

Recycling corporate social responsibility: Greenwashing the sport industry fence?

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It has been stated that since professional sport organizations are considered "social institutions," they must not only actively pursue but also take the lead in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Zeigler, 2007). Organizations consistently demonstrating socially responsible predispositions have realized benefits including enhanced reputations resulting in heightened brand credibility (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002), integrity (Arnold, 2001), and linking the company and affiliated brand or product to core customer values (File & Prince, 1998). Furthermore, organizations that have strategically approached CSR through sustainability and environmental issues ("green" issues) have likewise realized related benefits. These benefits include reduced cost of waste management and other cost savings, evidence of management control, employee recruitment and retention, as well as indirect benefits such as reduced impact on the environment, improved corporate image, unique opportunities for promotion, partnerships and sponsorships, brand differentiation, and access to powerful and influential market segments like the Green Evangelists (International Organization of Standardization, 2008; Business Wire, 2008). However, the use of CSR campaigns exposes an organization to social-ethical concerns. Berglund and Nakata (2005) stated that because CSR initiatives can blur the lines between organization identity and social activism, organizations sometimes encourage this misunderstanding to present themselves as concerned citizens solely for potential capital gain. Additionally, consumers may question if the organization is exploiting its CSR endeavor for the associated benefits or to champion true advocacy.

In 1999 a term was defined to describe a social-ethical concern specific to green CSR initiatives. The term greenwash is "to mislead or deflect the public by stressing the environmental credentials of a person, company, product, especially when these are unfounded or irrelevant" or "to disseminate disinformation about a company so as to present an environmentally responsible public image" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008). Some of the effects of greenwash include deceiving consumers into supporting the unsustainable status-quo, enticing investors who relate environmental performance with financial performance, and misleading policy makers who create and enforce environmental regulations (Johnson, 2005). Therefore, because of the myriad benefits green CSR provides, many organizations have approached their programs in an insincere, ad hoc, and sometimes unethical manner in order to reap the benefits of being considered green. One of the most visible consequences of this insincere approach to green CSR is exposed by The Green Life, an organization that investigates the green credentials purported by organizations and reports their findings annually. Their report, entitled Don't Be Fooled, describes the 10 worst American greenwashing companies (Johnson, 2005). In 2005, the National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) made the 10 worst list due to their Sustainable Slopes program, which was a voluntary corporate program where ultimately those organizations that did not participate actually had better average environmental performance than those that did participate (Rivera & de Leon, 2004).

Since large sport organizations like college athletic programs and professional franchises have extensive media attention and public appeal, they are ripe for scrutiny that may expose not only egregious greenwashing, but also simply ineffective programs. Although the consumer has become more sophisticated and has learned to recognize insincere endeavors, many green programs consist only of recycling container placement in high traffic areas in and around event venues, supported by an event-related messaging campaign (e.g. public address announcements). While the easy and highly visible container placement and messaging campaign provides benefits too attractive to neglect, recycling participation by event patrons is more complex than just container accessibility. The organizations that implement initiatives such as these should be applauded for their efforts; however, the absence of a systematic approach, which includes empirical data collection to inform and justify initiatives, may subject them to a potentially ineffective program on multiple outcome measures. This failure to employ a systematic approach severely inhibits the ability to sustain initiatives, to be authentically green, and to ultimately fully actualize corporate social responsibility. Therefore, sport organizations must approach green CSR in a strategic, committed, and integrated way that infiltrates an organizational structure and culture through reinforced behaviors, sincere stakeholder engagement, and value-attuned communication strategies (Black, 2006).

This presentation will propose a conceptual model of green CSR that will support sincere and strategic green initiatives, which includes researching barriers and benefits of initiatives, developing internal initiatives (e.g. business operations, employee behavior), developing external initiatives (e.g. customer behaviors and supplier/vendor/partner behaviors), developing measureable, objective, and auditable corporate sustainability indicators, creating environmental management systems, and activating public relations and credibility building around effective programs (e.g. anti-greenwashing). Furthermore, this presentation will discuss a current interdisciplinary research collaboration among sport management, ecology, and biology

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faculty. This research collaboration specifically investigates openly discernable recycling behaviors and opportunities for tailgaters, which will provide a simple, measureable, and leveragable example for building a future of sincere and strategic CSR around green issues at sporting events. Finally, this presentation will discuss current green initiatives occurring at college and professional sport venues, identifying examples of both sincere and insincere approaches.