

Exploring the stability of sport team brand associations

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Aim

This research aims to add to sport team brand association knowledge by assessing the stability of the associations linked to a new professional sport team.

Literature review

Brand associations represent anything linked to a brand in the mind of a consumer (Aaker, 1991). Associations form a key component to customer-based brand equity and overall brand perceptions (Gladden & Funk, 2002). Therefore, marketers should be aware of brand association perceptions and how these may be impacted by environmental factors. Sport team brand associations represent the attributes and benefits linked to a team, and can be used to understand attitudinal outcomes provided by team support (Gladden & Funk, 2002). To date, sport team brand association research has focused on determining the range of associations linked to teams (Gladden & Funk, 2001, Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006), with no work yet evaluating the stability or fluidity of associations. Given the sport product is intangible and unpredictable, team brand associations would likely be fluid and constantly re-assessed. This research aims to add to team brand association knowledge by assessing the stability of associations linked to a new sport team, determining how quickly durable associations may take to form.

Method and analysis

Longitudinal quantitative data were gathered from fans of a new professional sport team located in Australia. Three online surveys tested the stability of brand associations linked to the team. The first survey was administered in October 2010 and collected data prior to the team's inaugural season. The second survey collected data six months later (April 2011), after the team had played three matches, all heavy losses. A third survey gathered information in April 2012, prior to the upcoming season. A total of 96 fans were matched across all three surveys, forming our sample. Eleven single-item Likert scale measures taken from the most cited team brand association scale (Gladden & Funk, 2001) were evaluated. Items represented the associations; Head Coach, Logo, Management, Peer Group Pressure, Pride in Place, Product Delivery, Stadium, Star Players, Success, Escape and Fan Identification. Tradition and Nostalgia were not measured due to the team being a new entity. Paired-samples t-tests were chosen to determine if any of the associations reported significant mean score changes across measurement points.

Results

Paired-samples t-tests revealed four brand association mean scores were significantly different ($p < .05$) from October 2010 to April 2012, with seven remaining stable between measurements. Those that did not change significantly were; Head Coach, Escape, Peer Group Acceptance, Pride in Place, Star Players, Success and Fan Identification. Of the associations that did change significantly, Logo ($M=4.98$; $M=5.52$), Product Delivery ($M=4.76$; $M=5.38$) and Stadium ($M=5.16$; $M=5.93$) reported increases. Management ($M=5.51$; $M=5.18$) reported a reduced mean score. Analyses including the April 2011 data suggested the associations displayed more volatility between the October 2010 and April 2011 measurements (four significant differences) and between the April 2011 and April 2012 measurements (seven significant differences).

Discussion

This study explored the stability of brand associations linked to sport teams and how these may change based on consumer experiences with the team. Such experiential factors include any new information the consumer links to the team. Despite temporal fluctuations, team associations displayed a pattern of stability over the long term suggesting consumers develop established association perceptions quickly. The long term reduction in Management can be explained by dealings with player indiscretions. The associations Logo, Stadium and Product Delivery likely increased given the greater opportunities to attend live team games, interact with other fans, and the team's attractive style of play (Gladden & Funk, 2001). As indicated above, associations were fluid and influenced by experiential factors during the season (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000), however not all associations changed and over the long term most remained stable.

Implications

Sport marketers can use this information to understand their brands, and how perceptions may change over time. Though brand association perceptions may fluctuate temporarily, this study suggests initial impressions are important and durable over time. Thus, teams should focus early marketing efforts to highlight the positive characteristics of all associations and build a strong brand image as early as possible. Failure to do so may result in a poorly viewed brand, which may be hard to salvage. Results should be treated as exploratory given the small mean score changes reported and short assessment period. Future research should observe the associations over a longer period of time to account for a greater range of experiential factors.

References

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