University vs Team Brand-Dominance Effects on NCAA Conference Change

Bradley Baker, Temple University
Daniel Funk (Advisor), Temple University

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The NCAA landscape recently experienced another round of seismic shift as 34 FBS (Football Bowl Series) teams announced conference changes in the two years between June, 2010 and June, 2012. Conference change can be viewed as a brand-building exercise, especially for universities "trading up" from a mid-major to a BCS conference. An impending conference change provides a unique opportunity to explore the roles of stakeholder involvement and branding relationships between university and team to better understand potential image effects of such a move. Analysis of survey data from a large urban university immediately prior to conference change indicates that both university and team brands factor into consumer behavior decisions and a co-dominant relationship is preferred.

Theoretical Background

Aaker and Joachimstaler (2000) define a spectrum of brand architectures that ranges from a branded house (one strong master brand) to a house of brands (many independent brands). Under this framework, an athletic team can operate as independent brand but primarily support the university master brand. This university athletic brand architecture has important financial implications by increasing involvement among stakeholders. Stinson and Howard (2010) found donors giving to both athletic and academic programs have higher lifetime value to the institution than those giving to either alone. In addition, media contracts driven by consumer interest are shaping conference realignment. Hence, a better understanding of the co-dependent relationship between team brand and university brand involvement is needed.

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) serves as a framework to investigate involvement with team and university as distinct brand entities (Funk & James, 2001). The PCM allows university stakeholders to be classified into four hierarchical segments of involvement for each brand through a staging procedure (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009). Kunkel, Funk and Hill (in press) utilized this approach to illustrate three unique brand relationships exist (team dominant, league dominant, and co-dominant) between teams and league in professional sport. The current study extends this research to examine the relationship between university and athletic team brands and how these brand relationships influence stakeholder perceptions. Specifically, how does university sport brand architecture influence perception of an impending conference change on institutional image, ticket purchases and giving?

Method

An online survey was distributed to a database of football and alumni contacts provided by an athletic department of a large urban university moving to a new athletic conference next season. Additional respondents were contacted through use of a link on the website of the institution and an email blast sent to current students, staff, and faculty. Data was collected during a three-week period. A total of 1,350 completed and usable surveys were collected, of which 55% were alumni, 20% were current students, 12% were staff or faculty, 9% were friends or family, and 4% were classified as "other" or did not provide any affiliation information.

Following the methods outlined in Kunkel, Funk and Hill (in press), respondents were segmented based on their involvement with the university and their involvement with the university's football team. These two segmentation procedures were combined to place respondents into one of three groups: Co-dominant group (N=378) of respondents at the same level of involvement with both university and team; University-dominant group (N=879) of respondents with a higher level of university involvement; and Team-dominant group (N=93) of respondents with a higher level of team involvement. Statistical tests of $\chi 2$ and ANOVA were conducted among the three groups to examine the perceived effects of the conference change on a) future purchase of season tickets, b) future donation behavior, and c) university reputation to identify between-group differences for the three theoretically-identified segments.

Results

Analyses revealed significant differences among the three brand architecture groups and perceived conference change effects on future donations to athletics, season ticket purchase intent, and university reputation ($p < .01$). Post-hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD test identified significant differences between each pair of segments (team-dominant vs. co-dominant; team-dominant vs. university-dominant; co-dominant vs. university-dominant) ($p < .05$). Results indicate future intention to donate, buy season tickets next season and perceived increase to university image were strongest among the co-dominant group followed by university-dominant and then team-dominant groups.

Discussion

Theoretically, current research reveals a unique brand architecture exists for university and athletic teams with co-dominant, team-dominant, and university-dominant groups. These groups are distinct and indicate differing influence on perceptions of a conference change on important financial and social outcomes. The current study shows the dominant partner in the brand architecture between university and football team influences purchase and donation behavior and response to a change in conference affiliation. Shared relationships, in the form of co-dominant involvement, yield the highest frequency of ticket purchase and donations, as well as most positive response to increased level of play through elevation to a major athletic conference. This suggests that universities should adopt a coordinated approach to best leverage brand alignment between school and team. The theoretical contribution of this study is improved understanding of the brand architecture relationship between universities and teams and support for a tool to segment sport consumers.

References

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