

The challenge of understanding sports brand equity: The case of Calcio Padova Spa

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Aim of the paper and research purpose

In a sport organization the brand has become a fundamental asset. Its identification and development is crucial to implement sport marketing strategies of Federations, Leagues, clubs and events. Despite the growing importance of the brand for a sport club, however there is still a lack of conceptual models specifically developed for sports brand equity. The existing literature is mainly empirical and referred to the North American sporting environment (Boone et al., 1995; Gladden, Milne, Sutton, 1998; Gladden, Irwin, Sutton, 2001) and to the European football context (Richelieu, Couvelaere, 2005; Dolles, Söderman, 2008; Söderman, Dolles, Dum, 2010), and it is mostly spectator-oriented (Ross, 2006). Nevertheless, some authors have proposed theoretical frameworks to make brand equity models more applicable to sport management (Woratschek, Ströbel, 2008; Ströbel, Woratschek, 2011).

This specific work is not aimed to propose a new conceptual model on sport brand equity, not even to give a financial measure of a team brand value. Rather, our goal is to develop an analytical framework that can be a sort of "guidelines" helping football managers to understand specific assets of their sports brand to create value and maintain a competitive advantage. In developing this framework we consider the peculiarities of the Italian sport industry. This "inner" approach could be useful for sport organizations, both professional and amateur. Our framework focuses on the brand of an Italian football club - the Calcio Padova Spa -, that during the season 2011/2012 was playing within the National Professional League Serie B.

Literature background and methodology

This research is based on the main theoretical models about *brand equity* (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Kapferer, 1997, 2004; Keller, 1993, 2003; Kotler, Keller, 2007). While the models vary, many of them indicate that brand awareness and brand associations will impact brand equity. An extensive review of this models has been essential to identify the most important assets to be considered for an evaluation of a sports brand. Moreover, we have analyzed the brand value models proposed in the specific literature developed within sport, even if it is quite country and context specific (Boone et al., 1995; Dolles, Söderman, 2008; Gladden, Milne, Sutton, 1998; Gladden, Milne, 1999; Richelieu, Couvelaere, 2005; Ross, 2006; Ross et al., 2008).

Starting from this theoretical assumptions, we tried to identify the main relevant indicators to determine the sport club's brand value.

Six main value drivers have been selected from existing theoretical literature and empirical research related to a sports brand. While each of them, when considered individually, is not sufficient to our extent, as a whole these assets can be useful to understand the football team brand value:

- *Brand loyalty* (15 pts): stadium attendance and TV audience during the season;
- *Brand exposure* (15 pts): club quoted in newspapers and magazines; National and local TV, radios; Internet and new media and the overall communication mix of the club;
- *Sponsorship, merchandising and licensing* (15 pts): main sponsorships; technical partnerships; other suppliers; merchandising and licensing;
- *Arena* (20 pts): home stadium; sports center; suburban facilities; other facilities;
- *Brand image* (25 pts): club historical tradition; logos; communication and promotional activities;
- *Internationality* (10 pts): international reputation; foreign top players; other players or coaches who make the team recognized abroad.

To each driver is assigned a maximum range value (10, 15, 20 or 25 points for each category driver). The highest points are given to the most relevant assets for a small-medium football team's brand like the Calcio Padova Spa. The value to each specific indicator is given on the basis of a qualitative methodology. We requested comments from the most relevant stakeholders of the football club (CEO, General Manager, Marketing Director, fans representatives, TV journalists, etc.) during about 15 face-to-face and in depth interviews characterized by open questions, so that interviewees had the possibility to reflect their knowledge to the full extent. Questions dealt with the various topics included within each category driver (stadium, merchandising, club's image, fans engagement, role of new media, etc.).

Qualitative information have been integrated with quantitative data gathered from official reports and balance sheets from the club. The final result, accounted in cents (* / 100), is a sort of index that expresses the value of the brand Calcio Padova.

This numerical value is purely indicative, not scientifically proved. Nevertheless, by assigning a numerical value to the team brand could be useful since the idea is to extend this analytical framework to all the football clubs of the same Division.

Results and discussions

The proposed analytical framework does not claim to be exhaustive. It is an attempt to build a sort of basic "tools kit" for a sport organization brand awareness. Rather than offering an evaluation of the economic performance of the football club, not even an evaluation of the brand's strength from a spectator perspective, this framework could be useful for sports managers in order to identify strengths and weaknesses of the football club's name/brand. On the company's side it is possible to implement a strategic path

for managing the sports organization's assets. By the way on the supply side sport organizations can project and offer sustainable and appreciated services to fans and supporters. Nevertheless, this analytical framework could be useful especially within the Italian sports context where there is still a lack of managerial skills and capabilities.

References

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