Developing Youth, Creating Fans, Building Communities: Utilizing an Innovative Marketing Vehicle to Deliver Short- and Long-Term Success for Professional Sports Teams

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Marketing
Thursday, May 24, 2012
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
8:55 AM

According to Sports Business Research Network (2011), 26.9 million people play basketball in the United States, of which, nearly 12 million are youth between the ages of 7-17. This makes basketball the largest participatory team sport in the nation (www.sbrnet 2011). Basketball is enormously popular. However, the National Basketball Association (NBA) attendance levels for the past three seasons are in decline (www.sbrnet 2011). Although there has been little empirical study of the link between participation and fanship, sport participants are often seen as an attractive and viable market segment. As professional sport teams seek to build and maintain fans, they are increasingly turning to youth programs. Youth sport programs offer a triumvirate of potential marketing benefits. First, they are a ready population for ticket sales. Participation in these programs often include a free ticket for the child. As participants are not old enough to attend a game alone, the ‘free’ ticket spurs additional adult ticket sales. Second, youth sport programs can be powerful tools for relationship marketing (cf. Bee & Kahle, 2006). The ongoing nature of these programs offers numerous opportunities to build brand identity (Couvelaere, 2005), brand loyalty (Lin & Lin, 2008), and fan identification (Sutton et al., 1997) with the participants and their parents. Third, youth programs, particularly programs linked to positive youth development, showcase the sport organization as a force for good in the community (Stoldt et al, 2006). Thus, youth programs can build positive community relations.

Due to the highly competitive leisure and entertainment industry, it is crucial for professional sports teams to plan effective and innovative strategies that reach new customers, retain loyal fans, and increase community equity. Youth sport programs seem particularly well suited to these objectives. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact positive youth development (PYD) sport programs have on attitudes toward the brand, fan identification, key consumption behaviors, and corporate reputation for professional basketball teams.

This empirical study will survey parents and participants of several professional basketball programs at 2 points in time: before participation in a youth development program, and after participation. Measures will include attitudes toward the brand (Voss, 2003), fan identification (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), key consumption behaviors, and corporate reputation (Helm, 2005). Relationship marketing (e.g., Bee & Kahle, 2006) would posit that all measures would increase for both participants and their parents as a result of their interactions with the brand through participation in the PYD program. Repeated measures ANOVA will be used to determine changes due to interactions with the program.

This investigation seeks to discover a deeper understanding of the impact positive youth development sport programs have on key marketing outcomes for professional sports teams, specifically the NBA. This may be an innovative marketing tool to build and maintain fanship as well as contributing to the positive growth of the participants as well as the community. If proved to be valuable, professional sports teams will have an additional marketing tactic to combat escalating pressures to meet short- and long-term strategic goals in a highly competitive industry. It will also have the ability to evaluate whether these programs are actually delivering on their potential. Implications for marketing through PYD programs will be discussed, and shared with the professional teams who contributed to this study in order to provide helpful recommendations for practical use.