Evaluating a Professional Baseball Team’s Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) may provide a general framework to structure the responsible use of corporate power and social involvement. While many corporations have implemented various CSR initiatives, critics have questioned the sincerity and effectiveness of their activities, suggesting that these activities often provide minimal benefit to society (Bakan, 2004; Devinney, 2009; Hess & Warren, 2008). Businesses, including professional sports teams, are expected to not only provide financial donations to nonprofit organizations but also devote resources that are meaningful to the community and thus address pressing social problems. Several professional sports teams have attempted to provide social initiatives that meet the needs of communities including Major League Baseball’s (MLB) “Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities” (RBI), National Basketball Association’s “Read to Achieve”, and National Hockey League’s “Hockey Fights Cancer”. While these programs provide a significant resource investment to addressing various social issues in communities, little is known about the effectiveness of these programs in meeting their goals and objectives.

The CSR literature reveals that while there is much discussion about what companies should do, limited data or analysis exists about what companies are actually doing in practice (Blum-Kusterer & Hussain, 2001). The literature in the area of CSR explores the formation and design of CSR initiatives (Miles, Munilla, & Darroch, 2006; Sahlin-Andersson, 2006), and their implementation (Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2009; Rama, Milano, Salas, & Liu, 2009; Seitani & Crane, 2009), but scant attention is paid to outcomes, measurement, and evaluation of CSR initiatives. Carroll (2000) answered the question of whether CSR should be measured and, if so, why. According to him, the brief answer to this question is ‘yes’, because ‘it is an important topic to business and to society, and measurement is one part of dealing seriously with an important matter ...’ (p. 473). In order to improve a CSR program, evaluations should be based on measuring, verifying, and reporting, with the objectives of determining what works well, why, and how to ensure it will continue; investigating what is not working well and why; exploring barriers to success and ways to overcome them; and revisiting original goals or establishing new ones as necessary (Government of Canada, 2006). Margolis and Walsh (2003) suggest that one of the most important aspects of CSR is the impact of these initiatives on the intended beneficiaries. To date, this area remains virtually unexplored. Businesses who engage in CSR should also have a responsibility to evaluate, verify, and report on CSR progress.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a MLB team’s RBI program that provides inner city children the opportunity to participate in baseball and softball. An action model evaluative framework (Chen, 2005) guided the study. This model allowed for a systematic assessment of the RBI program’s service delivery, program implementers, and effect on participants. The research setting was a professional MLB team located in the United States Midwest that delivers its RBI program through the community’s parks and recreation programs.

To evaluate the RBI program, a sequential exploratory mixed methods strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) was used, which involved a three-phase approach and occurred over a two-year period. Phase one (year one) entailed qualitative data collection and included semi-structured face-to-face and phone interviews which were conducted with 42 program stakeholders including participants (N=9), parents (N=10), team executives (N=3), coaches (N=6), corporate partners (N=2), and parks and recreation directors (N=12). The interviews were designed to elicit stakeholder perceptions of their assessment of program delivery, barriers to participation, and recommendations for improving the program. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. Initial codes were first inductively generated from the data, then codes and themes were assigned to the data, and finally patterns were determined. In Phase-two (year two), using the qualitative findings, a survey was developed and subsequently sent to 1312 RBI program stakeholders. Responses were received from 294 individuals (response rate 22.4%) including players, parents, coaches, and parks and recreation directors. The survey examined RBI stakeholders’ demographics, perceptions of the delivery of the program, and the impact of RBI program on the participants. Survey data was analyzed using multiple one way ANOVAs within groups and ANOVA between group comparisons of stakeholders’ perceptions and outcomes of the program.
Using the evaluative framework, the major findings are organized in relation to assessment of program delivery, program implementers, and impact on program participants. Pertaining to the delivery of the program and program implementers, both the qualitative and quantitative findings suggested that overall stakeholders appeared to be satisfied with the general delivery of the program. However, the data also indicated that stakeholders identified several programmatic concerns that were created due to a poorly defined contract between the MLB team and the parks and recreation departments. Each partner assumed that the other was fulfilling certain deliverables, and as a result, advertisement of programs and schedules were not completed and posted by program implementers in a timely manner prior to the start of the season. Furthermore, program implementers performed limited marketing and branding of the program, recruitment practices, transportation, and a lack of quality and number of coaches created barriers to potential participants. Stakeholders recommended that the two partners re-examine and renew the original partnership agreement, delineate program responsibilities, create a marketing and branding strategic plan, and the MLB team enhance their presence with the program. In terms of the program’s impact on participants, all stakeholders perceived that the program filled an important niche in providing opportunities for youth to participate in baseball and softball, and positively impacted participants in the areas of physical (more physically fit, continue to be physically fit, and improved baseball and softball skills), social (healthier choices, social relationships, and teamwork) and emotional development (increased fun, self-esteem, and self-confidence).

Involving stakeholders’ in the evaluation of a firm’s CSR initiative is an important step in assessing the effectiveness of a program in meeting its goals as well as displaying the organization’s sincerity in delivering meaningful CSR activities. The implications for professional sports organizations will be discussed along with future directions for research.