

Do fans care? CSR's influence on consumer attitudes in the sport industry

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Abstract 81**

The early part of the 21st century has ushered in a new era of corporate scrutiny, and the accountability that goes along with it. Consumer distrust of most corporate entities is high, with the misdeeds of a few tainting the marketplace for the rest. In response to these mounting concerns large-scale corporate giving has certainly increased in both priority and profile in the past decade, as evidenced by corporations in the U.S. giving away roughly \$13.7 billion in 2005 towards charitable causes (AAFRC, 2006). A quick glance to any organizations' website these days reveals that most, if not all of them engage in some sort of community outreach.

The shift in thinking about the way organizations embrace their agenda toward social responsibility has subsequently translated to organizations within the sport industry. Most teams and leagues have embraced the idea that they not only have the opportunity, but the responsibility to make a difference in their host communities (Sommerfield, 2001). For example, The Philadelphia Eagles "Go Green" environmental campaign aims to provide a cleaner community for Philadelphia's citizens; the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has made significant investments regarding social responsibility, "...more than 40 percent of FIFA's income goes directly towards supporting the grassroots of the game, development work, and partnerships with relief organizations" (FIFA Activity Report, 2002-2004, p. 66). The NFL and NBA's partnerships with the United Way and Read to Achieve, respectively, are just two of the many humanitarian and educational initiatives that sport leagues are involved with. Through their foundation, Reebok sponsors a Human Rights Award providing \$50,000 grants to recipients. In addition, Nike's Fair Labor Standards Act promotes sound worldwide labor practices.

While the aforementioned examples reveal that a number of organizations and companies are embracing the idea of CSR, from a research perspective, two primary issues remain largely uninvestigated - the motives behind such activities, and the benefits that might accrue for the organization. The reason perhaps most often cited is that CSR is good financially for the organization and can lead to greater profits (e.g., Burt, 1983; Maignan & Ferrell, 2000; Margolis & Walsh, 2001) or greater public support which may in turn bolster profits (e.g., Hillman & Keim, 2001; Russo & Fouts, 1997; Williams & Barrett, 2000). However, it could be argued that in the sport industry, where cultivation of an affective connection to the organization is critical, CSR may provide benefits for the organization over and above those which have been seen in other industries. In addition, while the study of CSR has become increasingly prevalent in the management and organizational behavior literature, the concept has only recently entered the sport management discourse (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Bradish, 2006; Walker, Kent, & Rudd, 2007).

The purpose of this mixed-methods investigation was to analyze consumer reactions (i.e., reputation assessments and patronage intentions) to various CSR activities within the National Football League (NFL). In addition, the study sought to determine the extent to which the level of sport team identification influenced this relationship. Fans of two NFL teams were sampled (n=297) via intercept technique, prior to a regular season home game. In total, 297 (n=148: location 1; n=156: location 2) useable surveys were collected [male: 201 (67%); female: 96 (33%)]. The survey was developed from previous literature on the CSR construct as well as incorporated items to measure corporate reputation, team identification, and patronage intentions (e.g., word of mouth consumption, merchandise consumption, media consumption, and repeat purchase).

To expand and enrich the quantitative findings, eleven on-site, semi-structured interviews were conducted at location 2, following the administration of the questionnaire. Interview questions were developed from previous literature on the CSR construct, and purposeful open sampling was employed to achieve a sample representative of the overall respondent pool (e.g., Mohr et al., 2001). The interview guide generated discussion about the activities the team was involved with, how respondents learned about what the team was doing, whether a team's socially responsible behavior affects their overall attitude, how respondents view socially responsible companies, what respondents' levels of support for socially responsible companies were.

Moderated Multivariate Multiple Regression (MMMR) revealed that CSR is an important predictor of reputation (up to 16% variance explained), and that two types of patronage could be significantly impacted as well (i.e., word of mouth and merchandise purchase). A significant difference [$\lambda(.834, 12)=11.577, p<.001$] among the outcomes was found for the global CSR scale. The moderating effect of team identification was also significant [$\lambda(.551, 20)=47.512, p<.001$] yet influenced the outcomes in different ways. For more highly identified respondents, CSR's influence on reputation was strong but less influential ($R^2=.145$) compared to lower identified respondents ($R^2=.168$). CSR's influence on the patronage dimensions was moderated differently, as repeat purchase ($R^2=.021$ for the high group vs. $.004$ for the low group), word of mouth ($R^2=.098$ vs. $.019$),

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merchandise consumption ($R^2=.055$ vs. $.03$), and media consumption ($R^2=.039$ vs. $.01$) all increased as the respondents level of identification increased. Qualitative findings reinforced the quantitative discussion by providing support for the general conclusions that CSR was viewed favorably by most fans, and is an important aspect of the overall business strategy of an organization.