sport and social issues

Buying into mega events: Introducing corporate social responsibility as a mechanism to build community identification with mega-events

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Aim of paper and research questions

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an increasingly popular topic in the general management and marketing literatures (e.g., Garriga & Mele, 2004; Guay, Doh & Sinclair, 2004; Matten & Moon, 2008). Only recently have researchers turned to this concept in sport management (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008; Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell & Clark, 2003). While we know little about CSR within sport management, we know even less about this topic in mega-events and community-based settings. This theoretical paper seeks to consolidate the existing information on CSR within these two important settings and propose a framework for CSR, which will help focus and entice future research in this area.

Literature review

It has been established that mega sporting event organizing committees need stakeholders to accomplish their preparation and hosting tasks; however, they must also meet certain needs and expectations of these stakeholders (Parent, 2008a). While no published studies have specifically examined CSR in mega sporting events, related terms have, such as legacy and knowledge management (e.g., Halbwirth & Toohey, 2001; Kearney, 2005; Parent, 2008b), sustainability (e.g., Girginov & Hills, 2008), environmental impact (e.g., Chappelet, 2008), and social impact (e.g., Lenskyj, 1996; 2000). Yet, CSR is broader than each of these aspects studied so far. Heere and James (2007) introduced the notion that the structure of a sport organization, in which the fans and other stakeholders play a crucial role as members of the organization, lends itself for examination as a brand community. Brand community research changed the marketing paradigm where producers aim to fulfil needs of the consumers to a paradigm where both the company as well as the consumer feel part of the same community, and where consumers talk about the organization as if they are a part of it (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2000; Schouten & McAlexander, 2001). Within this paradigm, consumer identification with the organization becomes central to a company's marketing strategy (Homberg, Wieseke & Hoyer, 2009). While identity has been acknowledged as a key element, mechanisms to strengthen this identity are still relatively unexplored (Ahearne, Bhattacharya & Gruen, 2005). Research on CSR indicates a positive impact of CSR on the attitudes of the consumers towards the organization (Walker et al., under review) and therefore could be one mechanism that sport entities can use to build their brand community. It is argued that, given the size and impact of organizations such as the International Olympic Committee, CSR and its related concepts must be studied in greater depth by researchers as they can play a key role within the community's and stakeholders' event identification process.

Research design and data analysis

The conceptual framework suggested in this paper is based on a review of the existing literature on CSR and its related concepts within the sport management and marketing literatures. It also rests on a meta-analysis of the CSR theme within the authors' past studies relating to mega-events and community branding (Parent, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; Parent & Séguin, 2007; 2008; Parent & Slack, 2008). Finally, archival material from various sporting events have been used to complete the literature review (e.g., London 2012 Olympics, Rugby World Cup 2011, Amsterdam 2028 Olympics), including sustainability and bid/final reports of Canadian Olympic, national and provincial Games.

Results

In light of the current global recession, public funding for the organization of mega events has come under pressure; bid committees will increasingly have to justify the investment for bidding for events (Slot & Sherman, 2008). Within this dynamic, event organizers will have to develop new strategies to communicate with the host communities (and their stakeholders), and develop strategies to build or maintain the identity of the community with the event. CSR plays a central role in this process. The philanthropic responsibilities of the organization to the community and other stakeholders should span the breadth from infrastructure building to social, economic, environmental, policy/planning/political, and sport development and participation responsibilities.

Discussion and conclusion

The framework within this study proposes a more integrated approach for event organizers to deal with the various stakeholders, and introduces the concept of identity, and its role in brand community research as a crucial tool for event organizers to involve local and/or national governments with the mega event. Leveraging event community identification by implementing CSR strategies is seen as an effective tool to do so, and could serve mega-event organizers in their search for public funding, or other forms of support. Finally, we move research beyond city (re)imaging (cf. Whitson & Macintosh, 1993; 1996) and into community identification in relation to events, and include a CSR perspective on the issue.

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