Stepping Up to the Plate: Consideration of Sustainability in Sport

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Professional athletes hold celebrity status, team owners live the entrepreneur's dream, and die-hard fans represent the ultimate in brand loyalty. Yet it is often reports of off-the-field violence, performance-enhancing drugs, or hedonistic lifestyles that create image management challenges for professional sports organizations. How can the industry rise above the front page scandals and become front-page heroes? How can professional sports organizations enhance their reputations and brand images while also serving the community and the bottom line?

This panel will consider the intersection of sport and sustainability, a global business imperative that Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley (2008) describe as a “necessary revolution” with “extraordinary opportunities” to enhance organizations while addressing the interconnected challenges of energy and transportation, food and water, waste and toxicity. Sustainability is informed by the integration and balance of economic, natural and social capital as well as an ability to meet the needs of stakeholders both current and future, with the awareness that one’s actions impact others, both individually and collectively (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Collins, Steg & Koning, 2007; Savitz and Weber, 2007).

As both consumers and governments demonstrate increasing interest in sustainability, a proactive, responsive approach provides opportunities for organizations to enhance brand value, differentiate and build loyalty leading to enhanced profitability (The SIGMA Guidelines, 2002), particularly through integrating sustainability “into the core brand” (Jones, Clark-Hill & Comfort, 2007, p. 126). While some organizations view sustainability as defensive in nature (i.e., to avoid bad publicity or litigation), planning and implementing sustainability initiatives, including social and environmental stewardship, can address issues offensively, providing strategic advantages that minimize the need for defensive posturing.

The size and impact of the sporting industry globally provides an opportunity for sport organizations to lead sustainability efforts and implement initiatives with lasting benefit. With its unique emotional appeal to diverse audiences and broad media coverage, the sports industry is uniquely positioned to take a leadership role in promoting economically, socially and environmentally responsible behaviors. This roundtable provides a forum for sharing research and insight on sport sustainability, including sustainability initiatives from venue, event, and league perspectives, and considers opportunities for further integration of sustainability as a means of adding value as it connects to long-term economic viability, societal well-being, and environmental quality.

This roundtable is comprised of academics and industry representatives who will provide a brief overview of their work, followed by a chaired discussion with the presenters and audience for reflection on sustainability in sport and consideration of future directions for research.

The first presentation examines self-presentation of sustainability communication in North American professional sports teams through website analysis of member teams of the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Hockey League (NHL) longitudinally from 2009 to 2012. This study’s focus is sustainability communication, or the commitment to sustainability communicated by the team, rather than the investigation of actual sustainability practices, investigating to what extent North American professional sports teams are using websites to communicate sustainability, sustainability messaging, and differences in sustainability communication across leagues.
The second presentation focuses on sustainable construction in sport. Sustainable construction achieves the dual aim of reducing building carbon emissions while reducing lifecycle maintenance and long-term operating costs of the facility. This presentation aims to address the gap between the growing development of commercial LEED real estate buildings and sports and entertainment venues, while developing a framework for LEED Certification in New Ballparks.

The third presentation focuses on opportunities for empowering sports managers and marketers to hasten widespread adoption of sustainable practices. Corporations, not-for-profit organizations, and even professional sports teams have begun to recognize the value of sustainability initiatives. Many organizations are making strides, though some sustainability initiatives thus far have been more tactical than strategic. Ordinary leaders who take a macro approach can integrate sustainability strategically into the event plan, identifying and addressing social, environmental, and economic goals and objectives relative to the event. To present a framework for this type of integration, the perspective of local, national, and global sporting events is considered.

References


