, irrespective of their individual characteristics (Coakley, 2009). Despite the importance of attracting a diverse fan base, little attention has been devoted to this issue (Armstrong & Peretto Stratta, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of our study was to explore this issue in greater depth.

Research design and proposed data analysis

We conducted interviews with 7 sport marketing directors of NCAA Division I universities and 6 African American students attending a large, public university located in the Southwest United States. After the data were transcribed, the two researchers and an independent scholar went through an iterative data analysis process, following Glaser and Strauss' guidelines. This resulted in the generation of six themes.

Discussion of progress

The first theme was that "diversity breeds diversity," such that diversity and inclusion in the athletic department was strongly linked with the attraction of a diverse fan base. Seeing a diverse workforce and learning about diversity initiatives in which the department was engaged resulted in an attraction to the athletic department in general. Conversely, when potential fans perceived that the athletic department valued similarity, they were unlikely to devote their time or monies to the events.

Second, participants indicated that "athletics need to be linked with the broader campus environment," especially given that, in many cases, athletics is the leader on the campus when it comes to issues of diversity and inclusion. Students in our study pointed to the connection

between the diversity culture on campus and what they perceived to be the diversity culture in the athletic department.

Third, our participants stressed the need to "integrate the athletes into the university community." The students, in particular, felt that there was a disconnect between student-athletes (particularly racial minorities) and other student groups on campus, and as such, felt little to no obligation to support them and the athletic department.

Fourth, and tied to the point above, our participants insisted that "athletics should be something 'for' the fans" if athletic departments desire to have a diverse fan base. Fans are more likely to attend sport events on campus when they highly identify with that entity; the athletic department should make a personal connection with fans such that the teams' successes and failures are seen as their successes and failures.

Fifth, making athletics something that is "for" the fans also involves "addressing the rising costs" of attending sporting events. If certain fan groups do not see tickets as affordable, this could certainly affect athletic departments' ability to attract a diverse fan. Marketing directors and students discussed the need to offer affordable ticket plans so that diverse fan groups could attend sporting events.

Finally, our participants discussed the need for athletic departments to "develop and cultivate relationships with fan groups." It is important to go beyond the one-time approach to connecting with fans (e.g., international day); instead, athletic departments and their personnel must invest in an ongoing relationship with various stakeholder groups.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the study. First, fans are cognizant of the demographic diversity in athletic departments and are unlikely to support teams or events that are affiliated with departments that value similarity. Second, the organisational culture of diversity has the potential to meaningfully impact the attraction of diverse fans. Having a workplace that values differences, where athletes and employees are linked to the broader community, and where a relationship is sought with a broad and disparate group of community members is essential in attracting and maintaining a diverse fan base.

References

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