

Building Relations with Sport Participants through the Internet: the Case of Canadian National Sport Organisations

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Abstract

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Research Question

This study employs a relationship-building process model for the Web (Wang, Head & Archer, 2000) to examine the use of the Internet by selected Canadian National Sport Organisations (NSO) to promote sport participation. More specifically, it addresses the question: How do Canadian NSOs use the Internet in terms of functionality and service provision to create and maintain relationships with sport participants and delivery partner organisations?

Theoretical Background

Sport participation is a systematic and continuous process which involves knowledge creation, dissemination and interactions between NSOs, participants, member clubs and other agencies. These imply developing holistic and long-term relationships with participants and deliverers so the values of sport participation are accepted, internalised and acted upon by all parties. The interactive nature of the Internet offers an effective platform for communicating the NSOs' objectives and for creating and maintaining relationships with sport participants. Moreover, the Internet is in itself a relationship between a variety of technologies, techniques, and ways of communicating (Jones, 1999).

Effective relationship marketing is premised on the collection and analysis of information about participants and delivery partners which together form the sport participation network. Wang, et al (2000) relationship-building process model for the Web proposed the three interrelated stages of initial investigation, full-range communications and relationship network creation. During the first stage the relationship between an NSO and its delivery partners and participants does not exist, the parties lack adequate knowledge about each-other and the dominant activity is information gathering. At the second stage participants and deliverers of sport services come in direct contact and engage in full-range interactions by experiencing the activities being offered. Finally, a relationship network develops between the NSO, its

delivery partners and participants where the experiences and perceptions of the sport programme become of higher importance than the number of participants.

Methodology / Research Design / Data Analysis

The study focuses on ten NSOs of Alpine Skiing (ACA), Athletics (AC), Badminton (BC), Bowling (CTF), Cycling (CCA), Gymnastics (GC), Hockey (HC), Rowing (RC), Swimming (SNC) and Volleyball (VC) running Sport Participation Development Program (SPDP) projects funded by Sport Canada. The NSOs' websites were monitored between September and November 2007 focusing on their information-gathering activities and the services offered with regard to membership, media, advocacy, and general support and volunteer recruitment and management. These were analysed in relation to four key categories of users including individual participants (I), clubs (C), provincial associations (A) and corporate users (B).

Results / Discussion / Implications

Table 1 shows NSOs' information-gathering activity about and service provision for the sport participation network. Most NSOs collect information about participants' socio-demographic characteristics and level of participation through downloadable forms for event and membership registration (1st stage). This is akin to a 'reactive' level of relationship marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 1996) where NSOs are encouraging web viewers to experience sport through browsing, spectating or participating but do not initiate any further contact with them. This is far from the 'partnership level' characterised by continuous interactions between an NSO and the network. NSOs' information-gathering activities that make-up the relationship-building process appear rather sporadic allowing limited opportunities for developing a marketing data base critical for establishing relationships with sport participants. This issue is not purely technological or one of resource availability. It is equally about recognizing, understanding and using the Internet as an engine of social change and a form of relationship. Canadian NSOs have been receptive to the take-up and use the World Wide Web for promoting sport participation with all ten organisations having reached the provision and processing stages of functionality (Burgess & Cooper, 2000). Relationship marketing, however, poses a conceptual and practical challenge to all NSOs as they have to reconcile two conflicting objectives of getting to know their participants better in order to develop trusting relationships, while at the same time increasing the number of people enrolled in the SPDP programmes.

This conflict makes analysing and personalising their relationships with sport participants very difficult.

Table 1. NSOs websites information-gathering activities and service provision for members of the sport participation network

NSO	Criterion	VC	SNC	RCA	HC	GC	CCA	CTF	BC	ACA	AC
Membership support	Advice on fundraising				I,C,B	I,B	I,B				B
	Downloadable forms			I,B	I,B	I	I,C	I,C,A	I,C	I	
	On-line donations					I				I,C,A,B	
	Keeping the books										
	Running the Club										
Media support	Organising effective meetings										
	On-line press releases	I,C,B	I,C,B	I,C,A,B	I,C,B	I,C,A,B	I		I,C,A	I,B	I,C,B
	Briefing materials	I,C	I,C		I,C,B	I,C,A,B		I	I,C	I	I,C,A,B
	How to deal with the media										
	On-line petitions										
Advocacy	Links to Government and other sites	I,C,A		I,C,A	I,C,A,B	I,A			I,C,A,B	I,C,A,B	I,C,A,B
	Training courses/Manuals						I			I	
	Managing volunteers									I	
	Information on sport participation	I	I,C	I	I,C	I	I,C	I	I,C	I	
	Information about SPDP										
General public support	Participation fact sheets										
	Coaching courses	I		I	I,C		I	I			I

Key: individual participants (I), clubs (C), provincial associations (A) and corporate users (B)

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