Social Leverage of Professional Sports: Delivering Benefits through Community Relations Programming

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Professional sport leagues have embraced the idea that their teams have not only the opportunity, but the responsibility to make a difference in their host communities (Sommerfield, 2001). The success of the home team depends largely on the support that it receives from local residents, and there is increased pressure on teams to demonstrate their value to the community. As the costs of stadium construction continue to rise, critics of publicly funded stadia have questioned whether these facilities can deliver a return on investment comparable to targeted social or government programs (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). At the same time, teams seek ways to improve the image of their athletes, especially the media draw attention to athlete misbehavior on and off the field (King, 2001).

In the same way that sport events can be leveraged for economic impact (Chalip & Leyns, 2002), sport teams can be leveraged to deliver social benefits to their host communities. Professional sports teams have a variety of unique assets that can be used to maximize their social impact. Specifically, the team offers an entertainment platform and celebrity cachet. Attempts to leverage these assets have typically consisted of either cause-related marketing efforts or community relations programs.

The emergence of cause-related marketing in the mid-1980's marked a major change in the way in which organizations view philanthropy and marketing. Increased competitive pressures forced businesses to develop new ways to distinguish themselves (Davidson, 1997). A company's association with a social cause became a platform for a company to build their reputation as a good corporate citizen and develop employee loyalty, while at the same time driving business (Foley, 1998; Muirhead, 1999; Stark, 1999). The NFL is widely considered the most civic-minded of the major leagues, primarily because of its successful cause-related marketing partnership with the United Way (Lau, Makhanya, & Trengrouse, 2004). Over the course of this campaign, the NFL has supported the United Way through player appearances, coordinated media campaigns, joint programs and direct financial contributions.

While major league teams have experienced success with cause-related marketing efforts, minor league teams typically lack the expertise, manpower or resources to implement such a campaign. Minor league teams tend to rely instead on limited, one-time community relations events. Through community relations programming, a team can create new programs that would not exist in the absence of the team. Likewise, a team can enhance existing programs by providing financial and in-kind support, and by raising the profile of social issues.

The purpose of this presentation is to examine the effectiveness of a minor-league community relations program and to identify the factors that inhibit and enable the use of a professional sports team to deliver social benefits to its host community. Specifically, this study focuses on a community walking program implemented by the Corpus Christi Hooks, the AA affiliate of the Houston Astros.

An initial meeting with the team president, vice-president, and community relations director was held to assess how they view their role in the community and what types of projects they viewed as important to the community. During this meeting, team officials stressed that they wanted to participate in a community program only if they thought that it would have an impact and reach city residents with the greatest need. On this basis, the team president suggested a family-oriented walking program to encourage physical activity among residents of the city's west side, a low-income, largely Hispanic part of the city. The program was initiative as a joint project of the Corpus Christi Hooks and a community-wide healthy lifestyle coalition.

The team president did not see the value in an aggressive cause-marketing campaign because the team was already successful and he believed the team didn't need to sell more tickets. As the smaller-scale walking program proceeded, concerns about the brand-equity of the lifestyle coalition emerged, as did difficulties in implementing a program with the team's limited human resources. However, the program was successful in "getting the team off the sports pages" and building its reputation as a good corporate neighbor.

Qualitative methods were used to analyze (1) the effectiveness of the walking program and the impact of the program on the
larger community and (2) the process of using a professional sports team to address social issues in the community. Focus groups were conducted with program participants at the beginning and conclusion of the 10-week program. The purpose of these focus groups was to obtain data related to the participants' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about health and physical activity and to document how these changed over the course of the program. An additional purpose of the focus groups was to determine how the program's affiliation with the Corpus Christi Hooks, a popular and well-respected community institution, affected their participation and opinions of the program. Participant observation and interviews with employees of the team were used to document the process of developing and implementing the community program.

The results of this study provide insight into the importance of highly visible community relations programming to the team and the community, and it identifies the unique assets of a sports team that can be leveraged for social benefit. Additionally, this presentation discusses a number of factors that need to be considered when local organizations undertake community relations programming with sport teams.