

USFooty – Australian for Football: The penetration of Australian Rules Football in the United States

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Aim of paper and research questions

Many sport leagues and organisations are aggressively seeking to increase awareness and interest of their sport across national borders. Research on the globalisation and diffusion of sport has largely focused on the expansion of spectator sport, while limited research has focused on participant sports in cross-cultural contexts. This research examines the branding and positioning issues associated with the penetration of Australian Rules Football in the United States. Specifically, this research seeks to identify: 1) awareness and interest of Australian Rules Football in the United States, 2) the perceptions of a sport in a new cultural context, 3) barriers to participation in the sport, and 4) strategies to effectively brand and position the sport within the new cultural context.

Literature review

While it is widely acknowledged that sport leagues and organisations are expanding across national borders (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007; Grainger & Andrews, 2005; Harvey, Rail & Thibault, 1996), the primary focus of such research has been on spectator sports and the influence of popular media (Maguire, 1993; Rowe, 1995). The relationship between sport and the media has thus been considered key for the spread of a sport in foreign countries, though challenges exist for participatory sports where media coverage is often limited or non-existent (Meek, 1997; Lai, 1999). In introducing a sport into a new country, there is a need to understand the cultural characteristics that act to foster or inhibit the sport's penetration into the new culture. Specifically, it is useful to adapt the sport practices and marketing efforts to the values and style of the new cultural setting (Lai, 1999; Thoma & Chalip, 1996). This research seeks to examine how the sport of Australian Rules Football should be marketed and positioned in a new cultural context, the United States.

Research design and data analysis

Australian Rules Football is the number one spectator sport in Australia. In 1997, the sport launched in the United States as a participant based league known as both the USAFL (United States Australian Football League) and USFooty. Since then the league has expanded to include more than 35 teams and over 2,000 players, with teams located in nearly every major US market (www.usfooty.com).

An inductive method was utilised. Ten focus groups were conducted to gain insight into the factors that make a particular sport attractive, gateways and barriers to participation in a new sport, and awareness of Australian Rules Football. Focus group respondents were shown two short videos of Australian Rules Football. Participants were then asked to provide a description of their initial perceptions of, and their interest in the sport. Participants were asked to further define the aspects of the game they thought would be of interest to the American population and those that may act as barriers to entry. Each focus group consisted of 6-9 respondents and lasted

approximately 90 minutes. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim, entered into the N*Vivo qualitative software program, and core categories were systematically derived through the use of open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 1998). Data were coded independently by each author to enhance reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Results suggest limited familiarity with the sport of Australian Rules Football in the United States and a subsequent lack of knowledge about the rules of game. Once exposed to the sport, individuals generally express an interest in participating if given the opportunity and the proper instruction. However, numerous barriers to entry exist, including lack of knowledge about the sport, lack of existing opportunities and venues to play the sport, the perception that the sport is high contact and dangerous, and the already saturated participant sport market in the United States. Additionally, the name or brand of the league was seen as causing cultural confusion and had little relevance in the new cultural context.

Discussion and conclusion

The results highlight the importance of adapting the sport to the new cultural context in which the sport is being introduced (Lai, 1999; Thoma & Chalip, 1996). Further, the results suggest that not only does the sport have to be modified to fit the new cultural context, but the branding and positioning of the sport needs to be defined and differentiated from other existing products in the marketplace. Pre-existing biases and beliefs about competing sports need to be addressed, and benefits of the new sport over existing sport opportunities should be highlighted to attract participation. Further, efforts should be made to educate the new communities about the rules and regulations of the sport, and venues and opportunities to play the sport should be made accessible to the community that is targeted. Future research should examine strategies for rebranding sports in new cultural contexts.

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