Exploring Common and Unique Season Ticket Holder Brand Associations across Professional Sport Teams

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Abstract 2011-073
Marketing

Friday, June 3, 2011
8:30 AM
20-minute oral presentation
(Room 236)

A number of studies have examined the role of brand associations in attracting fans and sponsors to sport organizations. Typically, these studies develop a list of attitudes, attributes and behaviors from past literature or through qualitative work, and then investigate the degree to which consumers associate those features with different sport teams. This process is problematic in two ways; a) the associations are unnaturally limited (e.g., 14 in Ross et al’s, 2006 TBAS scale), removing variation between respondents and; b) by using the same set across all organisations, the insights into points of differentiation across teams are limited. While unique brand associations are said to be a major differentiator for products, a way to connect with particular individuals (i.e., where the “personality” of the brand and person match) and a source of competitive advantage for organizations, the nature of past research often restricts data collection and analysis regarding possible unique points of differentiation. This study returns to free association as a means of eliciting brand associations from season ticket holders (STH) of a number of clubs in the same league, in order to examine the full range similarities and differences in the types of associations elicited both within and across teams.

The research investigated brand associations of STH, asking:

Research Question 1: What are the key brand associations STH have with their club?
Research Question 2: What consistent and unique brand associations are apparent across clubs?

Data presented here were collected from STH of six clubs in the Australian Football League (AFL). Of the subject clubs, two were foundation clubs of the league with over 100 years of tradition, two were clubs who had changed their name or location in recent history, and two were expansion teams who have entered the league within the previous 20 years. As part of an end of season embedded email survey, all STH with a valid email address at the subject clubs were asked “When you think of (Name of Club) Football Club, what are the first things that come to mind?” Respondents then provided key top-of-mind brand recollections in up to three open response boxes. In all, the number of STH responding ranged between 2232 and 4361 per club which represented response rates of between 25% and 37% of those invited to participate from the six different clubs.

Past categorizations of sport brand associations (Bauer et al, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al; 2006) were assessed to develop groups for analysis. Qualitative responses were then analysed using a coding structure incorporating two researchers to determine consistent codes and key themes were utilised in the analysis. Each statement was coded based on emergent key words and themes used by STH in their recollections. Frequencies of coded response themes were then collated, with analysis initially undertaken on the most popular 100 brand responses for each club. A second stage of analysis was then undertaken comparing the most popular ten responses of each club. Exploratory descriptive analysis using MS Excel and SPSS determined themes and trends within and across clubs.

The results found the top 100 qualitative brand associations for each club (600 in total) could be categorized in 12 categories in line with past classifications of sport brands. Without including consistent generic references to the sport itself (e.g; game, player, team) STH most commonly associated common values or traits of their clubs such as spirit, teamwork, integrity and loyalty (average of 35% of total STH references per club). This was followed by references to social aspects such as community, family and friends (16%) and STH experiences such as excitement, enjoyment and pride (10%). The club colours and references to winning or past on-field success (both receiving 9%) were the next most common response categories. Within each category it was expected to see different themes emerging, however, a high level of consistency of both recall topic and recall level was seen in two of the top three ranking categories (social references and experiences). Even in the top ranking category of values and traits, where brand differentiation would be expected, multiple consistent themes such as unity, integrity, community and loyalty appear at comparable levels across the sample clubs.

A more discrete analysis on the top ten themes for each club was then undertaken. Each of the top ten themes had received a recall of at least 6% by STH at the subject club. An examination of the top ten brand associations revealed continuing similarities across clubs. Of the 60 remaining themes or keywords (top ten from each of six clubs), 41 were common themes relating to the areas of past success, club colours, social aspects (family, friends), loyalty and pride. Many of the remaining unique associations (between one and four per club out of the club top ten) can be linked to the different classifications of clubs (traditional, expansion or changing clubs) and topical issues for clubs in the current year.
Results show the two traditional clubs are uniquely defined by history, colours and home ground while the expansion clubs are much higher on social and location based associations. The two clubs which have undergone change are unique in the areas of club monikers or logos (which despite club names and location changes have remained consistent) and the noted characteristic of spirit. Additionally, we see outliers that can be clearly connected with topical issues from the current year such as coaching changes and high profile administrators which create differentiation in brand recall across clubs.

The homogeneity of findings suggests brand personality is largely consistent and common both in recalled topics and levels across AFL clubs, particularly in leading categories such as social and experience based associations. In areas such as traits and values we see some difference which can be aligned with the historical classification of clubs, but many recalled values remain consistent across clubs. In short, where there is differentiation, this appears not so much influenced by the club itself but by outside factors which are beyond the control of marketing and brand managers.

This research underlines the importance of clubs to understand not only brand recall but the unique associations (i.e.; it may not always the most recalled associations which are the most relevant to clubs). Promoting a brand on many of the characteristics seen within the top ten recollections for clubs could be an inefficient use of resources as there are limited opportunities to achieve competitive advantage given the homogeneity of brand associations. Finally, in collecting top of mind measures we see raises in topical areas for some clubs at the expense of brand recollections in social references or values and traits, confirming brand traits are dynamic and potentially change on a seasonal basis.