Cause Marketing via Sport Events: The Effect of Inspiration on Post-Event Behaviors

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Cause related marketing is increasingly prevalent among sport organizations wishing to attract more people (Filo, Funk & O’Brien, 2007) and media attention (McGlone & Martin, 2006) to their events. Charities use sport events to raise awareness and funds (Wood, Snelgrove & Danylochuk, 2010). Sport organizations also like to associate with a cause to attract more attention, increase attendance, and generate a more positive image of the organization (Walker & Kent, 2009). Yet, research on the effectiveness of these partnerships is still equivocal. Empirical studies of cause marketing tend to focus on one of two areas: (a) motives to attend the event or (b) benefits from the event (Walker & Kent, 2009). This study examines both motives and benefits, with an emphasis on understanding the benefits to the sport organization distinct from those benefiting the charitable organization. With the exception of Walker and Kent (2009), few sport studies have been outcome focused, instead choosing to focus on the motivation for participating in charity sport events. Few studies have examined the benefits to charities and sport organizations of partnering for spectator sport events. Yet spectator events are a fairly common way for sport organizations to execute a cause marketing strategy. To evaluate the effectiveness of these events, it is important to understand the effects of the special event elements on consumers’ attitudes and actions toward the sport and charity. Ideally the synergy of the partnership will enhance the reputation of both partners and spur attendees to take action benefiting both partners.

A qualitative study of the Race for the Cure (Lim, Ogura, Green & Chalip, 2010) identified a critical element of this synergistic process – inspiration. Inspiration played a pivotal role in empowering participants to take action in their own lives, in others’ lives and in their communities (Lim, et al., 2010). Inspiration became a tool for psychological transcendence (c.f., Thrash & Elliot, 2003) that facilitated consumers’ positive behavioral outcomes. Consequently, it is possible that cause-related sport events can inspire participants to become more involved in the sport as well as the cause.

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of cause marketing events on key sport- and cause-related outcomes. In particular, this study sought to examine the role of event elements with the potential to inspire attendees to further support the sport, cause, and sport organization.

The study used a survey design to test the effects of inspiration on key consumer behaviors. Four hundred surveys were randomly distributed to attendees in each section of the facility between the 2nd and 3rd sets of the Volley for the Cure event at a large Southwestern University. This study is based on the 219 surveys completed by respondents age 18 and older. The survey measured 7 key constructs: cause-related motivation to attend, sport-related motivation to attend, cause-related inspirational elements, sport-related inspirational elements, cause-related consumer outcomes, sport-related consumer outcomes, and brand reputation. Both cause- and sport-related motivation were measured via a 4 item scale using a 6-point agree/disagree scale. Eight items were created to measure the degree to which cause-related event elements were considered inspiring. Two items (talented athletes and competition) measured the degree to which sport elements were considered inspiring. Items were measured on a 6-point scale (1=not at all inspiring; 6=deeply inspiring), and were averaged to create overall measures of cause inspiration and sport inspiration. The likelihood of cause-related outcomes (e.g., participate in Race for the Cure, donate to a breast cancer charity) was measured via 10 items. The likelihood of sport-related outcomes (e.g., repeat attendance, purchase sport merchandise) was measured via 5 items. Items used a 6-point scale (1=not at all likely; 6=highly likely) were averaged to create measures of cause and sport outcomes. Reputation of the sport organization was measured via an average of three reputation items (Walker & Kent, 2009).

Data were analyzed via a series of regressions to test: (a) the direct effects of motives on inspiration, (b) the indirect effects of motives on outcomes, (c) the direct effects of inspiration on outcomes. Cause-related inspiration was regressed on cause and sport motivation. Results of the stepwise regression showed a significant impact of cause motivation on cause-related inspiration ($R^2 = .29, F(2, 216) = 44.15, p < .001; \beta = .57, t = 9.23, p < .001$). Similarly, stepwise regression showed a small but significant impact of sport motivation on sport-related inspiration ($R^2 = .09, F(2, 216) = 10.45, p < .001; \beta = .32, t = 4.56, p < .001$). A series of 3 hierarchical regressions were then performed. Each outcome was regressed on the inspiration variables in Block 1, and the motives in Block 2. All three were significant, although the significance of the predictor variables varied by outcome. Fifty-three percent of the variance in cause-related outcomes were predicted by cause inspiration ($\beta = .55, t = 10.60, p < .001$) and sport inspiration ($\beta = .15, t = 3.34, p = .001$). A further .07% of the variance was predicted by cause motivation ($\beta = .33, t = 5.91, p < .001$) for a total of 59% variance explained. Only sport inspiration ($\beta = .21, t = 3.21, p = .002$) explained any variance.
in sport outcomes in Block 1, explaining .05% of the variance in sport outcomes. Sport motivation ($\beta = .54$, $t = 8.37, p < .001$) explained a further 26% of the variance. In the final regression, 13% of the initial variance in reputation was explained by cause inspiration ($\beta = .24$, $t = 3.74, p < .001$) and sport inspiration ($\beta = .27$, $t = 4.19, p < .001$). In addition, sport motivation explained a further 15% of reputation ($\beta = .43$, $t = 6.64, p < .001$).

From the resulting path model, it is evident that the event hooks (i.e., motives) and inspirational elements led to two different types of action from consumers: sport actions and cause actions. Sport-related outcomes were a result of the degree to which attendees were inspired by the sporting elements of the event as well as consumers’ sport-related motives for attending. By providing quality sporting events, sport-minded consumers are more likely to continue to support the sport organization. Cause-related outcomes were influenced by a combination of inspirational elements – the special cause-related elements that were a part of this one-off event as well as the performance of the athletes and the competition itself. Further, when consumers came to the event because of their association with the cause, they were more likely to participate in and support other cause-related events and initiatives. By providing both sport- and cause-related inspirational elements, consumers motivated to attend cause-related sport events are more likely to take action to support the cause. Although the cause-related elements did not predict sport-related outcomes, they did positively enhance attendees’ views of the reputation of the sport organization. In short, sport organizations and charities can each benefit from partnering and providing consumers with tie-in cause-related sport events.

This study supports earlier qualitative research suggesting the importance of facilitating inspiration at cause-related sport events. The inclusion of elements designed to inspire consumers can greatly increase the likelihood that attendees will think well of the sport organization, and take actions to benefit the cause and the sport organization.