Turbulent changes in the external environment of professional sport associations and the inadequacy of its bodies to monitor and respond to these changes in a timely manner are making it difficult to effectively promote the profession’s interests. By providing an overview of the developments in the external environment and identifying the influence of the driving forces in society and the developments within the direct environment of the organization, we have been able to answer the key question of this research: ‘What is the future role of professional sport associations?’ Based on the belief that a modern professional association determines its vision, mission and strategy after having analyzed the external environment, three hypotheses have been proposed, which were tested in this study:

- The professional sport association of the future will change its inside-out strategic thinking to outside-in strategic thinking.
- The professional sport association of the future will seek proactive cooperation with its stakeholders.
- The professional sport association of the future will develop from a service oriented promoter of the profession’s interests with passive members to a center for knowledge with active members.

Research methods, objectives, timeliness

This project involves qualitative methods in practice-based research and serves to support the making of new policy. The analysis phase according to the scenario method (Nekkers 2006) has been applied for the assessment of the 3rd hypothesis. The protracted developments have been placed in arrays with four quadrants. Each quadrant renders its own unique scenario. Through this research, a mirror is held up to the organization. By confronting traditional theorists with radically different future prospects, an attempt is made to alter perceptions and sharpen the mind. It shows that transitions are possible in the future. The other hypotheses have been tested using a combination of literature based research (Tack 2002, 2006, Berenschot 2003, 2008), desk-based research, interviews and a case study by VNT [Vereniging van Nederlandse Tennisleraren = Dutch Association of Tennis Instructors].

Conceptual framework

The professional sport association is defined as an organization involved in the various aspects of promoting the profession’s interests. In addition to the service it provides to its members, which is to an important extent focused on individual gains, it is active in the areas of positioning strategic interests and lobbying. It also organizes the collective by making internal and external arrangements. Furthermore, it organizes meetings for its members to discuss items of mutual interest. The Dutch have a penchant for forming associations. However, the relationships between members and clubs are changing. The number of active members has diminished, and the age of volunteers has increased. The number of face-to-face meetings has decreased and the extent of professionalism has grown. Successful organizations have adopted an outward approach based on an international orientation; they use social media strategies and devote a great deal of effort to identify, stimulate and support active members. Within the contextual environment, six important driving forces in society are distinguished, which have a direct impact on professional sport associations:

- individuals have become more independent
- increasing attention to social innovation
- changes in information technology
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- changes in communication
- deploying co-creation (crowdsourcing) to create value
- willingness to cooperate

Within the transactional environment, two types of development are distinguished, the substance of which may differ per organization: organization-based developments and profession-driven developments. Developments initiated by the organization are referred to as organization-based developments. Profession-driven developments are developments that have an impact on the organization, but that have not been initiated by the organization. Taking the initiative and showing democratic leadership are also important in this respect. It has become more important to devote attention to the recruitment of members and to retain their loyalty. It requires an ever increasing amount of time and effort to find, commit, capacitate and activate members. It is necessary to continuously keep track of what is going on within the profession and, subsequently, to take proactive action in order to be able to effectively promote the profession’s interests.

Future directions

Based on the findings from the partial questions, the case study by VNT and the researcher's insights, a general tendency has been discovered and the key question 'What is the future role of professional sport associations?' is answered as follows: The future role of professional sport associations will be the role in which the professional sport association projects itself as a democratic leader that has adopted an outside-in method of strategic thinking. It is in fact not important which theoretical view an organization chooses to adopt. But it is indeed far more important to make an analysis of the external environment. The professional sport association anticipates and responds to social developments and profession-driven developments and it is able to manage and initiate developments where possible. The organization cooperates proactively with members, potential members and stakeholders. It is able to perceive people as a source of knowledge, whether they are within or outside the subject area or in a national or international context. Within its network, the professional association becomes the key player who is in charge of all information gathering and professional knowledge management. Social innovation and co-creation are tools which are deployed to mobilize and bridge all these islands of knowledge. The process of identifying, stimulating and supporting active members deserves a great deal of attention. The organization is able to use social media strategies. Through all modern means of communication, the information and knowledge is disseminated and shared among the members in the professional field who are passively involved. Based on the above findings, hypotheses # 1 and 2 have been accepted. The third hypothesis has been rejected as it is not plausible that the association will be exclusively a center for knowledge with active members. A large part of its members will be passively involved. It is expected that some form of service provision to the members will remain in place because the 'loyalty based' membership has given way to a membership that is based on the 'what’s in it for me' principle (Berenschot 2008).

The possibility of benefitting individually from an association is the main reason for becoming a member.

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