Team Name Selection in Professional Sport: The Case of the Tulsa Shock

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The purpose of the present study is to examine the process followed in naming the most recent expansion/relocation team of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA). Specifically, the goals of this research are (a) to explore the steps taken in the team naming process, with particular emphasis on the characteristics of the chosen name and (b) to examine whether there are unique aspects in the naming of sport (vs. non sport) brands. The intention of this study is to add to the relatively limited literature on the naming of sport franchises and to offer guidelines to sport professionals interested in (re)naming their sport franchises. Given the importance placed on the brand name and other brand elements, even in an industry like professional sport that has extremely high barriers to enter and where brand movement is far from an everyday phenomenon, the ability to select effective brand elements and leverage them so as to positively affect a team’s bottom line is crucially important.

Keller (2003) identified six criteria for the selection of brand elements, specifically memorability, meaningfulness, likeability, transferability, adaptability, and protectability and discussed how those criteria allow the building, leveraging and protection of a brand. No element does more to identify and distinguish a brand than the brand name. In fact, “the brand name is a fundamentally important choice because it often captures the central theme or key associations of a product in a very compact and economical fashion” (Keller, 2003, p. 182). The benefits of an effective brand name have been well documented in the marketing and branding literature, pointing to increased awareness and recall levels, favorable brand associations, greater marketing success, a differentiated image, and improved brand performance as potential outcomes (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Horsky & Swyngedouw, 1987; Keller, 2003; Shipley & Howard, 1993; Sullivan, 1993; Wanke, Hermann, & Schaffner, 2007; Zinkhan & Martin, 1987). Sullivan (1998) found that brand names cause people to view products differently, even if they are identical, showing how powerful a brand name can be. Furthermore, a study of 400 travel agency clients suggested that name associations with a hotel influenced clients to choose one over the other, despite the hotels having the same features (Wanke et al., 2007).

There have been a number of studies examining which characteristics make a brand name desirable (e.g., Argo, Popa, & Smith, 2010; Bao, Shao, & Rivers, 2008; Fox, 2002; Keller, Heckler, & Houston, 1998; Klink, 2003; Kohli & Suri, 2000; Lowrey & Dubitsky, 2003; Peterson & Ross, 1972; Robertson, 1989). Most of these studies seem to agree that words that are descriptive, suggestive and relevant to the product category, easy to pronounce, carry positive connotations, contain repetitive sounds, and evoke emotion make effective brand names. Keller (2003) has further highlighted the need to select a name that captures the “ideal meaning” of a brand, that will be memorable and meaningful, and will maximize marketing efforts of the brand.

Selecting the right name for a brand, a name that will exhibit the characteristics described above and lead to positive and measurable outcomes for the brand, can be a very challenging task. Kohli and LaBahn (1997) developed a five-step process marketing managers should follow when developing the brand name that includes specifying the objectives of branding, creating the candidate brand names, evaluating these names, choosing the name, and finally getting a trademark registration. Their list includes steps also found in Shipley and Howard’s (1993) work. This earlier effort proposes a step-by-step brand name selection process that involves setting objectives, deciding strategy, deciding name criteria, generating name ideas, screening these ideas, then making a final decision.

Sport brands depend on high levels of equity to achieve favorable outcomes such as fan support, national media attention, and the sale of team licensed products. Mayberry (2008) discusses how sport teams use animal-related names (although many are already in use), names involving weather, and names that are significant to the host city. However, extensive research is required to avoid a name that might have a double meaning or be considered offensive, as was the case with the Houston Dynamo’s original selection of the name “1836” which was seen as...
offensive by Mexican-Americans (Jensen & Sosa, 2006). Many teams, especially in the minor leagues, employ naming contests where fans can vote on what name their new team will take. This can increase fans’ identification with the team, ultimately driving ticket and merchandise sales (Dwyer, Le Crom, Tomasini, & Smith, 2011).

The focus of this research is on the Tulsa Shock, the newest “addition” to the WNBA that resulted from the 2009 relocation of the Detroit Shock to Tulsa, Oklahoma. In January 2010, four months before the season’s first game, the team name and colors (black, red and gold) were announced, followed by the unveiling of the team logo (a basketball on top of “Tulsa Shock” with a lightning bolt through it), team slogan (“Get Plugged In”), and team mascot (Volt). Interviews are being conducted with team and league officials and data are content analyzed to determine the step-by-step process followed in identifying the team name—which, in the end, remained unchanged from the original Detroit franchise. Given existing marketing and branding literature, a goal of this research is to identify unique aspects in the naming of sport/team brands.

Based on data collected thus far, here are some preliminary findings: 1. The league, the team/ownership group, and the local community were all involved in the team name selection process, but in varying degrees. 2. Following the review of over 100 names generated internally and externally, candidate names were narrowed to three: the Shock, Fire and Tempo. Clearance for existing copyright and patent rights was also sought. 3. The team ran a promotion through a local newspaper where fans had a chance to vote their favorite team name. The Shock was an overwhelming winner. 4. The relocation team ended up with the same name as the original franchise, but changed the team logo and colors. Having the same name was seen by team management as beneficial in bringing instant recognition to the new franchise along with a history of championships and a winning tradition. 5. After the name selection, several color combinations were evaluated to select a color scheme that was different from the Detroit Shock and from other teams in the local market.