

“You belonged to something”: the social leverage of sport events within fundraising teams

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Participatory sport events continue to align with charitable causes as a mechanism to differentiate the event and increase participation (King, 2004). Fundraising is acknowledged as a critical component of sport events; however, financial contributions to charitable causes are declining. Traditional sport events, with a fundraising component, face the additional challenge of increased choice and competition from more novel offerings such as Tough Mudder, Colour Run, and Movember. As a mechanism to address these challenges and enhance the event experience, people increasingly raise funds and participate as part of fundraising teams. Fundraising teams provide participants with additional sites for social interaction, community, and meaning (Woolf, Heere & Walker, 2013). Building on Woolf et al. (2013), and in response to the challenges confronting sport events with a fundraising component, we focus on how belonging to a team facilitates social interactions, heightened event experiences, and fundraising outcomes.

In the current research, we explore the practices of two highly successful fundraising teams (Mands' Mob and Yarra Babes) that participate in Run Melbourne and the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) 24-Hour Mega-Swim, respectively. These teams raise funds for a specified charity (Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation and MS Australia) through their completion of each event. Understanding how successful fundraising teams contribute to the event experiences of members can provide insights for event managers regarding approaches to leverage team participation and success alongside guidance for the organisers of fundraising teams (i.e., team captains) to bolster fundraising, team performance, and participant recruitment and retention. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to examine how successful teams contribute to the (a) social interactions, (b) event experience, and (c) fundraising approaches of team members.

Chalip's (2006) social leverage of events framework is applied to guide the managerial notion that organisers can design offerings to maximise social value for participants and host communities. The social leverage perspective allows us to explore how organisers might leverage fundraising teams in complement to the event itself. This approach builds on recent developments in marketing, which seek to harness the power of subgroups that emerge organically within the consumer base or brand community of organisations (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Woolf et al., 2013). These teams provide meaningful subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) for members within an event that foster social interaction and direct effort to outcomes shared with event organisers (i.e., fundraising and social impact).

Qualitative data were collected across focus groups with Mands' Mob team members (n=3; n=5; n=5), interviews with Yarra Babes team members (n=9), and interviews with Mands' Mob team members (n=5). Using Chalip's social leverage of events as a framework guiding thematic analysis uncovered six themes: (1) enabling sociability; and (2) event-related social activities; (3) informal social opportunities; and (4) ancillary events; and (5) theming; and (6) personifying the cause.

Enabling sociability was revealed through the constant communication within the teams. Team members indicated that consistent emails and social media posts kept individuals up to date on team activities, and set the tone for the sharing and exchanging of ideas within each team. Event-related social activities encompassed formal and planned activities, such as team dinners and training sessions, organised by each team that allowed individuals to socialise. Informal social opportunities reflected a social atmosphere surrounding the team reinforced by team members being encouraged to gather and interact during the event. Ancillary events included additional social gatherings, such as birthday celebrations and trivia nights, wherein all team members were encouraged to attend. Theming was demonstrated by participants describing how their respective team distinguished itself through dress (e.g., an official novel team dress theme) and branding (e.g., an official bright orange team t-shirt) from other teams or general event participants. Finally, personifying the cause involved respondents describing the role and importance of a single individual associated with the team (e.g., the namesake of the team, team leader) as an inspiration for participants.

The results demonstrate that fundraising teams co-create social value with event organisers and host communities. In doing so, the findings extend Chalip's (2006) framework by uncovering how community can be fostered by additional event stakeholders: fundraising teams and team managers (Woolf et al., 2013). Based upon our findings, event and team managers can implement leadership and empathy training for team members, while providing platforms for fundraising teams to contribute personal storylines and purchase distinct uniforms to achieve additional theming benefits.

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