Communicating with Young People in the Sport Industry: Practitioners' Insights

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Poster

In today’s marketplace many organizations are implementing integrated marketing communications. An integrated marketing campaign identifies the target audience and develops a promotional strategy that will obtain the desired consumer response. Kotler et al. (2002) identified five steps for effective communication that an organization should follow in the development of their integrated marketing communication strategy. These steps are as follows: market selection, message design, choice of communication channel, selection of influencer and collection of feedback. When marketing to youth having a well-developed communication strategy is extremely important in order to reach and influence this group. The ability to effectively communicate with this market segment also has important long-term implications as many brand decisions are made when people are young (OSullivan, 2005). In the past, research centered on understanding the consumer behaviour of youth has been primarily collected directly from youth in the form of interviews and observation (Geraci, 2004; Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). However, Grant (2004) noted that less attention has been given to practitioners who are the developers of the marketing communications strategies that are directed towards youth.

Lindstrom (2004) identified that in order to develop an effective communication strategy an organization must first define their audience. The most common approach taken by marketers is to segment youth based on age as this provides the marketers with the ability to easily determine different groups with similar interests, attitudes and needs (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998; Stone et al., 2001). When developing marketing messages, marketers need to ensure they are utilizing appropriate language, known as tweenspeak and a suitable medium (Lindstrom; Lindstrom & Seybold 2003; McDougall & Chantrey, 2004). Research identified that the tween market does not wish to be informed via traditional channels such as print. Rather, they prefer obtaining information about brands from channels which are made available at all times of the day such as the Internet (Lindstrom). Other methods that have proven successful at attracting the attention of youth are built upon traditional communication channels with a focus on excitement and entertainment, including kids clubs and buzz marketing. In terms of influencers, parents, peers, heroes, celebrities, and athletes have been recognized as strong influencers of tweens (Lindstrom & Seybold; Stevens, Lathrop & Bradish, 2003; Wellner, 2002). Finally, collecting feedback from youth provides marketers with an insight into the opinions and preferences of this market segment in order to allow the opportunity to change, alter, or enhance the product, event or service offering.

Within sport marketing research, limited studies have specifically examined the youth market. Research that has examined the youth sport market has been limited to participation in extreme sports and key influencers (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004; Stevens et al., 2003) and has yet to examine the communication process as it relates to youth sport marketing. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap in the research by applying the five-stage communication model developed by Kotler et al. (2002) through the investigation of the successful and unsuccessful communication strategies from a practitioner’s viewpoint. This study was conducted in order to develop a greater understanding of the practices and strategies utilized by marketing practitioners when targeting youth in a sport context. Thus, an interpretive investigation into their viewpoints and experiences of what constitutes an effective communication strategy was conducted. Although previous work in youth marketing, focusing on obtaining feedback directly from youth, has provided great insights, there is a need to complete our understanding through the eyes of practitioners (Grant, 2004). Such an approach is valuable as it creates support for the findings previously obtained from youth and highlights any discrepancies that might exist between youth’s self reported behaviour and their actual behaviour as observed by practitioners. This study was exploratory in nature due to the lack of existing empirical research.

This study focused on the age group of 9 to 14 year olds, also referred to as the tween group. Practitioners working in a consulting capacity known to be involved in marketing sport to youth were targeted to participate in the study. A sampling frame of seven different companies were contacted, with five agreeing to be interviewed (i.e. a response rate of 71%). The interview questions were developed from Kotler et al.’s (2002) five-stage model for effective communication. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner to provide the opportunity for a deeper, more interactive level of feedback. The interpretation of the text followed the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Transcripts were broken down, examined and compared and the information contained within the responses was coded based on emergent themes.

One of the key findings from this investigation is the benefit of utilizing technology in a communication platform. This medium is an extremely effective channel for reaching youth, however, the technology industry is rapidly changing. Thus, marketers need
to be aware of the current technologies utilized by youth and remain well informed of the changes that occur. Another key finding relates to the use of language in a communication campaign targeted toward youth. This market has a well-developed method of communicating with each other and in order to effectively reach and penetrate this group marketers need to be well versed in the use of this language. This language is extremely important to youth and marketers not willing to understand how to use it correctly will not be regarded highly by youth. This may even result in the eventual boycotting of certain brands by this group. This market segment has also been identified as being extremely difficult to reach. Marketers need to develop creative and relevant approaches for communicating with youth in order to effectively reach them. Further, youth respect companies that are honest in their communications and that provide them with brands that are available when they want them. Using these findings when developing a communication platform will improve the marketer's ability to reach this group. Involving youth in the communication process by giving them the opportunity to provide feedback is also a highly recommended approach and should be carefully considered by practitioners striving to successfully target this market segment. In addition to having a thorough understanding of the tween market, it is important for practitioners to adapt to the dynamic nature of this market by continuously evaluating the match between their communication strategy and the behaviour of youth.