

Promoting Kung Fu to the American People: A Marketing Perspective

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Kung Fu, also called Wushu, is a comprehensive system of theory and practice that combine techniques of self-defense, fitness, and wellness into various forms of martial arts (e.g., Shaolin, Wudang, Taichi, Yong Chun, and Jeet Kune Do). The origin of Kung Fu can be traced back to the human history in China, for a few thousand years (Tsang, Kohn, Chow, & Singh, 2008). In the U.S., Kung Fu was brought to the California Gold Rush by Chinese miners, laborers, and merchants in the 1850s to 1860s. By the 1970s, its popularity reached its peak as Bruce Lee became a Kung Fu hero, household name, and international star. From the 1970s to 1990s, Kung Fu became strongly rooted in American culture and embraced by many American youth and adults. The growing popularity was in part due to the improved technology and transportation that brought many Kung Fu masters and students from Asia to the U.S. Despite the growing trend, to date Kung Fu has remained to be at a grassroots level. Compared to other Olympic martial arts, such as Taekwondo (TKD) and Judo, Kung Fu is not yet a mainstream sport and does not have good marketing appeal to American consumers.

As Americans have extended their life expectancy, more seniors have health issues and experience difficulties to maintain their balance and fall. The medical expenses have a huge adverse effect on people's financial affordability and quality of life. Kung Fu has the potential to be a very effective rehabilitation intervention for improvement of stability and prevention of falls. However, according to recent national survey data, the popularity of Kung Fu has decreased in recent years despite of its recognized health benefits. In fact, Kung Fu is among the least popular sport activities; less than three million people participate in Kung Fu and only one third of them are regular participants. In the meantime, two other Asian sports, TKD and Judo, have seen elevated growth and popularity. To a great extent, achievements in TKD and Judo's high popularity, participation rate, and international recognition are attributable to the concerted efforts that the Korean and Japanese governments and Korean and Japanese communities in the U.S. have made over the years to promote these sports. Many successful experiences and lessons learned may be applied to promote Kung Fu participation. Following the SWOT analysis procedures postulated by Stotlar (2009), a market environment analysis would be conducted to identify a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and obstacles associated with Kung Fu promotions. Consequentially, a marketing plan is proposed, discussed, and formulated that stipulates Kung Fu target markets, marketing objectives, marketing mix, and a management system to implement, coordinate, control, and evaluate the execution of the plan.

Starting with a discussion on the physical, mental, and social benefits of Kung Fu as both a recreational and competitive sport, this symposium focuses on understanding the market environment of Kung Fu and formulating effective promotional procedures to enhance Kung Fu participation among Americans. In particular, focus will be made on marketing opportunities and constraints for Kung Fu. There are four components in this proposed symposium: (a) understanding the market environment of Kung Fu in the U.S., (b) growth and popularity of TKD: Lessons learned for Kung Fu, (c) growth and popularity of Judo: Lessons learned for Kung Fu, and (d) overcoming challenges of promoting Kung Fu to Americans and formulating marketing strategies to increase its participation.

To understanding Market Environment of Kung Fu in the U.S., an investigation applying qualitative and documentary research procedures was conducted by three trained researchers in this study, who identified, summarized, and coded relevant information through searching both printed publications and on-line materials. Information from multiple researchers and sources were cross-validated. Based on the research findings, this segment of the presentation is to describe and analyze market environment of Kung Fu programs in the U.S., in terms of participant characteristics, program offering, and program instructions. According to a number of recent national surveys, the popularity of Kung Fu appears decreased in recent years despite of its recognized health benefits. In fact, Kung Fu is among the least popular sport activities; less than three million people participate in Kung Fu and only one third of

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them are regular participants. Findings derived in the investigation are deemed relevant and useful for a SWOT analysis (strength, weakness, opportunity, and Threat) of Kung Fu market environment.

In terms of growth and popularity of TKD, this segment of the symposium focuses on analyzing the reasons that lead to the growth and popularity of TKD and lessons learned for promoting Kung Fu in the U.S. TKD has been known as the most systematic and scientific Korean traditional martial arts, which was developed over 20 centuries ago. TKD has gained popularity since the 1950s, when it was developed by the Korean Army as a free-fighting combat art. After the Korean War, martial arts became widespread domestically although many TKD schools were operating under their own independent style of martial arts until the late 1950's, when the International Taekwondo Federation (ITF) and the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) were formed to organize and lead TKD development. The ITF adhered to more traditional style of TKD; whereas, the WTF has promoted TKD as a modern martial sport. In 1972, the Korean government decided to formally recognize and support the WTF as the only governing body of TKD, leading this organization to become the only official Black Belt certifying agency in the world and an IOC-recognized sports federation. Today, the WTF has 191 member nations with 70 million participants. TKD enthusiasts have actively promoted this sport to be a formal competitive game in the Olympic Games, and their efforts have been fruitful. TKD was first staged in the Olympic Games as a demonstration sports in the 24th Olympiad in 1988 and became an official Olympic medal sport at the 27th Olympiad held in Sydney, Australia. Since then, TKD has rapidly grown and developed in its popularity in the U.S. To a great extent, achievements in TKD's high popularity, participation rate, and international recognition are attributable to the concerted efforts that the Korean government has made over the years to promote this sport internationally. Successful experience and lessons learned may include, but are not limited to: (a) Chinese government involvement, support, investment, and promotional efforts, (b) establishing an international governing entity and network structure, (c) standardizing Kung Fu curriculum and instructional requirements, (d) offering high-quality training programs for instructors, (e) ensure achievement standards through establishing a certification system, (f) establishing a Kung Fu academy, similar to WTA, and (g) conducting frequent marketing studies to formulate effective management and promotional strategies (e.g., market segmentation, market demand, program differentiation, pricing strategy, and youth programming) for Kung Fu programs and schools to ultimately satisfy the consumer.

Judo is one of the modern martial arts that were developed in Japan in 1880s. It became an Olympic sport for the first time in 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games for the men's event. For the women's division, it was initially introduced at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games and became an official medal event in 1992. During the 1960s and 1970s, Judo was initially introduced to and advertised in the U.S. through comic book advertisement by highlighting this sport as an effective self-defense strategy (Black Belt Magazine, 2012). Currently, there are two governing organizations in U.S., including the United States Judo Federation (USJF) and the United States Judo Association (USJA). At the 2012 London Olympic Games, American athlete Kayla Harrison won the Judo gold medal, which was the first time in the U.S. history. This triumph moment has further helped draw significant attention to Judo by the American people. Besides promoting Judo as self-defense techniques, both USJF and USJA have been publicizing its physical, mental, and even social benefits for participants (Columbus & Rice, 1991; Mathes & Battista, 1985; Richman & Rehberg, 1986; Ito, Nogawa, Kitamura, & Walker, 2011). These promotional techniques, along with its well-developed belt-system and highlighted cultural elements, can be helpful lessons learned for promoting Kung Fu.

The final segment of the symposium focuses on identifying strategies to overcome challenges of promoting Kung Fu to the American people and formulating marketing strategies to increase its participation. These will be accomplished by conducting a marketing SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analysis, and formulate marketing strategies. Despite the recognized benefits of achieving healthy mind, body, and spirit, Kung Fu is not a familiar activity for a vast majority of Americans. The traditional styles of Kung Fu are difficult to instruct and learn although there are some simplified forms that are much easier. People are often confused of the rituals and routines of Kung Fu with religious practices or consider it a system of indoctrination. Following the SWOT analysis procedures postulated by Stotlar (2009), a market environment analysis is conducted to identify a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with Kung Fu promotions. Consequentially, a marketing plan is formulated that stipulates Kung Fu target markets, marketing objectives, marketing mix (i.e., product, place, price, and promotion) including promotional strategies, and a management system to implement, coordinate, control, and evaluate the execution of the plan. Of the plan, publicizing the benefits of Kung Fu participation, enlightening simplest forms of Kung Fu, generating interests in Kung Fu, and fostering positive attitudinal orientation toward Kung Fu are the focal objectives. Presently, promoting Kung Fu is necessarily focused on youths and young adults. Continuing efforts are necessary to promote Kung Fu in schools, colleges, and community organizations. Promoting

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Kung Fu through such sport activities as TKD and Judo may be an effective approach to accomplish both cooperative and competitive marketing objectives. Lessons learned from marketing TKD and Judo are invaluable to advance Kung Fu in the U.S. For instance, establishing a nation-wide governing entity would provide an administrative structure to standardize Kung Fu curriculum and instruction, research and solve critical issues that hamper Kung Fu development, and develop and launch marketing campaigns. While seeking Chinese government's involvement and investment would definitely improve the level of visibility and acceptability of Kung Fu, offering quality programs with well-trained and highly-qualified instructors, establishing a well-conceived advancement/recognition system of participation, incorporating cultural elements into the instructional process, and regulating program operations are key to elevate the perceived image of Kung Fu among American people, which in turn would affect their choice and participation in this very promising form of sport.