

The Difficult Task Of Addressing The Internal Audience: The Case Of Improving Employees' Health And Active Lifestyle By The Means Of A Sponsorship

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Aim

The scope of sport sponsorships is covering multiple purposes, and addressing the internal audience is by Cornwell (2014, p. 141) described as "one of the areas where sponsorship has the largest unrecognized potential to contribute". This makes sponsorship management appear as an overlap between classical marketing and Human Resource Management practices (Edwards, 2016). Our study presents results from a case where a leading Danish insurance company prior to the 2012 Olympic Games decided to sponsor the most successful Danish rowing boat (winning medals ever since Atlanta 1996). Unlike other sponsorships, the idea behind this sponsorship design was solely to reach a specific group of employees working in the company's service center. The sponsorship addressed three overall themes *health*, *competencies* and *teamwork* that should be improved by means of inspiration from elite rowing. The purpose of this study is twofold as we 1) explore how elite sport as part of a health improvement campaign is enacted and integrated in the sponsorship design, and 2) investigate how middle managers and in particular employees evaluate the sponsorship-linked efforts to promote a healthy life-style through exercise and inspiration from elite rowing.

Theoretical background

This study is anchored in a critical realist understanding of management and organizing (Tourish, 2013). Improving employees' health has intensified over the last years resulting in intensified focus on sport and physical exercise not only outside of, but frequently as an integrated part of a corporate strategy (Pichot, Pierre & Burlot, 2009). However, this health-approach has led to negative outcomes such as stigmatization and exclusion of some employees (Mik-Meyer, 2008). We therefore problematize (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) the basic assumption — among practitioners as well as among some researchers — that the attraction towards elite sport can be directly transferred to efforts promoting a healthy lifestyle among employees.

Research methods

We use both quantitative and qualitative methods with the aim of increasing knowledge and generating insights into the difficulties of addressing the internal audience. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were carried out in 2012 and 2013. This includes single interviews with the HR and marketing managers of the company, group interviews with two elite rowers and two company project employees working specifically with the sponsorship implementation, and two focus groups (each consisting of three persons) with employees of from the service center. A questionnaire was developed based on knowledge gained from the first rounds of interviews with the managers and distributed among the service center employees in September 2012, just after the Olympic Games (N = 653; respond rate 66%). Of this group 10% had a position as middle managers. The quantitative findings are based on self-evaluations, thus — and different from other studies (Edwards, 2016) — a limitation of this study is that it does not contain a before/after design neither was it possible to test it on a control group. Instead the study combines qualitative and quantitative methods where quantitative findings are followed by group interviews in order to gain deeper insights into the subjective perceptions of managers, rowers, and employees by drawing attention to possible links and constraints between elite sport and healthy lifestyle and the role of middle managers during the implementation of the sponsorship.

Results, discussion and implications

Whereas this sponsorship seems to have had a positive impact on employees' competencies and team work (study under review), positive health aspects are more dubious. Unlike the competencies and team work that were uniquely integrated in this sponsorship, the health component was by the management integrated into already existing employee health improvement efforts initiated earlier at the company. Thus, the management linked elite sport with health efforts. While 67% of the employees surveyed responded that it was either very important/to some extent important that a sport sponsorship also focused on employees' health, a vast majority (94%) responded 'no' to the question whether the campaign associated with this sponsorship had made them do more sport/exercise. Qualitative insights furthermore confirmed the missing link between an elite sport sponsorship as a means for health improvement. Our study is in line

with those studies emphasizing that it is difficult to find evidence that there is a direct connection between elite sport and intensified physical activity among non-elite people. An explanation can be found in the fact that this sponsorship was not designed solely for the purpose of being linked to an improved employee health intervention. Thus a managerial implication is that we cannot take for granted that a healthy image ascribed to sport can easily be transferred to employees by means of a sponsorship.

References

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