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Real and virtual sport events in marketing industrial products

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Background

Over the last decades sport has suffered enormous changes assuming connotations of *business* (Zagnoli, Radicchi, 2008) that nevertheless do not cancel its exciting and emotional dimension: the desire “to consume” the sport experience keeps involving thousands of practitioners and fans.

In the contemporary competitive context, to acquire a sustainable market space in terms of profitability,

companies try to involve consumers in a *cognitive, sensorial* and *affective* way (Resciniti, 2004) offering consumption “experiences” able to entertain and to make feeling the consumer an active protagonist of “unique occasions”. Although are mainly commercial and distribution companies to be oriented toward an experiential marketing approach, even industrial firms can enrich their products by offering an entertainment experience.

In contemporary marketing strategies, industrial companies look at sport events such as an important *experience provider* to create an intimate, personal, bi-univocal and long lasting relationship with specific target segments and to gain meaningful *competitive advantages* towards their competitors. Moreover, participating to sport occasions and events can guarantee an high quality of contact with the consumer and acts on the motivational pushes to the purchase. The active participation of spectators creates an *emotional involvement* enabling to build the “values heritage” connected to the brand and to the product’s identification for consumers.

Objectives

Among the possible relations between marketing and sport, this paper focuses on *how industrial companies* (sport products and equipments suppliers, multimedia companies and service providers, consumer goods manufacturers, etc.) *combine sport with their products and brands* “staging” experiential events.

Methods

A *qualitative methodology* based on the experiential marketing literature reviewed in the light of the new media technologies and a *multi-cases analysis* (Yin, 2002) was used. The case studies have been developed through qualitative interviews (*primary source*) with decision makers of sport equipment suppliers (Adidas, Nike, etc.), consumer goods companies (e.g. Coca-Cola), multimedia companies (Vodafone, Yahoo, Linden Lab, Electronic Arts, etc.), sport event organizers (Sportur, Festival del Fitness, etc.), industrial divisions of sport clubs (Ferrari), sport retail stores (Universo Sport). The cases selected involve above all major companies with global brands since those constitute the major proponents of sport experiential occasions with a case histories that allows to make an articulated analysis of the several situations in which sport emerges as a tool of experiential marketing.

Focus group with professors of the Master Degree in Sport Management of the University of Florence,

sport professionals and experts such as marketing directors of sport federations, event’s organizers, sport venues managers, etc. were also organized. Further meaningful information have been gathered through specialized database (SBRnet, Sport and Technology Review, Sport Business Journal, etc.) and official web sites (*secondary source*) of sport equipments producers, multimedia services suppliers, event’s organizers, etc.

Results and Conclusions

Since the increasing diffusion of new multimedia and interactive technologies at global level, companies often adopt experiential marketing strategies aimed to the ideation and implementation of sport events that intend not only to enhance a direct consumers’ involvement, but also a “mediate participation” up to offer a sport virtual representation. Multimedia and interactive opportunities granted by the new media induce industrial companies to stage real sport events enriched with multimedia value added services aimed to maximize the user’s involvement and co-participation as well as to diversify their own incomes, arriving in some cases particularly structured to offer a virtual representation of the sport event.

The deepen exploration of each selected case study, in synergy with the experiential marketing literature, allowed to represent a sport events typology distributed along a *continuum* at whose extremes we can find on one side real sport practices and on the other extreme side sport virtual artifacts. In the middle we can observe “hybrids” forms: real sport events enriched with multimedia and virtual dimensions such as web sites, video streaming, web community, Sms, etc.

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