

A management and marketing analysis of elite sports facilities in Flanders: A case study of Flanders Sports Arena, Sportoase and Expodroom

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Abstract 260**

In 1966 the Council of Europe launched the Sport for All principle because they were convinced that sport was benefiting the health and well-being of all citizens in society. Therefore, most European countries, including Belgium, have a long history of Sport for All and the deliverance of recreational sport through the public government. Recently there has been a shift in the sectors that provide programs and services dealing with sport. The greater part of the recently constructed elite sports facilities, for instance, are no longer solely built by the public sector, but arise under the private sector or public-private partnerships.

Literature indicates a shift in the provision of sports facilities from the public sector, towards the private sector and public-private partnerships. The public sports sector carries out the Sport for All policy with a goal of offering sport services at very low costs for the participants. In order to increase sports participation, the public sector constructs and manages sports facilities and launches sports promotion with tax payers' money (Kesenne, 2000). Although the government has built a large portion of the current sports facilities, 39.3% of the Flemish cities and municipalities still suffer from a shortage of indoor sports facilities (De Knop, Scheerder, & Ponnet, 2006). This shortage is recently filled up by facilities built by the private sector and public-private partnerships. There is also a shift from building recreational sports facilities to multifunctional elite sports facilities (De Mar, & Van den Berghe, 2004). Westerbeek et al. (2003) analyzed the importance of all elements of the marketing mix related to the management of sports facilities and events. In line with Westerbeek's framework, the systems theory (Soucie & Doherty, 1994) and the marketing strategy constraints (Shilbury, Quick, & Westerbeek, 2003) are used to explore the three forms of elite sports facilities currently present in Flanders.

The purpose of this study is to identify differences in marketing mix approach between elite sports facilities in Flanders, built and managed by the public sector, the private sector and public-private partnerships.

This research used a qualitative, case study method to explore the marketing mix approach in the different types of elite sports facilities. The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real live events, such as organizational and managerial processes (Yin, 2003). More specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted with three sport managers of three different types of sport facilities, i.e. Flanders Sports Arena, a public sector facility; the Expodroom, a private sector facility; and, Sportoase, a public-private partnership facility. During the in-depth interviews, a guided questionnaire was used enquiring about the marketing mix elements, i.e. product, price, place, promotion, people, processes, and positioning. Some of the questions were: 'What is your target market and who is your competitor?', 'How much money does the product costs to the customer and how did you decided on price setting?', 'What was the deciding factor to built the sport facility at this location?', 'Via what means do you try to reach your target group and what do you undertake to increase the accessibility of the facility?', 'How many employees work in the sport facility?' and 'Which external factors (demographic, economic, sociological, technological, ecological, political or competition) affect the marketing and management of the sports facility the most? A SWOT-analysis of the three elite sports facilities was also performed. Data were analyzed based on fully transcribed interviews, using the systems theory and the marketing strategy constraints as a tool.

The product which the three elite sports facilities offer to their target groups differs. The Flanders Sports Arena is a multi-sport indoor athletics arena that serves elite athletes. This public facility handles the lowest service prices, due to the Sport for All idea. Promotion channels are barely used. The advantage of the public facility is that they have no stakeholders, so there is no pressure to make a profit. Their disadvantage is the attitude of the civil servants.

Sportoase is a multipurpose facility with a swimming pool, fitness centre, basketball arena, dancehall, squash courts and conference rooms. This public-private partnership facility focuses on 'business to consumer' and 'business to business'. The offering of this wide range of services has two implications. First, this type of facility needs more personnel than the Flanders Sports Arena and Expodroom. Second, they have to deal with a lot of competitors and therefore they have to use a very wide range of promotional channels. The city invested in Sportoase, so all the schools from in the area are allowed to use the swimming pool. The great advantage of the public-private partnership facility is the large number of visitors. Their disadvantage is that they will never be politically free to make important decisions.

Expodroom is a multipurpose facility with auditoriums, offices, exhibition spaces, a basketball arena and luxury suites. This

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private facility focuses on 'business to business'. They use the elite basketball arena to attract international companies. Although Belgium is a small country, the place of the elite sports facility has always been important. Expodroom is located on an industrial site in Bree, at the eastside of Belgium. They definitely need to improve their accessibility in the future. The advantage of the private facility is their fast and flexible reaction and decision making process; their extremely high rental price is their disadvantage.

It appears from the in-depth interviews that the public facility, private facility and public-private partnership facility all have different advantages and disadvantages. It seemed that the managers from the facilities used the marketing mix elements in different ways and did not realize that cooperation between the elite sports facilities in Flanders is possible. They each offer different services and target different market segments, so they are not competitors of one another. The public elite sports facility is specialized in the organization of major sports events, such as the World Cup Artistic Gymnastics and European Championship Fencing. The public-private elite sports facility has not organized major sports events so far, but they have an extended technological knowledge on sports equipments. The private elite sports facility focuses on the 'business' side of sport, so they have knowledge on public relations, selling luxury suits and, attracting partners. An exchange of know-how, experience and knowledge about management and marketing of elite sports facilities can assist managers to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of running their facilities in the future.