

CONTEMPORARY SPORTS BUSINESS ISSUES: SPORTS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AT MIDDLESBROUGH FOOTBALL CLUB

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Context

This paper has developed from the author's ongoing research interest into the critical role that public relations has to play in contemporary sports business. A key current issue for commercial organisations is that of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), or Corporate Responsibility (CR) as it is increasingly being called. CSR is something that falls under the remit of public relations and is something that commercial organisations, while recognising that it is essential, have either handled very well or very badly. Taking the view that contemporary sports organisations are businesses, whether they like it or not, and need to operate like businesses, then issues such as CSR need to be understood. However, because of the nature of sport business, adapting CSR to become SSR (sports social responsibility) would seem to be much more meaningful. Sports organisations have long engaged in SSR through well-established community relations programmes, for example. However, such initiatives tend to be seen, erroneously it is suggested, as part of the marketing function that detracts from and completely overlooks the SSR ethic. In *PRWeek* 1st April 2005, William Gaillard, UEFA's director of communications and public affairs said "You can't treat sport like, say, the chemicals industry. It has to be nurtured, not regulated. We are a social movement." Taking this comment as a starting point, this paper will present the case for SSR as an increasingly essential element of sports public relations.

Methods

In the North East of England, consuming sport in some form or another is one of the most popular leisure pursuits and there is an extremely rich provision of both amateur and professional sports organisations throughout the whole region. Amongst the professional sports organisations in the region there are currently three premier league football clubs (Newcastle United FC, Sunderland AFC and Middlesbrough FC), one premier league rugby club (Newcastle Falcons) and one First Class county cricket club (Durham County Cricket Club) all of whom have active community relations strategies and strong SSR vision.

For the purposes of this study, Middlesbrough Football Club's Football in the Community initiatives were analysed for their SSR content and focus. A particularly close relationship with the football club developed as the author was also supervising an undergraduate student live project which was taking place simultaneously. This has presented the ideal opportunity to use Middlesbrough FC as an exploratory case study into the existing awareness of and provision for SSR at a Premier League football club. It has also enabled the emergence of some particularly rich findings. At the time of writing the research, which commenced in December 2004, is ongoing. Interviews have been held with key informants including the Communications and Football in the Community Project Managers at the club and a review of football club literature and publications such as the Middlesbrough Football Club *Annual Charter Report* for 2003/4, the Club's website and the Football Community Project Delivery Programme has been undertaken.

Results

According to CSR consultancy founder and author Giles Gibbons (2004) "Firms cannot ignore the rise of CSR. They must exceed expectation and make a contribution." The research findings show that such awareness is clearly evident at Middlesbrough Football Club. One of the significant findings of the research is that the football club both believes and demonstrates, through its community relations activities, that the way to create a positive reputation is to be a responsible company and that this can be achieved with a strategic sports public relations vision and approach. Middlesbrough Football Club's Football in the Community Project is an example of how a sports organisation can maximise social, ethical and environmental opportunities to create the foundation of a solid reputation. Business organisations with a CSR focus are considered to be those that carry out activities and policies that *meet* society's expectations. These research findings suggest that Middlesbrough Football Club has

gone beyond this to the next stage that has been identified in the literature as Corporate Social Leadership. Those companies that *exceed* society's expectations through their activities and policies are considered to be Social Leaders.

Discussion/Implications

According to Pickton and Broderick (2005), CSR is a business philosophy that recognises the social, cultural and environmental consequences of business practices and subsequently demonstrates actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law. Middlesbrough Football Club is an example of a sports organisation that believes that SSR means exceeding expectations and using all the strengths of the Club to make a positive social contribution, which in turn will be beneficial to long-term profitability and relationship management. It is certainly the case that the culture, personality and traditional heritage of Middlesbrough Football Club underpins their SSR ethic but as most sports organisations are rooted in their communities to some extent, it is entirely feasible that the Middlesbrough approach can be emulated and used as part of an effective sports public relations strategy elsewhere. This research therefore suggests that, by virtue of the nature of their business and their practice, significant numbers of sports organisations have the opportunity to become Social Leaders should they so wish.

References

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