

The Internationalization of Football Team Brands: The Specific Case of Chivas (Mexico and USA)

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Abstract

In professional sports, the brand is one of the primary concerns of franchise managers and potential sponsors. It is the key element that allows a team to differentiate itself from its competitors, even if the consumer does not always perceive the product as having concrete attributes (Gladden et al., 1998). High levels of brand awareness as well as a positive brand image increase the probability of brand choice, generate higher consumer loyalty and reduce vulnerability to competitive marketing actions (Keller, 1993). In addition, as the battlefield for consumers keeps expanding, a sports team brand has to develop internationally to remain competitive. Often presented as cultural symbols (Holt, Quelch and Taylor, 2004), sports teams that plan an international growth may benefit from accessing larger pools of fans but may also receive an adverse reaction from more ethnocentric consumers (Yu, 2003).

In light of this dilemma, the careful choice of an appropriate internationalization strategy becomes critical in the future economic success of the team (Couvellaere and Richelieu, 2005). Several options are available for teams pursuing an international expansion. In this paper, an in-depth analysis of the strategy adopted by CD Chivas (Mexico) to enter the US football market (MLS), using the same brand name for the new American team, is presented and criticized. The goal of the paper is to identify variables that favour or hinder such an internationalization strategy.

Kapferer (1998) underlined three main strategies of internationalization. Think local, act global is relevant above all for standardized products and consists of a gradual implementation abroad based on the success in the local market. This allows the brand to increase its chances of acceptance abroad and to reduce the financial risk (Schuiling and Lambin, 2003). Think global, act global as much as possible consists of launching a brand in different markets at once. This allows economies of scale and scope, but increases the financial risk (Schuiling and Lambin, 2003). Firms that choose this option have a global mindset. Finally, Unifying local brands occurs when a firm buys another one. These three strategies can be coupled with the four strategies proposed by Van Gelder (2002, 2004): i) The brand domain specialist, which influences development in a specific domain (technology) and consumers' preferences, ii) The brand reputation specialist, which emphasises authenticity, credibility and reliability (myth, history, legacy), iii) The brand affinity specialist, which outperforms competition by building relationships with consumers and offers a memorable experience, and, iv) The brand recognition specialist, which increases the brand's spontaneous notoriety that can then become part of the evoked set. These different internationalization strategies offer a wide array of clearly defined approaches to

internationalization for general products or services. However, sports teams, along with their inherent specificities, can not be as easily classified and offer a mix of these different approaches. It is therefore critical to identify conditions under which a strategy or a combination of strategies is adapted to the internationalization of a given team brand.

Using secondary data (websites, academic and professional publications) as well as interviews conducted with marketing managers and fans of Chivas USA in Major League Soccer (MLS), this research explores and analyzes the conditions leading to the adoption of Chivas' internationalization strategy and the consequences of such a choice on the team's positioning.

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