Impact of Innovative Marketing Strategy on Fan’s Brand Experience Regarding Professional Sport Entity: The Case of Stade Français

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Marketing Abstract 2011-062
Thursday, June 2, 2011
4:15 PM
20-minute oral presentation (Room 236)

In 2007, Stade Français Paris (SF Paris) rugby union club set a new world club attendance record for the fifth time in less than two seasons with 79,741 people for a regular domestic rugby union game (Jackson, 2007). This record is particularly interesting because the regular home ground of SF Paris has a capacity of 12,000 seats (Bodet, 2009). The major explication for the club’s success in filling huge stadiums several times a year is the President’s ability to market events and build strong professional sport entity brand. Indeed, Max Guazzini, a media guru, wanted to develop the club as a modern business and implemented modern marketing techniques. He never hesitates when it comes to promoting his club and creating a buzz. Consequently, the club has been attracting an equal number of cheers and criticisms for the last five years. In order to achieve this massive audience, the first objective was to offer a nice show to spectators. Max Guazzini also introduced female cheerleaders, music before kick-off, the sound of bells to mark the end of each half (instead of a more traditional siren), fireworks at the end of evening matches and a radio-controlled car to bring the tee to the kicker when he takes a penalty or a conversion kick.

In order to attract new fans and to recruit new customers (i.e. women or kids), North-American Leagues have been using music and show around the event. In this regard, going to a sporting event can be considered as “an experience” where the consumer is also the co-producer of the show (Holt, 1995). Everything around the event is important, even though it has nothing to do with sport. In Europe, the situation is quite different, as on-pitch performance is very important in professional sport, as Leagues are open (promotion and relegation system) and teams play on a domestic and European level (such as the UEFA Champions League). This is why using a show to promote a game was almost never used in European professional sport, until SF Paris’ marketing strategy was implemented.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of innovative marketing strategy on fan’s brand experience regarding professional sport entity. Indeed, while it is necessary for a club to attract new fans, it seems to be arguably more important for the professional sport entity to satisfy its core-fan.

Previous research has underlined the importance of branding in sports (Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt, 2005; Farrelly, Quester and Greyer, 2005; Mullin, Hardy and Sutton, 2007; Richelieu and Pons, 2006 or Chanavat and Bodet, 2009) and has acknowledged sport teams as brands in their own right (Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005; Ross, 2006; Bodet and Chanavat, 2010). Indeed, each sport organisation possesses a brand, and it is in the interest of all sport organisations to increase their brand equity through a marketing approach (Ferrand and Torrigiani, 2005). Since Aaker (1991), marketing scholars have focused on the measurement and the assessment of brand equity (Kapferer, 1998; Keller, 1993). Almost all research studies on sport branding have focused on brand image (Ferrand and Pagès, 1999; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005; Hill and Vincent, 2006; Richelieu and Pons, 2006; Chanavat and Bodet, 2009 or Bodet and Chanavat, 2010). To date, despite its importance to the field, nothing has been done regarding impact of marketing strategy on fan’s brand experience regarding professional sport entity. This apparent gap is important, given that clubs have to measure fan’s responses (i.e., cognitive, affective and conative). Indeed, while innovative marketing strategy should be developed, it may be relevant to determine how the experience is perceived by consumers. According to Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello (2009), brand experience encompasses sensations, feelings, cognitions, and conative responses evoked by brand-related stimuli. Such stimuli appear as part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environment.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the strategy of a club that moves from a sports club to an entertainment show producer. This study measures the impact of innovative marketing strategy on new and traditional fan’s brand experience. It focuses on Stade Français Paris rugby union club because the club developed an innovative marketing strategy based on the targeting of new fans rather than just the traditional fans (Hunt et al, 1999).

If bringing tangible and intangible benefits to the consumer can be considered as a strength for the organizer (Richelieu and Boulaire, 2005), there is also a threat. Truly, if recruiting new consumers is easy at the beginning, core-fans can be less faithful if they consider that the brand and the product are “diluted” because sport is being substituted by pure entertainment. In other words, “what are the constraints to consider in order to keep the traditional fans and to recruit a new audience at a sporting event?” The purpose of this research is to test two major hypothesis:
Hypothesis 1: “Can experiential marketing and music shows contribute to recruit new customers?”
Hypothesis 2: “Can shows around the pitch make the club lose core-fans?”

Data for the study were collected from 722 people (male: 486, female: 236) in order to gauge customers brand experience. A variety of people were surveyed: new customers and core fans, Stade Français and away team fans. On October 25th 2009, they were surveyed when Stade Français played against Stade Toulousain at the Stade de France (at the end of the game). We used a four pages questionnaire, including four topics (i.e. “You and rugby”; “you came today because […]”; “your opinion on music and the show” and “personal data”). Each topic consisted of 10-15 questions that were evaluated through a five point Likert scale. The SPSS 17.0 software was used to analyze responses.

Data analysis has shown many differences in the evaluation of rugby and the show. The crucial results could be divided into three points. First, traditional core fans like the idea of rugby getting more popular. However, they do not want to see an under-evaluated on-pitch performance because of the show around. According to them, there are limits and the clubs should not go over. Second, the diversification of the audience is indubitable: women like this evolution of sport events and sport show, particularly when they want to bring kids to the stadium. Finally, this evolution is more appreciated among Stade Français fans than away team fans. Consequently, creating a new model of sport brand that associates new and core-fans will be one of the biggest stakes for the marketing policy of the club.