

**Branding in youth sports: The case of the CST baseball academy**

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Participation in youth sports in the United States has increased 9% since 1998 to include over 265 million young people ages seven and up (NSGA, 2007). Such participation generates considerable revenue through equipment and apparel sales making the youth sports segment a large and significant part of the sport industry. For example, over \$6 billion was spent on children's sports apparel in 2001 (Pack, 2003). Yet, there remains a relative paucity of discourse on best practices and original research on business and marketing aspects of youth sports programs. Furthermore, research and case studies describing branding in youth sports is deficient. Thus, the purpose of this presentation is to provide an overview of a non-profit youth sports program's efforts to brand a youth baseball academy.

While youth sports participation continues to increase, participation numbers in recreational baseball are either stagnant or decreasing; down 12% since 1998 (NSGA, 2007). Yet, participation in competitive tournament, also called travel or select, baseball programs has steadily increased over the past decade (Wills, 2007). These programs have been designed and developed for the young athlete or parent who wants to participate in baseball more often than what is typically offered through recreational programs such as Little League. Tournament baseball programs typically increase costs for families due to the commitment to travel, increased participation in more games, individual lessons with professionals, and equipment and apparel needs. An outcome of the increase of tournament programs has been the development of baseball schools or academies whereby an owner provides a "home" for athletes in a specific geographic area interested in pursuing baseball on a more competitive basis. These programs exist to meet the needs of young, and often more skilled, young athletes by providing advanced (often times professional) coaching, a more competitive atmosphere, and an enhanced opportunity for achieving performance success and longevity in the sport.

CST baseball academy was founded in 2006 to meet the needs of youth baseball players in a community of approximately 130,000 located in the southwestern United States. While many communities this size have established baseball academies there was not such a business in this particular community at the time of its establishment. CST was founded by a former college baseball coach and a retired professional baseball player with over nine years of professional service. CST began with one team and has since grown to include eleven teams and over 120 participants and families. While CST functions like many of its competitors in the scope of its work, the mission and vision of this organization is atypical. For instance, ownership philosophy has been to teach skills, provide safety measures founded on empirical research, focus on player development, and not to focus on winning. Based upon this vision ownership also took the unusual step of putting together a branding campaign prior to adding additional players, teams and families to the academy. The first phase of the campaign began with an extensive literature review on branding and branding campaigns. Not unlike other products, a successful youth club sport program is contingent upon a successful perception of the brand within the mind of the target market. Building a sustaining brand is contingent upon management's ability to position the brand as something desirable and of value to the target market.

Since CST is a service based non-profit corporation ownership likewise analyzed service quality literature. The service nature of the product creates a need to decrease the gap between the expected service and the actual service that is delivered. Berry (2000, p. 128) suggests that branding is even more important in the service industry, and that excellent sports brands help fans to "better visualize and understand intangible products". Likewise, Ritchie, Swami, and Weinberg (1999) suggest that non-profit organizations that use branding actually "produce significant gains in the achievement of organizational goals" (p. 21). The presentation will also include descriptions of the other phases of the branding campaign, including the elements of identity creation, integrated marketing communication efforts of the academy to brand, campaign evaluation and maintenance of the CST brand. Finally, implications for youth sport managers and marketers and directions for future research will be discussed.