

How to build a sports team brand: Minor league vs. Champions League teams, what are the similarities and differences?

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Aim of paper and research questions

The purpose of this paper is to explain “How can managers build a football team brand at different levels of competition, at the minor league as well as at the Champions League level?”. In line with this, “What are the similarities and differences, in both the catalyst factors used and the strategies employed by football teams?”

Literature review

The brand is considered the most important asset of sports teams (Bauer et al., 2005), and a team’s brand identity provides it with direction and meaning (Hill & Vincent, 2006). This identity is based on brand personality that increases consumer preference and usage, arouses emotions in consumers and tends to increase the level of trust and loyalty among consumers (Aaker, 1997). Fans derive strength and a sense of identity from their affiliation with a team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Fans often see the team as an extension of themselves: team success is personal success, and team failure is personal failure. Brand and branding are strategic leverage to generate value for organisations (Keller, 2003; Lewi, 2005), and in sports specifically (Mullin et al., 2007; Richelieu et al., 2008; Ross, 2006), from both a marketing and financial standpoint (Mizik & Jacobson, 2008). Therefore, it is important for teams to know about the importance of different catalyst factors and their impact on the sports team brand, according to their sporting level.

Research design and data analysis

In this exploratory research, we looked at seven football teams: three in Germany (SpVgg Vreden [7th division], SC Fortuna Köln [5th division], SC Paderborn 07 [3rd division]), three in France (Olympique Lyon, Olympique de Marseille and Paris Saint-Germain [all in first division]) and one in Spain (FC Barcelona [in 1st division]). We engaged in semi-structured interviews with managers of the seven teams. The qualitative method enabled us to carry out an in-depth case analysis of the strategic vision of team managers in terms of their plans to build and manage their brand. Cases were selected according to the researchers’ observation skills and the cases’ ability to provide relevant information (Patton, 1980); the case study limits the number of companies that could be studied in a reasonable period of time and at reasonable cost (Eisenhardt, 1989). One and a half hour face-to-face meetings were held. Given that the main criterion in the choice of a respondent for a case study was the quality of the information that could be obtained from the respondent (Kolb, 2008; Lee & Lings, 2008), the managers chosen were directly involved in the teams’ marketing initiatives (marketing directors, V-P marketing or Presidents).

Results

The two main contributions of our paper are:

1. The relative importance of the internal and external catalysts in developing a football team brand, depending on the calibre of the team (lower division team, up to a global sports team brand), its ambition and means. We have identified 25 catalyst factors and their respective impact on the team brand. For instance, sports infrastructures and the team web site seem to have a very strong impact, independent of the team calibre, whereas, on-field performance and merchandising clearly have a stronger impact on the brand of higher calibre teams than on lower division ones.
2. The strategies that would be the most appropriate for a football team according to its calibre, ambition and means. Here, we articulate six core strategic options. These six options are structured around the supply (focus on youth development; focus on first senior team), direct demand (focus on emotional connection with fans) and indirect demand involved (focus on the medias; focus on the sponsors; focus on merchandising) (Hoeness, 2003).

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the derived 25 catalyst factors and their relative importance, we came out with a set of options that would enable soccer team brands to navigate through the strategic construction and management of their brand. Furthermore, we identified six potential strategies. Clubs with a lower level of team competitiveness, seem to be more focused on strategic options. Admittedly, the derived importance of the catalyst factors postulates that all team managers have the same definition of a sports team brand in mind, which might not be true. Moreover, these cases are unique in many ways. Consequently, transcending these results to apply the conclusions to other teams should be done with caution (Lee & Lings, 2008). However, our study provides a first set of guidelines in answering the question: "Are there some best practices that could help us transcend the sports domain and apply them to other industries?". These guidelines should be validated next, in an empirical study.

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