2010 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2010)

More Than a Competition: A Case Study of National Kidney Foundation of Florida Surf Festival, the Largest Charity Surfing Event

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Abstract 2010-033

June 3, 2010
1:15 PM
25-minute oral presentation
(Snowy Egret)

Competition for funding, donors, and volunteers for non-profit organizations has become increasingly fierce. In 1981 there were only 327,758 non-profits competing for resources whereas today there 1,536,134 non-profit organizations in the United States alone (“IRS”, 2009). This represents an increase of nearly five times the number of non-profits competing for the same resources in the United States. In addition, as technology has advanced creating multiple advertising mediums it has become necessary for non-profits to develop new ways to connect to their consumer base (Cornwell, 2008). The purpose of this presentation is to provide an example of a successful strategy to break through the promotional clutter to gain a competitive advantage over competing causes by hosting a grassroots sporting event. Up to now, there remains little discourse on best practices, research on business strategies, and marketing tools for non-profits hosting cause related sporting events. The National Kidney Foundation (NKF) Surf Festival, a successful cause related sporting event, can provide an organizational template for other non-profit and business seeking to create a connection with their consumer.

The NKF Surf Festival began twenty-four years ago as a small event designed to benefit chronically ill dialysis patients. It was the heartfelt commitment of former professional surfer Rich Salick and his twin brother Phil, who put his life on the line in 1974 by donating a kidney to save Rich’s life. Excited about the success of the transplant the brothers wanted to better the lives of other kidney patients; using their life-long knowledge of the surf industry they created a series of tournaments to raise money and awareness about kidney disease. At the first event the brothers raised one-hundred-and-twenty-five dollars which they put in a brown paper bag and delivered to the local dialysis center. It has become the largest charity surfing competition in the world. Held over Labor Day weekend, the festival has been attended by several hundred thousand people throughout its history. The event has raised over four million dollars to help prevent kidney and urinary tract diseases, improve the life of the families affected by the disease and increase the availability of organs for transplant (NKF of Florida, 2009).

Unlike traditional advertising that mainly utilizes indirect communication tools, a grassroots sporting event creates a medium for producer and consumer to have a direct interaction. This direct interaction between consumer and producer enhances the ability for marketers to gain the consumers attention (Cornwell, 2008). As grassroots and niche sports participation has continued to grow, the growth of team sports has declined. Sports marketers have begun to use grassroots and niche sporting events as a medium to deliver their company’s message (Miloch, 2006). The close interaction of a grassroots sporting event allows the host organization to become involved in activities of their target consumer, create brand awareness, and build community support.

The methodology for gathering data will be to conduct interviews with the board of directors, the CEO of NKF Florida, Rich and Philip Salick, the Marketing Director, staff, volunteers, competitors, and sponsors. These interviews will produce a qualitative history of the Surf Festival, the mistakes management has made, and the successes they have created. To support these qualitative findings, year-over-year analysis of the sponsorship package, the business plan, and the volunteer plan will be done to provide quantitative information on the founding structure of the Surf Festival and show its evolution to its modern form. Finally, to show quantitatively the Surf Festivals growth year-over-year analysis on the number of competitors, number of sponsors, money earned from sponsors, and the cost (overheard) of conducting the tournament will be conducted so the trajectory of the tournament can be traced. We have a signed permission statement from the CEO of the National Kidney Foundation of Florida to conduct this research. Combining these analysis tools and working with the NKF of Florida a guideline for creating and run a cause related grassroots sporting event will be developed.

This study attempts to address the gap in research for non-profit cause related grassroots sporting events. Through analysis of the development history of the NKF Surf Festival, this study will create a guideline for best practices, business strategies, and marketing tools for non-profits hosting cause related sporting events. This guideline will help non-profits and sport marketers efficiently and effectively develop events that create direct communication with the consumer.

Tampa, Florida
June 1 – 5, 2010
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