

Influence of Perceived Relationship Quality on Donor Behavior: Case of Professional Sport Charitable Nonprofit Organizations

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Aim

Through their own charitable foundations, sport entities have become highly engaged with social and environmental issues in recent years. However, given the increasing number of nonprofit organizations in professional sports, intensified market competitions for donor's dollars are coupled with the limited amount of financial resources for charities and donations; today, organizations must find effective ways to maintain current donor involvement and nurture future contributions. One of the logical ways to sustain charity funds would be to strengthen the relationship quality of an organization with its donors. The current study sought to answer the following research questions: (a) what are the important relationship quality traits in the sport nonprofit setting and (b) does the relationship quality of athletes and that of staff members influence donor behavior?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Relationship quality is defined as “overall assessment of the strength of a relationship, conceptualized as a composite or multidimensional construct capturing the different but related facets of a relationship” (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006, p. 138) and the importance of personal interactions has been drawing considerable research attention in terms of customer relationships. Nonprofit researchers and practitioners have long regarded “friendraising” and “relationship fundraising” strategies as an essential component of any fundraising effort because such relationships make donors more involved and financially committed (Sargeant & Jay, 2004; Weinstein, 2009). Previous studies have confirmed the positive linkage between relationship quality of nonprofit organization and donor behavioral outcomes (e.g., Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005). Even so, only a limited number of studies have been conducted to examine such relationships in the context of professional sports. As professional sport nonprofit organizations provide various charity events and programs involving star players, donors have opportunities to meet and interact with high-profile athletic figures. Due to the unique conditions and situations, the relationship quality of athletes who engaged with fundraising events or charity programs might have a higher chance to influence donor behavior; similarly, the resulted relationships of event organizing staff members with donors would also help cultivate and reinforce donor behaviors. Yet, these speculations need empirical evidence; in particular, no consensus exists among investigators in terms of identifying underlining dimensions within the relationship quality concept in the context of sport-related charitable nonprofit organizations.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Due to the lack of a well-conceived theoretical framework, qualitative research process was first conducted to capture donors' perceptions regarding relationship quality between professional athletes and donors and also between respective nonprofit staff members and donors. After refining an instrument through conducting a test of content validity via a panel of experts, a questionnaire was formulated that contained items measuring perceived relationship quality of athletes and nonprofit staffs, along with items measuring donor behaviors (i.e., future intention to donate and positive word-of-mouth). All items were

phrased into a 7-point Likert scale. A total of 511 useful surveys were collected from professional sport donors through conducting an online survey. Both of an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted to identify and confirm a set of latent constructs of relationship quality. Then, a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was performed to test the proposed correlations.

Results and Discussion

From the qualitative data, four relationship quality factors were identified (i.e., trustworthiness, commitment, sympathy, and friendliness). However, the EFA revealed two single global measures; Relationship Quality of Staffs and Relationship Quality of Athletes. The CFA showed an acceptable fit of the measurement model ($\chi^2/df = 2.71$, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .081) and other validity and reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha, factor loadings, and factor correlations) fell within the acceptable ranges as well. The SEM testing the inter-concept relationships indicated a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.72$, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .081). Overall, the relationship quality had a significant impact on donor behavior outcomes. In addition, the direct impacts of relationship quality of staffs and athletes on future intention ($g = .70$ and $.23$, respectively) and word-of-mouth ($g = .71$ and $.20$, respectively) were statistically significant.

Conclusion and Implications

Relationship quality is a critical concept for motivating and sustaining sport donor behavior. When donors are treated seriously and valuably by nonprofit organizations, they can play an important role in maximizing financial supports. Thus, organization managers should professionally act with honesty, kindness, sympathetic emotion, and dedication when communicating with their donors to maintain their donor base and seeking continuous support. When professional athletes are invited to fundraising events, nonprofit managers should make sure the athletes act in the same manner as do the nonprofit managers. In addition, using the refined survey form would be helpful for sport nonprofit organizations to effectively monitor their interactions with donors and even select and train highly-qualified staff members.

References

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