

Perceptions of Non-Revenue Sport: A Case of Intercollegiate Men's Wrestling

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The majority of student-athletes participating in NCAA sports at institutions across all levels are involved in sports labeled "non-revenue" (NCAA Participation Report). However, when it comes to promoting the various sport teams at colleges and universities it is interesting to note the significant attention that revenue producing teams obtain from marketers. The perplexing issue is not that these revenue producing teams garner attention, but rather the lack of effort expended to support non-revenue producing sports. One may argue what came first, the money or the marketing? Regardless of the answer to the age old debate, considerably more attention should be focused at the management of non-revenue producing sports at the collegiate level.

Given that non-revenue producing sports are continually expected to generate some resources to offset costs, managing these teams as brands would be beneficial to athletic departments. Viewing a sport organization from a brand perspective allows marketing personnel to better understand the perceptions of the team within the sport marketplace (Gladden, Irwin, & Sutton, 1998). Brand identity is defined as the perception of the brand as it is interpreted by the consumer (Nandan, 2005), and is key in communicating with sport consumers. These brand associations can be used to generate marketing communication programs and positioning campaigns. One specific brand association for example, team success, has been often used in promotional campaigns for various sport teams. While this association dimension is best used when a team is winning, other brand association dimensions can be used to promote and position a team during down times in performance.

Research seeking to increase our understanding of brand associations in sport must include an acknowledgement that brand associations may differ across various segments of a fan base. One potential characteristic for segmenting sport consumers is through identification with a team. Intercollegiate sports administrators need to be cognizant of these differences and the positioning strategies that may be used reach various levels of committed fans. Given the characteristics of sport (e.g., experiential, subjective), the likelihood of variation between segments is to be expected. As such, to better promote non-revenue producing teams to future and existing customers, an understanding of the current brand associations across levels of identified fans is crucial. In fact, Gladden, et al. (1998) suggest that in terms of building brand equity, the challenge for major professional sport teams in the next decade will be to learn as much as possible about their customers. If a non-revenue producing sport team intends to increase attendance, creating a positive perception in the marketplace is paramount. The purpose of the current study was to compare the brand association dimensions of a non-revenue generating sport team across levels of identified fans. Specifically, the current study examined the sport team brand associations for an intercollegiate wrestling team across two segments of identified fans.

Surveys were distributed at three different wrestling meets at a large Midwestern University in the United States. A total of 283 individuals responded to a five page self-administered questionnaire. The survey included measures of brand associations, team identification, and demographics. A modified version of the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006) was used to examine the brand associations for the wrestling team. The TBAS was originally developed to assess the team brand associations of professional sport (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006), but has been shown to be very valid and reliable in intercollegiate settings (Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007). The TBAS measures 11 brand association dimensions thought to comprise the overall brand association construct in sport. Four items were used in the instrument to assess the team identification construct. These items have been used successfully in previous research to examine individual's team identification (James & Ross, 2002; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005). All items were measured on seven-point Likert-type scales with response categories anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) and Strongly Agree (7).

In order to examine the wrestling team brand associations across various levels of team identification, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed. Each respondent was classified into one of two segments of team identification, labeled "low to moderate" and "high", by calculating the mean score across the four identification items. The low to moderate identification segment was defined as those respondents whose mean identification score was between 0 and 5.0, while the high identification segment was defined as those respondents whose mean identification score was between 5.1 and 7.0. The rationale for segmenting respondents in this manner stemmed from the exploratory nature of the study and the fact that nearly all respondents indicated at least a moderate level of identification. The low to moderate identification segment represented 27.0% (N=76) of the sample, and the high identification segment represented 73.0% (N=205) of the total sample.

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The results indicated significant differences between the two groups on 7 of the 11 brand association dimensions. The four dimensions that were non-significant between the two segments of identified fans were concessions, rivalry, stadium, and success. It should be noted that rivalry, stadium, and success dimensions might have been found to be significant at the .10 level; however, the p value was initially set at a more traditional .05 level. When examining the raw scores for each association dimension, the highly identified segment had greater means for each dimension except concessions. Further examination of the raw scores indicates that the strongest brand association was team-play characteristics for both the low to moderate segment (M=5.26) and the high segment (M=6.11). Similarly, while not significantly different, the weakest dimension for both the low to moderate segment (M=4.06) and the high segment (M=4.04) was that of concessions.

The results of this study indicate highly identified fans of a non-revenue sport have greater access to positive unique brand associations than those who are less identified. An individual's identification with a team, and the relationship this connection has to the network of brand associations, is important for intercollegiate marketers to consider. The ability to properly assess these brand associations allows sport administrators the capacity to more effectively reach and serve existing customers, as well as potential new consumers of these non-revenue producing entities. Sport marketers should pro-actively control the brand images that are communicated to consumers.