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Growing running market necessitates mastermind marketing strategies of athletic federations

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Background

The popularity of running has increased spectacularly in The Netherlands. This has not been a constant development. Two 'waves of running' can be distinguished (Van Bottenburg, 2006). The term 'wave of running' refers to a period of growth in participation after a period of reduction or stabilisation. In The Netherlands the first wave started at the end of the 1960s and stagnated in the early 1990s. The second period of growth started at the end of the 1990s and there are indications that it is still continuing (Van Bottenburg & Hover, 2009). In 2007 eighteen percent of the Dutch population of six years and older practised running. The increase of the popularity of running is predominantly caused by the development of a new market segment of road runners. Three decennia ago running was just about synonym for track running with improvement of personal results as focal objective (Stokvis & Van Hilvoorde, 2008). Organisers of running events have contributed to the second wave of running as they offer a product which meets the needs of numerous runners of all types. On the other hand, running events flourish due to the growing running market (Scheerder, 2009). Many organisers of running events are facing a rising demand for their product. The increasing popularity of running and running events can also be observed in other European countries.

During the first wave of running athletic federations in Europe did not value the potential of the growing popularity of road running for their organizations. They primarily focussed on track and field and elite sport (Delnoij, 2004). In The Netherlands the objectives and strategy regarding road runners of the athletic federation has radically changed since road runners are now considered to be potential federation members. Federations in other countries might follow the Dutch approach.

Objectives

This study offers insight in socio-demographic and sport related characteristics of participants of the ten biggest running events in The Netherlands. It also assesses the degree to which runners with 'weak ties' are receptive for 'stronger ties' and under which conditions. Insight in the profile of the receptive runners is offered as well. This study has made a considerable contribution to the knowledge regarding the market of event runners and the marketing potential of the national federation in this segment.

Methods

The Dutch Athletics Federation and the organisers of ten major events commissioned this study. The target group consists of Dutch and Belgian participants. The data were collected through a web questionnaire with a broad orientation. Besides questions concerning the receptiveness for 'stronger ties', the survey examined for example event preparations, the social context, the intensity of running in the past and present, the interest in running-related products and services and socio-demographic features. Secondary data sources were also analysed. Almost 55.000 questionnaires were fully completed. Additional knowledge was obtained through 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with runners from the target group. These interviews were primarily focussed on motives of event participation and the social context of running in general.

Results

Almost sixty percent of the event runners are native men or women in the age group between 30 and 55 who carry out paid work. Seventy percent of the event runners are men. This share might decrease in the future as the sex ratio in young cohorts is distributed more evenly. About half of the event runners trains alone, a quarter is a member of an athletic club and almost one fifth trains in an informal running group. More than one third of the event runners are interested in a membership of an athletic club or federation. Individual assistance by running professionals is the most requested service. Noticeable is that one third of the event runners who are interested in a membership do not consider running as their main sport. Mastermind marketing activities of the Dutch Athletics Federation concentrated on the ten major events may lead to an membership increase of 30 percent. The federation is challenged to create added value by combining the strengths of their organisation and give an adequate answer on the runner's needs. The neglect of this segment of the running market in an earlier period puts the federation in a disadvantageous position and therefore requires profound effort.

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