

GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS: WEBSITE PRESENCE AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN ENGLISH FOOTBALL

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Abstract

Football is more often than not deplored for its negative business practices such as corruption, astronomical transfer fees, illegal betting, poor governance, player behaviour and controversial take-overs to name but a few. As a consequence, questions concerning the legitimacy of football clubs and their position in society have proliferated (Slack and Shrivess, 2008). It is only recently that the football world has started using parlance to denote the positive side of the sport's business life. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is concerned with grasping the power of football and channeling it into society for intended 'good cause' business agenda.

One CSR-related activity that has yet to be systematically examined is the way in which sport organisations use the internet to communicate their initiatives and programmes. A notable exception is the recent work of Walker et al. (2010), who analysed CSR-related content distributed by North American sport teams to their stakeholders via electronic newsletters. In the European sport context, however, the website content associated with CSR actions has not enjoyed sufficient attention. This is rather surprising given that football clubs have now established official websites as their primary communication medium (Kriemadis et al., 2010). The purpose of our research (in progress), therefore, is to provide a preliminary descriptive account of the online features associated with CSR practices employed by top-tier football clubs in England.

This research draws on the institutional perspective and as such is primarily informed by legitimacy theory, which assumes that a social contract exists between society and the organisation. Those organisations (in this case, football

clubs in the English Premier League) which appear to damage that contract need to restore it if they are to regain societal approval. This type of reaction does not limit itself to 'repairing the image' but also generates opportunities closely associated with relationship-building and promotional activities. Consequently, although the authors initially approached the matter through legitimacy theory, analysis soon showed that marketing-related features play a prominent role in these websites and hence cannot be overlooked.

Direct website observation was used to identify the content of those online pages devoted to CSR practices. This methodological technique is consistent with that of Beech et al. (2000) and more recently Kriemadis et al. (2010), and in the current study involved a detailed examination of the web pages dedicated to CSR practices across the twenty clubs in the PL during the 2010-2011 season. Observations were conducted from November 2010 to March 2011, and the overall preliminary findings are outlined in Table 1.

The trend towards an 'arm's length' organisational independence is not reflected in online CSR presence. Only four trusts/foundations have an independent webpage and therefore the ability to control both the content and the frequency of uploading this information. This can be seen as a missed (business) opportunity for those trusts/foundations whose online presence is only realised through the club's official webpage. It is not surprising therefore that online content is dominated by programmes that follow the organising body's (the PL's) four major concerns of social inclusion, education, health and equality. Interestingly, however, not all of those PL shareholders devote space or time (i.e. resources) to the effective communication even of those programmes. Moreover, inclusion of text translators or redirection to translated web pages for global viewers is frequently seen in those clubs with a global brand (or foreign owner). Although findings did identify, for example, Manchester United using language features on its official club site, this does not extend to the content of its foundation. This perhaps reflects the emphasis these foundations put on local needs and synergies with local businesses and/or public organisations. On the other hand, an international programme called Premier Skills (part of the PL's wider CSR agenda) demonstrates that PL clubs' global reach may require more internationally-based communication practices. One way to respond to the previous point is through the use of social networking sites. Our findings indicate that trust and foundation web pages incorporate links to social networking sites such as (most frequently) Facebook as well as Twitter, Myspace and Bebo. The integration of these sites provides a(nother) platform to communicate CSR programmes to a wide demographic audience both domestically and internationally.

This research-in-progress aims to establish the current state of e-communication of CSR practices employed by football organisations. Our preliminary findings indicate an emphasis on themes strongly associated with the PL's 'institutionalised' CSR agenda, but they also highlight several features that can be linked with marketing practices hence potential business opportunities.

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