The strategic value of branding in sport: An international perspective

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Session 7 2:00 PM - 3:15 PM Abstract 234

Is there a "universal" approach to branding sport teams, leagues, events or even players in different sports around the world? Does a specific pattern of development need to be followed before reaching a high level of equity? How do they maintain a high level of awareness and involvement from fans? The goal of this symposium is to explore these questions that become increasingly important in the international sport marketing area, especially in a competitive environment in which teams, leagues, events and even players evolve to capture fans' imaginations and attract their disposable income. All the more so, since the concept of branding has become central to the corporate strategy and how it impacts the different activities of the organization, because of its strategic value (Kapferer, 2007). For instance, the power of a sport team brand often determines the degree to which fans will turn into paying consumers, buying items such as memorabilia or clothing items that enable them to publicly identify themselves with their franchise (Richelieu & Pons, 2006). Corporate sponsors, in turn, will pay to associate themselves with the brand if it fits their positioning (Desbordes, 2006). The strength of any sport franchise, and what it represents, is based on the core values (tangibles and intangibles) associated with the brand itself (Richelieu & Boulaira, 2005; Ross, 2006). Some franchises are more successful than others in developing values that are unique to their brand without overstretching the brand and using an excessive commercialization that would alienate the demanding sport consumer.

The challenges faced in branding sport teams, leagues, events and players, as well as practical examples of branding strategies in sport will be presented by the participants in this session. The session will be moderated by Dr. Andr' Richelieu. Each participant will present a short summary of his or her research (10 - 12 minutes), followed by an open discussion among attendants. Please find below a list of participants and a brief description of their presentation topics.

The Emergence of Soccer Player Brands - Context, Definition and Management Challenges
Dr. Simon Chadwick, Professor, Coventry University Business School & Director of the Birkbeck Sport Business Centre, University of London, England.

Branding has become ubiquitous throughout the world. And sport has not been exempt from the phenomenon of branding, with many clubs, teams, leagues, events and competitions having been branded and becoming successful brands. However, football players have not historically been referred to as brands, although for many years they have been associated with other major brands, principally through personal endorsement deals. This has started to change because players have recently begun to emerge as brands in their own right, most notably David Beckham, although others such as Cristiano Ronaldo are now beginning to challenge 'Brand Beckham'. The main purpose of this presentation will be to explore the nature of player branding. Using a range of examples, the presentation will provide a unique definition of player branding, identify the reasons why players are becoming brands, and highlight some of the distinctive challenges that managers of such brands are facing. The presentation will conclude by proposing a framework that can be used to identify how, why and in what ways players become brands. Through a mnemonic - TOPSTAR - it will be explained that (T)eam; (O)ff-field life; (P)hysical characteristics; (S)uccess; (T)ransferability; (A)ge; and (R)eputation all contribute to understanding the nature, characteristics and longevity of football player brands.

Brands and Sport Events: How Did Marketers Shift From "Classical" Merchandising Products to a Real Communication Strategy?
Dr. Michel Desbordes, Professor specialized in sport marketing, ISC Paris & Université Paris Sud 11, France.

In the 80s and 90s, the merchandising strategy was implemented when an event was successful enough to generate an interesting turnover. In this case, the strategy of the French Open (Roland-Garros), worked quite well. Philippe Chatrier, former president of the French Tennis Federation, aimed at increasing the visibility of tournaments, even after the event itself was over. Therefore, some co-branding deals were signed with prestigious brands, such as Lancel, Lacoste, Adidas and Peugeot.
Nowadays, this Roland-Garros brand represents approximately 25% of the annual income of the tournament. This is a "classical" case where a brand is created when the power of the event is strong. The NFL, NBA and MLB are also excellent examples.

However, things have changed since the 2000s. Merchandising no longer represents additional revenue. The brand is now completely integrated in the communication process. Sometimes, a brand is even created before the event is launched. For example, The Race "La Course du Millnaire" was the first ever non-stop, no-rules, no-limits, round-the-world sailing event, with a $2 million US prize. It was organized by Bruno Peyron. On the marketing side, the organizers created a brand before the event was launched. Renault cars and Bermudes clothes, were sold in order to promote an event that had never existed. The goal of our communication is to compare these two strategies for the brands and to see which one is the best way to integrate them in the marketing strategy of the sport event.

Marketing Professional Soccer in the US - Some Lessons to be Learned in Segmentation and Branding Strategies
Dr. Frank Pons, Professor specialized in consumer behaviour, reputation and sport marketing, Université Laval, Québec, Canada.

US professional soccer teams compete in one of the toughest sports business environments on the planet. In this environment, professional soccer teams face a tremendous competition from other major sports and entertainment offers. They continuously fight for media exposure and sponsorships and, unlike European teams, they face a quasi-inexistent loyal fan base. For these teams, marketing cannot be an afterthought, it is critical to their survival. Using secondary data (websites, academic and professional publications) as well as interviews conducted with General Managers of the Real Salt Lake (Major League Soccer, MLS) and the Atlanta Beat (former Women's United Soccer Association, WUSA), this presentation focuses on the nature of professional soccer in the US and, more specifically, how professional soccer is marketed in the US. In particular, it describes how two teams envisioned and implemented their marketing strategies in the difficult US context and how ultimately they fared in their respective markets. Sports marketing strategies used by US professional soccer teams' managers to address issues such as fan loyalty, segmentation and branding issues will be discussed.

Internationalizing a Sport Team Brand - An Analysis of Strategies Undertaken by North American and European Clubs
Dr. André Richelieu, Professor specialized in brand management and sport marketing, Université Laval, Québec, Canada.

Today, brand is the most important asset of sport clubs (Bauer et al., 2005). Moreover, the commercial success of the brand can contribute to the overall success of the team in attracting great players, even if this is not a sine qua non condition. Building on previous research on the internationalization of brands (see Andersen, 1998; Cheng et al., 2005), the contribution of our research lies mainly in the thorough conceptualization of the internationalization of a sports team brand, as well as in the description and explanation of how a sports team can position itself as an international global brand. This process involves different stages associated with different statuses for the brand: i) Local brand, ii) Regional brand, iii) National brand, iv) International continental brand, v) International global brand. In order to evolve through these different stages and statuses, we propose four strategies, which are relevant to the sports arena: i) Think local, act global / The brand reputation specialist, ii) Think local, act global / The brand affinity specialist, iii) Think local, act global / The brand recognition specialist, and finally, iv) Unifying local brands / The brand recognition specialist (Kapferer, 1998; Van Gelder, 2002; 2004).

We illustrate the internationalization of a sports team brand using cases from different sports and different cultural environments.