An Investigation of Partnerships with a Not-for-Profit Sport Organization: A Case Study of Special Olympics Canada

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It has been suggested that finding and developing successful partnerships is, and will continue to be, a challenge for amateur sport organizations of all sizes (O’Reilly & Seguin, 2009). The purpose of this study was to explore, describe, and evaluate the nature of partnership development and management in the context of Special Olympics Canada (SOC). Specifically, the investigator sought to determine strategies in which SOC can build and improve upon their relationship with their current national partners.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with seven of SOC’s national partners. The research questions focused on the national partners’ rationale for partnership, expectations, satisfaction, and areas for improvement. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis consisted of identifying themes that emerged from the four research questions.

The findings determined the national partners’ main rationale for partnership was giving back to an organization that impacts society, followed by corporate social responsibility (CSR), personal interest of president/board members, organizational fit (national reach and sport alignment), and employee involvement. Second, the participants stated that they expected to not only achieve and enhance their corporate objectives, but also improve SOC’s organizational effectiveness. For instance, the participants stated that they wanted to increase their collaborative efforts with SOC to raise additional funds, increase SOC’s public awareness/visibility, and improve SOC’s technical competence. Third, the participants rated their level of partnership satisfaction with SOC a 6.0 on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 = very dissatisfied to 7 = very satisfied). Finally, the overarching theme that kept emerging from the data, specifically in terms of partnership improvement, was SOC’s potential to strengthen their collaborative efforts by “pushing the envelope” to take each respective partnership to the next level. In addition to SOC being more proactive, the importance of connecting Special Olympics athletes with the national partners emerged as another key success factor in maintaining their relationship with SOC.

Each organization had its own specific set of motives for its partnership with SOC, thus, emphasizing the need for a tailored approach to a partnership and a strong fit between the partner and the property (Doherty & Murray, 2007; Seguin, Teed, & O’Reilly, 2005). Because corporations are inundated with countless sponsorship requests, it is suggested that sport properties need to indicate in their sponsorship packages that they are looking for a partnership – not a sponsorship – where mutual benefits are maximized. As such, it is vital for a sport property to demonstrate how the corporation can fit with the property and benefit from their financial and/or in-kind contributions.

The most commonly stated area for improvement was SOC strengthening their collaborative efforts with their partners. Previous literature suggests that successful partnerships need to be collaborative in nature, meaning both parties are focused on maximizing the benefits of the partnership (O’Reilly & Madill, 2006; O’Reilly & Seguin, 2009). The interviews suggested that building successful partnerships is dependent on both parties being satisfied with the outcomes and the sport property becoming more proactive rather than reactive (i.e., pushing the envelope). Corporate representatives are extremely busy with their day jobs and for the most part do not have the time and capacity to develop new and innovative ideas. Therefore, the success for not-for-profit sport organizations lies within the property becoming more proactive to meet the needs and objectives of their partners, while also approaching them with new and innovative ideas.