The Impact of the Awareness of Team Information on Pride in Place and Team Loyalty

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A primary target market of professional sports teams is residents who live in the “Hometown.” It is important for sport marketers to develop effective strategies to build a relationship between a sports team and the residents of a community in which a team is located. Since the founding of the J-league (Japan Professional Soccer League) in 1993, the league and its teams have focused on building relationships between the team and the residents of the hometown. Currently, all J-league teams have community relations programs which include fan events, sport classes, charity programs, education programs at elementary schools, and community events. According to J-league officials, in 2009 players participated in community programs for an average of 17.2 hours per season (J-league, 2010). The community relations efforts of professional sports teams are believed to have a significant role in building positive attitudes toward a team (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997).

Researchers have examined various fan attitudes including identification (Sutton, et.al. 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), loyalty (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 1999; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Heere & Dickson, 2008) and commitment to a team (Mahony, Madrigal, and Howard, 2000; Kwon & Trail, 2003). The various attitudes have been determined to be important indicators of sport consumers’ psychological connection to sports teams. For the marketers in charge of community relations programs, one of the most important psychological attributes of fans which they should prime is commitment toward the city and the community. Kolbe and James (2000) suggested there is an association between a city and a team in the sense that the team may be regarded by fans as the hometown team. Furthermore, Gladden and Funk (2001, 2002) focused on “pride in place” as a dimension of team brand associations.

The focus on facilitating a strong relationship such as pride in place, which is the attitudinal connection between a team and a community, is known as relationship commitment in relationship marketing research. Identifying relationship commitment as a key mediating variable is critical to the study and management of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In order to establish, develop, and maintain successful relational exchanges between a team and community (residents), marketers need to identify effective tools to stimulate commitment between a team and the hometown residents. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of the awareness of team information on pride in place, team loyalty, and intention to attend games.

A hypothesized model was created based on previous research. The model begins with direct effects from team information which is found in the mass media and team information which is found in the hometown (e.g., posters and flyers distributed in a community), to pride in place and team loyalty. In addition, pride in place is directly related to team loyalty as a mediator between team information in mass media and team information in the community; team loyalty is directly related to the intention to attend games.

A questionnaire was prepared to measure intention to attend games (one item), awareness of team information in the mass media (two items), awareness of team information in the hometown community (two items), team loyalty (three items), and pride in place (three items). The items were developed and tested in previous research (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Fujimoto, Harada & Matsuoka, 1996; Mahony et. al, 1999; Mahony et. al, 2000; Kolbe & James, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Hong, McDonald, Yoon, & Fujimoto, 2005). The items were specifically chosen based on a discussion between the researchers and the marketing staff of GAMBA OSAKA (a J-league club in Osaka, Japan).

Two thousand subjects in the GAMBA OSAKA database were selected by a random sampling method. The database was developed by the team through community activities. Questionnaires were mailed to the subjects. The response rate was 31.5% (n=631). The data analysis was completed with 361 respondents who were over 13 years of age, and who completely answered the primary questions. Descriptive statistics were first analyzed using SPSS18.0, and then confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques using Mplus 5.1 were used to test the model fit of the data.

The sample was 65.9% male, the mean age was 41.8 years old, 92.7% were married, and the average frequency of game attendance in the previous season was 3 games. The mean scores for team information in the mass media, team information in the hometown, pride in place, team loyalty, and intention to attend games were 5.62 (SD = 1.48), 5.19 (SD = 1.86), 4.04 (SD = 1.84), 5.85 (SD = 1.32), and 6.04 (SD = 1.49) respectively. The average variance extracted (AVE) scores and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the four latent constructs met the designated criteria as follows: team information by mass media (.702, .813), team information in the hometown (.667, .796), team loyalty (.685, .867), and pride in place (.659, .843) respectively. The factor...
loadings for the four latent constructs also met the designated criteria.

The CFA results indicated that the measurement model yielded a satisfactory fit: \( \chi^2 = 60.930, p < .001, df = 29, CFI = .976, TLI = .962, RMSEA = .055, \) and \( SRMR = .048. \) The SEM results showed that the hypothesized model fit the data well: \( \chi^2 = 79.271, p < .001, df = 38, CFI = .971, TLI = .957, RMSEA = .055, \) and \( SRMR = .048. \)

The results indicate that (a) team information in the mass media had a significant impact on both pride in place (.249) and team loyalty (.458); (b) team information in the hometown had a significant impact on both pride in place (.204) and team loyalty (.130); (c) pride in place had a significant impact on team loyalty (.170); and (d) team loyalty had a significant impact on intention to attend the games (.277).

These results lead to the conclusion that increasing the awareness of team information not only in the mass media but also in the hometown is important for professional sport teams in order to stimulate the pride in place and team loyalty. Although it is difficult for marketers to control the content and exposure volume of information in the mass media, they are more easily able to control information in the hometown. Team marketers would be well-advised to consider adding information in the hometown into their marketing mix.