

PHILANTHROPY IN PROFESSIONAL SPORT: EXPLORING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS OF ATHLETE CHARITY

Author:
Christopher Mull

email:
cmgoblue@umich.edu

Co-authors:
Lee, Seung Pil Babiak, Katherine

University:
University of Michigan

Faculty:
Sport Management

Abstract

As culturally influential individuals, professional athletes have begun to engage in philanthropy over the past decade and have formalized their charity by starting their own philanthropic foundations (Babiak, et al., 2011). Given the growing emphasis on strategic philanthropy and the interest of teams and sponsors on the appeal of athletes, there is a need to consider the perspectives of consumers and fans to better understand their perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions towards athletes' charitable initiatives. The study had two main objectives: (1) investigate the extent to which the level of athlete / charitable cause fit influences consumer perceptions and behaviors; (2) explore whether consumers view athletes who have charitable foundations as more likeable, trustworthy and sincere than athletes without formalized philanthropy and whether those views translate into behavioral outcomes.

To examine consumer perceptions and attitudes towards charitable athletes, we draw on themes from bodies of literature including: celebrity endorsers (Upadhyay & Singh, 2010), philanthropy and charity (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004), and sport management (Walker & Kent, 2009). The guiding theoretical framework we use to measure consumer attitudes and potential behavioral outcomes (i.e., willingness to donate, purchase merchandise, tickets etc.) is the Expectancy-Value Model. According to the EV Model, a person's attitudes toward an object (or an athlete) is determined by the subjective values or evaluations of the attributes associated with the object (philanthropic tendencies or more commercial interests). Because "attitude" is defined as a learned predisposition to respond to an object in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner, there is a strong link implied between attitude and behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Thus, a consumer's attitudes toward an athlete may be determined by the

consumer's evaluations of the athlete's attributes both on and off the field of play.

A quasi-experimental approach was employed where 24 professional athletes in the National Basketball Association (NBA) were identified; 12 who had formed a charitable foundation, and 12 other NBA players who had not formed a charitable foundation. Brief scenarios were designed highlighting information about the charitable players including their performance data (on the court) and information about their charity (name, focus, total amount donated in grants). Similar scenarios were created for the athletes without foundations, but information about a fictitious clothing company (name, revenues, industry) was presented instead of information about the foundation. Respondents were asked about fit of athlete activities, perceptions about the athlete's sincerity, likeability, trustworthiness, reputation, and their interest in purchasing tickets or merchandise with the athlete's name on it. 630 students at a Midwestern University in the United States completed the survey.

The study yielded a number of significant results. Briefly, correlation analysis and regression showed that the athlete-charitable cause fit is the most influential factor affecting consumer perceptions (e.g., sincerity, trustworthiness, likeability), attitudes and behavioral intention (e.g., donation, purchase). Second, the independent sample t-test showed significant differences of perceptions and behavioral intentions including familiarity ($p < .001$), trustworthiness ($p = .034$), sincerity ($p = .005$), and likelihood of encouraging others to buy tickets ($p < .012$), between athletes with and without foundations. Overall, this study suggests that consumer perceptions (familiarity, trustworthiness, and sincerity), are more positive toward athletes with foundations than those who are not charitable. Moreover, consumer behavioral intentions are more favorable toward philanthropic athletes than those who are not involved in pro-social initiatives, as respondents were more likely to donate to an athlete's charity than purchase from the fictitious small business ($p < .001$).

The results imply that athlete-charity fit plays a significant role in consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions. While consistent with previous research regarding CSR, sponsorship, cause-related marketing, and effects of celebrities on consumer decisions, these results are pioneering as the first significant findings on consumer perceptions of individual athlete philanthropy. However, one must consider the reliance on a single Midwestern University as an important limitation in the study. As seen in endorsement deals and sport sponsorships, companies often connect with celebrities and athletes in an attempt to sway consumer attitudes or behaviors about a specific brand or product. This important role of brand/cause fit also plays a major role in executing effective strategic philanthropy for athletes. This suggests that not only must athlete philanthropists focus on internal and external factors when deciding upon pro-social undertakings, but also on the alignment of the cause and the brand (i.e., themselves). Because the sport industry is dictated by consumer demand and willingness to pay, athletes, brand managers, and even team and league executives would be remiss to ignore consumer reception of athletes' philanthropic undertakings.

References:

- Babiak, K., Mills, B., Tainsky, S. & Juravich, M. (2011). An investigation into professional athlete philanthropy: Why charity is part of the game. (Forthcoming in *Journal of Sport Management*).
- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: an introduction to theory and research*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
- Pracejus, J., & Olsen, D. (2004). The role of brand/cause fit in the effectiveness of cause-related marketing campaigns. *Journal of Business Research*, 57, 635-640.
- Upadhyay, Y., & Singh, K. (2010). When sports celebrity doesn't perform: How consumers react to celebrity endorsement? *The Journal of Business Perspective*, 14, 67-78.
- Walker, M., & Kent, A. (2009) Do fans care? Assessing the influence of corporate social responsibility on consumer attitudes in the sport industry. *Journal of Sport Management*, 23, 743-769.