

The Invention of Tradition: Building Oiler Nation

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**Session 20: Organizational Theory
Presentation (25-minute)**

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We argue that the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) is a process that sport organizations can use to delocalize themselves in order to build fan nations. The delocalization of sport organizations has been discussed as a consequence of globalization (Euchner, 1993). A tangible result of delocalization is the emergence of the fan as consumer (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Choosing which sports team to cheer for is just another choice that the fan as consumer now makes. This shift from fan to "fansumer" (Euchner, 1993) has meant that the importance of a sport team's local affiliation is disappearing.

A result of the delocalization of sports teams is the emergence of fan nations. A nation is not restricted to a particular location. Anyone, from anywhere, can be a "fansumer". The Red Sox Nation (Shaughnessy, 1996) is the most notable, however, other nations are emerging. Toronto Maple Leaf and Saskatchewan Roughriders fans also refer to themselves as nations. Fan nation building is one way to increase the size and scope of a team's "fansumers".

Social process help "fansumers" develop community attachments with the sport organization and other "fansumers" (Carbaugh, 1996; Eastman & Land, 1997; Melnick, 1993). In other words, a fan nation is built through social process. The appeal of belonging to nation is that the "fansumer" belongs to a community regardless of the team's location. How, then, can sport organizations facilitate the affiliation of "fansumers"? One place to look for an answer is in the literature on the historical development of nations and nationalism.

The "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) describes how social elites built nations and nationalist sentiment. The crux of the argument is that fledgling nations need to build communities to survive. Nevertheless, there are limited ways to do so. One way that this can be done, however, is by creating common bonds among the members of the nation by referencing a "suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p.1).

There are three types of invented traditions that invoke a suitable past. The first are those traditions that establish or symbolize the "cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 9). The second are invented traditions that establish or legitimize "institutions, status, or relations of authority" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 9). Finally, the main purpose of the third invented tradition is "socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 9). Of the three invented traditions the first is most important. The other two traditions occur as a result of the development and creation of the community.

Invented traditions are particularly important to nation building because these traditions are vague and come to represent the underlying values and sentiments of the larger group. Invented traditions are emotionally charged and grounded in the symbols of the nation. These emotionally charged symbols are used to reference an idealized past. This idealized past then becomes a starting point from which to build further support.

It is our hypothesis that the Edmonton Oilers have successfully invented traditions to reference a particular idealized past. These invented traditions are elements that the Oilers have used to delocalize their fan base and appeal to the "fansumer".

To explore this hypothesis we examine the organizational practices of the Edmonton Oilers. The Edmonton Oilers are a small market franchise in the National Hockey League. With a market population of less than one million people, the Oilers are limited in their sources of local revenues.

We use a case study method to examine the processes that the Oilers have used to invent their tradition. We examine the team's activities and map these to the various types of "invented traditions". Different events such as the Heritage Classic, the first outdoor professional hockey game, the jersey retirement ceremonies for past players, the introduction of a third jersey and the deliberate attempt to represent the Oilers as Canada's team are all examples of the "invention of tradition". From these accounts we are able to describe how the Oilers have successfully used the "invention of tradition" to appeal to "fansumers" and increase the size of their nation.

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The contribution of our presentation is that this is the first investigation of how fan nations can be built. We demonstrate that the "invention of tradition" is a strategy that sport organizations can employ to delocalize themselves. The delocalization of a sport organization increases the appeal of the organization outside its geographic boundaries. In so doing, the organization appeals to "fansumers" and increases its potential revenues.

References

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