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Does strategic marketing of non-football team sports suffer from a lack of competitive attitude? Findings from a qualitative club survey

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Background and objectives

The present paper addresses to an empirical research project on the socioeconomic relevance of the four leading team sports football, handball, ice hockey, and basketball in Germany. The aim of the study was to measure revenue generation in a comparative setting. On the one hand, the point was to analyse the amount of revenue differences between the sport clubs and leagues on the basis of quantitative data along a theoretical market model. On the other hand, a qualitative interview study should answer the question how especially the non-football clubs manage to survive in the high competitive team sport market. This paper centers only the latter qualitative part of the research project. It analyses how the clubs evaluate their local market position and what strategic plans they have to improve their resource situation.

Literature review

Professional club team sport is the predominant research topic in sports economics and marketing (Andreff, & Szymanski, 2009, Desbordes, 2007, Downward, & Dawson, 2000). But it is only lately that tentative contributions to European team sports beyond football came up, i.e. particularly handball, basketball, and ice hockey. But there is still a lack of strategic marketing research in the literature on professional team sports. Related to the German team sport industry, the survey of Deloitte (2008), for example, provides insightful economic data of different leagues. Klein & Kurscheidt (2008) found in their empirical study, among other things, that the variables team management and inter-league competition are more decisive for revenue generation than pure market size categories. To get more information to which extent the individual team sport clubs deal strategically with their local market situation, more qualitative research is needed. This study tries to bridge this gap in the existing literature. On a practical level, the results can guide the clubs' future marketing activities.

Methods

Based on categories of a regional model of league sports (Klein & Kurscheidt, 2008), which transforms the basic football market model of Swieter (2002) towards an structure-conduct-performance and input-output-model for team sport in general, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed along four groups of questions: (1) General evaluation of team sports, the leagues' structures and politics, (2) Club characteristics, sporting success, management structure, existence of marketing plans and professional managers, (3) Revenue generation and marketing strategies, esp. related to attendance, sponsors, and local networks,, (4) Characteristics of the clubs' local sites, e.g. socioeconomic situation, sport infrastructure, and of further team sport clubs in the area.

In a period from 2005 to 2007 128 interviews were conducted with marketing managers from different football, ice hockey, handball, and basketball clubs. This sample involves 62.4 % of all

upper league clubs in the four leading team sports in Germany. The interviews were analysed qualitatively, using the MaxQDA program. The club managers' statements were compared following Mayring's qualitative content analysis (2008), similarities and differences between the clubs' marketing strategies were identified.

Results

The interviews verify the existence of a hierarchy between the team sports also in the individual perception of the club managers. All of the respondents attribute the 1st and 2nd league football clubs distinct advantages in the local team sport competition, like a natural phenomenon. In the light of limited local resources from sponsors, fans, or municipal government, we expected strong marketing efforts of the non-football clubs to save revenues and attendance. In contrary to that hypothesis, this is not the case for most of the clubs. In fact, their market behaviour tends to be rather passive, following a strategy in the sense of „friendly coexistence“, a behaviour patterns more associated with amateur sport clubs. Strategic marketing ideas are mostly restricted to sponsorships and seldom implemented in the field of fan management. Nevertheless, in contrast, there exist a smaller group of upgraded oriented clubs which traces complex marketing strategies in all of their revenue generation fields.

Conclusion/Application to practice

Today, professional football clubs' marketing strategies are in fact *that* benchmark for other team sports. Anyhow, in present and past, there were exactly the non-football leagues, especially basketball and ice hockey, which illustrated their creativity in team sport marketing and set up innovations in the sponsoring market. Nowadays, again, a more self confident attitude of the non-football team sports is needed to catch up with the popular football. The clubs have to face up with the competition and play an active role in the local team sport markets. This also requires more professional marketing managers, even in the lower leagues.

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