Identifying Event Features & Attributes that Enhance the Social Impact of Cause-Related Sport Events: Qualitative Approach

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The use of cause-related sport events is increasing (McGlone & Martin, 2006). Sport events and cause-related organizations partner to create synergies to attract more participants, to increase participants’ attachment to the event (Filo, Funk & O’Brien, 2007), to lure volunteers and sponsors (Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornell & Clark, 2003), and to garner media attention (McGlone & Martin, 2006). According USA Track & Field, more than $714 million was raised for charitable causes by runners and walkers in 2006 (USATF, 2007). Cause-related sport events create more opportunities to participate in sport, increase funds raised to support charities, and increase awareness of social issues. Sport event organizers and sponsors can also benefit by becoming involved in social issues (Chalip, 2007).

People become interested in cause-related sport events because it allows them to do something good for themselves and for people in need at the same time. Participants in cause-related sport events report motives of reciprocity, self-esteem, and the need to help others (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien, 2008). Charities, such as the Susan G. Komen Foundation’s Race for the Cure or the Lance Armstrong Foundation’s Livestrong Challenge, use sport events to increase awareness of the disease (i.e., cancer) in the community, to raise funds (e.g., for research, victim support) (McGlone & Martin, 2006), and to inspire and empower victims, survivors, their family and friends, and their communities. Sport events seem a natural context for these organizations to achieve these goals.

Sport events have been shown to generate social impacts for both the host community (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000) and the individuals involved in the events (i.e., participants and volunteers) (Filo, Groza & Fairley, 2009). Sport events can increase sociability, build camaraderie, develop social networks, and create trust among people (Green, 2001). However, since those impacts can be temporary, it is necessary to plan and implement strategies to extend potential benefits to the community (Chalip, 2006b). Moreover, by motivating participants to become more involved in sport, sport event participation can make a positive change in an individual’s everyday life. A growing body of research suggests the ability of sport to create positive change in a community (e.g., Chalip, 2006a; Green, 2008; McCormack & Chalip, 1988). Participation in sport has the potential to increase participants’ ability to interact positively with others, increase their confidence and self-worth (e.g., by finishing the race), motivate participants to take responsibility for their actions, enhance one’s sense of belonging, and provide opportunities for achievement (Green, 2008). In short, sport has the capacity to create personal change, empowerment, and even community change. However, these benefits are not achieved simply by participating in sport of any kind. Rather, the design and implementation of the sport program or sport event matters (Chalip, 2006b).

Cause-related sport events would seem to be particularly effective in generating personal and social change given the embeddedness of the charity’s goals in the overall goals and strategies of the event. Yet with one exception (Filo, Groza & Fairley, 2009), we know little about the degree to which these types of events do, in fact, generate the changes sought. We know even less about the specific elements and features of cause-related sport events that contribute to personal and community change. In order to enhance the value of cause-related sport events, we need to understand the specific elements that support personal and community change. The purpose of this study is to determine the event- and cause-related elements that create change by empowering participants and volunteers and create social change in the host community.

In order to achieve the goal, Susan G. Komen’s Race for the Cure (a 5K running event) in Austin was used as a case study. Susan G. Komen’s Race for the Cure is an annual event held to raise awareness of breast cancer and raise funds for programs and research. More than 18,000 people participated in this year’s event. Researchers attended the event and race-related activities and solicited volunteers and participants for interviews, collected photos, and observed the event. Event experiences were captured in the field notes of two researchers. Preliminary examination of field notes suggests that the existence of survivors in the race and family photos of victims printed on many team
t-shirts sends strong messages about the cause to the participants. Near the finish line many participants and volunteers cheered and celebrated each other’s efforts and achievements whether those achievements were completing the run/walk or surviving breast cancer. There was a survivors’ tent, a team participants’ tent, and a volunteers’ tent as well as companies’ booths. These areas provided a space for participants and volunteers to interact, socialize, share stories, and celebrate their accomplishments. The cause was very much a part of these celebrations.

Four groups of participants were solicited for interviews: runners/walkers with a direct link to the cause (e.g., have cancer, survived cancer, have or had a family member with cancer), runners/walkers with no direct link to the cause, volunteers with a direct link to the cause, and volunteers with no direct link to the cause. Approximately 24 informants (6 from each group) are being interviewed. Interviews are being conducted using a combination of semi-structured and photo elicitation techniques. Informants are first asked to describe their experience of the event. Follow-up questions and probes are used to understand the ways in which the event impacted them, including their opinions and behaviors related to the cause, those impacted by breast cancer, and sport participation and running/walking events. Event photos will be used to help informants to discuss the ways in which specific elements of the event affected their experience of the event and the charity, and resulted in any personal change. The interviews are being audio-taped and transcribed. Coding will use a grounded theory approach and consist of open and axial coding of themes interspersed with examination of relevant literatures. NVivo 8 will be used to assist with coding and data analysis. Initial interviews suggest group differences in both the experience of the event and the ways in which the event impacts the lives of those involved.

The expected outcomes of this study are an increased understanding of (1) the ways in which participant groups experience the event, and (2) the ways in which participant groups are affected by the event. Further, we expect to assist organizers of cause-related events to plan, organize and implement events with greater impact on the participants and their communities by identifying the specific event elements that are associated with personal and community change. Implications of the research for theory and for event design and management will be discussed.