An Exploratory Study on Bicycle Motocross (BMX) Emerging Development and Marketing Strategy

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Since the inception of Bicycle Motocross (BMX) in the 1970's, many changes have occurred in the participants, technical skills, racing products, and governing bodies. Both viewing and participation in this young sports phenomenon is on the rise, but the importance of it for the world of sports, media sport and the opportunities for sponsorship are rarely explored (Puchan, 2004). Despite the popularity of BMX in ESPN X Games, AST Dew Tour, and in the 2008 Olympic Games, BMX racing is at a crossroads in its development. In order to make BMX racing viable and sustainable in the fast growing action sport industry, several marketing opportunities were explored in this study. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify key issues in the evolution of BMX racing that impact this sport's future development. Particular attention was given to those issues pertaining to promotion and marketing of BMX.

This study utilized a qualitative design and the following data sources were employed: (a) questionnaires, (b) interviews, (c) field notes from observations, and (d) unobtrusive analysis of primary sources. Each component of data gathered opinions of current BMX participant groups: riders, industry insiders, spectators, volunteers/officials, and parents/family members of riders. Results suggested that most participants perceived the transition from niche to mainstream was a necessary and positive step.

The research, data, and participant opinions show that changes need to be made in the marketing and commercialization of BMX racing. Marketing Myopia is a lack of foresight in marketing ventures and is identified based on four symptom identifiers: (a) A focus on producing and selling goods and services rather than identifying and satisfying the needs and wants of consumers and their markets, (b) the belief that winning absolves all other sins, (c) confusion between promotions and marketing, and (d) a short sighted focus on quick-return investments in research and in relationship marketing (Hardy, Mullin, & Sutton, 2007). BMX racing is suffering from marketing myopia which is hindering its potential for optimum commercialization. These symptoms can be seen at the local, regional and national levels at the control of the national sanctioning bodies. Currently, BMX has severe marketing gaps between the local grass roots racing programs and the momentum from Olympic exposure.

Both national BMX sanctioning bodies, the National Bicycle League (NBL) and the American Bicycle Association (ABA), goals are summarized as providing, supporting, and promoting the sport of BMX (American Bicycle Association, 2011). These sanctioning bodies provide membership access to their sanctioned tracks and race seasons, but that is where the support ends. It seems that more needs to be done to meet the needs and wants of the consumers. Riders and other BMX participants surveyed desire bigger race events with higher rider counts, higher prize money amounts with a vast variety of fans in attendance. Spectators enjoy sports games and if they are attached to a sport or athlete they will continue to be involved (Coakley, 2007). If the races were marketed and promoted as spectator friendly events that provided a total entertainment experience and not just as participant only events, a shift in the marketability of the sport of BMX would occur such as an increase in ticket sales to prereace and race events, higher concession revenue, increased sponsor interest and higher prize money. These examples are just some of the endless opportunities available with better commercialization of BMX racing.

Many of the BMX participants that were surveyed and interviewed believe that winning a race is the main goal of being a racer. The U.S.A. Olympic riders were on the Today Show, advertised on McDonalds drink cups, and had other publicity opportunities (Brown, 2008). Top-ranked U.S. female rider Arielle Martin said, "The opportunity to represent my county in the biggest sports event in the world would be such an honor" (Brown, 2008, para. 8). Since the last Olympic Games in 2008, there has been a gap in terms of marketing and commercialization for the next games in 2012. Participants in BMX were expecting increased popularity to the discipline of racing, more sponsorship interest, and the chance to broadcast races on television. Regardless of their expectations, an Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, California with replica track was built. However, there are still only a relatively small
number of BMX professional racers trying to qualify for the 2012 U.S.A. Olympic Team, which illustrates that just being an Olympic sport and having riders win an Olympic medal does not instantly promote and elevate a niche sport to mainstream (United States Olympic Committee, 2011). The Olympics are just one catalyst in the commercialization of the sport.

The results of this study indicate that there is confusion between promotions and marketing. The sanctioning bodies, NBL and ABA, are putting out two different versions of the same product creating competition and confusion for participants with different events, different rules, and different sponsors. Also, riders who are sponsored by BMX companies have the ability to be promoted and marketed separately from the sanctioning bodies, thus sending mixed messages. Each track is sanctioned by either the NBL or the ABA, following their sanctioning body’s goals and mission. However, each track can promote and market their individual race track in the local community based on their own organizational rules, thus creating another separate message. All these separate messages from each prong are confusing participants, industry insiders, spectators, and any potential new participants and sponsors.

BMX racing relies heavily on companies to sponsor the race events and series. Heavy reliance on sponsorship is causing the sanctioning bodies to accept any type of sponsor from the local shops to national based corporations. Additionally, sponsors do not gain exclusivity rights for investing with in the sport. If the BMX sanctioning bodies were not just looking to make a quick return on investments, then they might realize that proper commercialization would greatly benefit the sport of BMX at all levels. Commercialized sports are selling public performances to an audience and then selling audiences to the sponsors within a promotional culture (Coakley, 2007). If BMX racing could entertain a mass audience then the sport could benefit from the potential commercialization for years to come. The research shows that further changes in the marketing strategies need to be made to progress BMX racing as a mainstream sport; while BMX participants are looking to the organizations to control marketing from grass roots programs to the Olympic level. BMX needs this to adapt to the varied needs of the participants and concentrate on promoting and marketing BMX racing as a mainstream action sport.