
TOWARD A MANAGEMENT MODEL OF E-REPUTATION IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS

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Synopsis:

Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collection in a professional sports organization among two key stakeholders groups, namely fans and Owners/Managers, this article investigates the perceived importance and management principles of reputation and e-reputation. It provides a better understanding of the challenges of managing e-reputation in highly expressive contexts (sports organizations) and propose a model of e-reputation management in this specific context.

Abstract:

1. Aim of abstract/paper - research question

E-reputation which is often presented as a component of the concept of reputation, expressed via the internet and the use of social media, represents a key interest and trigger point in several managerial decisions for organizations in general and, even more so, for sports organizations in which social media is often at the heart of the managerial strategies. Despite this critical role played by e-reputation in the sports industry, e-reputation has received limited attention in the strategic management or marketing literature (Castellano & Dutot, 2013). Therefore, this research addresses this gap by focusing on the concept of e-reputation as one of the key components of a professional sports team. More specifically, making the conceptual assumption that e-reputation is an extension of the reputation of an organization (Castellano & Dutot, 2013), this article examines the question of transferring the principles of reputation management to e-reputation management. Specifically, the central objective is to study which online reputation management levers to prioritize with certain stakeholders in order to optimize the control of a sports organization's e-reputation.

2. Theoretical background

Corporate reputation is the result of the collective judgment of different stakeholder groups that determines their future relationship with the firm

(Fombrun, 1996; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). This assessment is made on the basis of their past experience with the firm, its results, its communication and the communication by others. These characteristics can potentially be transferred to the definition of e-reputation. The concept of e-reputation has been little studied in the literature on strategic management or marketing but E-reputation is presented as one component of reputation, developed via the internet and the use of social media (Chun and Davies, 2000).

Reputation management relies on relationships with multiple stakeholder groups which can be internal or external to the firm. The firm can communicate directly with some external stakeholders, however, reputation is also partially built on information exchanges that cannot be controlled by the firm (stakeholder to stakeholder communication). As a component of reputation, e-reputation has the particularity of associating perceptions to what is said on the internet by certain stakeholders. Therefore, the management of e-reputation is particular as it relies on media emphasizing instantaneous communication, diversifying the sources, increasing the power of the public and giving more importance to inter-stakeholder communication. In addition, some contexts are naturally more exposed to the phenomena of e-reputation. This is the case of sports organizations as they trigger important social media use and communication between stakeholders as well as high emotional content. Among the identified stakeholders of a sports organization, some stand out because of their potential impact on the internet, particularly on social networks: managers, athletes and fans. The media and partners only use the internet as an additional communication channel. Therefore, this paper aims at identifying which of the main management principles (levers) of e-reputation are perceived by stakeholders to be effective in managing the reputation more effectively.

3. Methodology

In order to reach both the strongest possible contribution in this research and to respect the feasibility of the project, the authors decided to select a professional soccer team in the "Ligue 1" (top professional soccer league in France). The authors also chose to focus on two different types of key actors in the reputational context of the team, a pure stakeholder group (fans) and a pure shareholder group (owners/ managers). Finally, the authors decided to use a mix of qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative (online surveys) methods to offer a more diversified perspective/contribution to the issue of e-reputations in sports organizations.

4. Results, discussion and conclusions

The results highlight the importance of reputation for the sport organization but also the various difficulties in trying to include e-reputation as a part of the reputation equation. Building on the model proposed by Rindova and Fombrun (1999), a strategic managerial approach to e-reputation in professional sports organizations is proposed. This model suggests key recommendations to sports organizations' managers and decision makers to adapt the communication strategy of their key stakeholders in order to optimize the e-reputation of their team. For instance, the results of the analysis of the fans' perceptions of the e-reputation as well as the opinion of the team decision

makers on the topic show that the communication levers to prioritize to improve e-reputation management are transparency and consistency. A communication channel incorporating key stakeholders and their roles in terms of e-reputation management is also proposed in order to optimize the external control of reputation as a resource.

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