

New sport teams and the development of brand community

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Aim of paper and research questions

Teams competing in the same professional sports leagues are not always the same age. In many instances, league expansion has introduced much younger teams to the league (Dickson, Arnold & Chalip, 2005). Older teams have had more opportunity to develop a relationship with the consumer. These teams have a history of memorable moments, spectator interaction, heroic athletes and possibly on-field success. Established teams, through years of spectator interaction, historical moments, and the creation of traditions or rituals, are excellent examples of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For newly introduced teams, these elements are likely to be in short supply and many of them struggle to build a community around their sport team. This research examined the extent to which managers of new sports teams utilise group experience, organisational history, ritual/traditions and the physical facility in their branding strategies.

Literature review

Research on brand community has focused attention on successful brand communities such as Jeep (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002) and has proposed several mechanisms that are central to a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Underwood, Bond and Baer (2001) applied these mechanisms to the sport industry and they proposed four strategies for sport teams to build the social identity among their fans): 1) group experiences, 2) history of the organization, 3) rituals/ traditions, and 4) physical facility. How these mechanisms relate to new brand communities remains unclear, both in general marketing as well as in the sport industry. It is argued that newly established teams are an excellent context within which efforts to establish a brand community can be explored.

Research design and data analysis

Three case study sites were selected: (a) The New Zealand Warriors, (b) The Diamonds, and, (c) The New Zealand Breakers. Two representatives that were involved in the marketing of the team brand from each organization were interviewed. In order to triangulate this data, direct observation of the physical facilities whilst in use for an event was undertaken. To analyse the data, coding and organising followed the approach advocated by O'Leary (2005). Coding took the form of placing data under headings based on the key themes of group experience, heritage, rituals, and the physical facility. From these initial groupings, data was further divided into more specific categories corresponding to each of the questions used throughout the interview process.

Results

The most common challenges for the marketing of new teams were the general lack of awareness for either their team or league, the fickle traits of supporters and the difficulty of competing successfully 'on-field' against established teams. Group experience was important in

the development of their respective brands. Unlike the group experience, respondents provided varying responses regarding the importance of history for their current marketing strategy. Respondents were unanimous in their opinion that rituals were important to their organisations. Respondents were generally in agreement with the opinion that the physical facility is important to brand development, but what this physical facility entails was perceived differently.

Discussion and conclusion

This is the first study to extend the study of brand communities from successful and established brands to new organizations. While the organisations were aware of the precursors to brand community or social identification, and mentioned future plans to initiate development of each antecedent, currently there was minimal practice or development. Strategies towards building the brand through these four mechanisms were fragmented or non-existent. Each of the four mechanisms deserves more in-depth examination in different settings. The researchers recommend using experimental designs to examine the effectiveness of these four mechanisms into detail. Most of the traditional sport teams who were established decades (or centuries) ago, came into existence as a direct result of an external community, or were able to take advantage of a market that was more conducive for community building (Heere & James, 2007). In the current marketplace where many of the sources for communities are no longer geographical, new sport teams are struggling to build a community around the team, and in the case of the new sport teams in the Auckland region, they have yet to effectively build a marketing strategy to do so. It is argued that for these teams to be successful on long-term basis, it is essential to develop a marketing strategy in which group experience, the history and heritage, the rituals and traditions, and the physical facility play a key role.

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