Towards Strategic and Authentic Community Engagement in Professional Sport: A Case Study of the Detroit Lions

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Introduction

The rise and institutionalization of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in sport is captured in a growing body of work in sport management (e.g. Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Brietbarth & Harris, 2008; Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Walker & Kent, 2009). Scholars argue that sport organizations have an imperative to participate in CSR, due to the role of sport in our society (Godfrey, 2009; Post & Waddock, 1995; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). In addition to this sense of responsibility, professional sports teams in the US are motivated to engage in CSR by pressure from a variety of internal and external stakeholders, including sponsors, the local community, the media, the league, owners and athletes (e.g. Babiak & Trendafilova, 2010; Babiak & Wolf, 2009; Porter & Kramer, 2006). Through CSR, scholars suggest teams can develop a stronger network of partners and team brand image (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2010), and be strategic with leveraging the positive value of their internal resources to increase impact (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Porter & Kramer, 2006). We lack an understanding, however, of how teams can evolve towards this strategic CSR and do so in an authentic manner. The focus on broad trends in adoption, currently characterizing the literature on CSR in sport (Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013), obscures the opportunity to learn from positive outliers in this area – teams that go beyond a general, charitable approach to CSR (Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Extejt, 2004) to more fully leverage the power of sport and their high-profile, resource-rich organizations.

The purpose of this paper is to present and analyze a case study of a professional sport team in the U.S. that has reinvented, and reorganized around, a significant component of their CSR – their community relations (CR) approach. We use qualitative data to explore the case of the Detroit Lions as they evolve their community relations approach from a broad, responsive philanthropic model to a more strategic, authentic and partnership-focused model of economic development. We draw out themes around the Lions’ approach, process, and partnerships, and highlight best practices. In doing so, we hope to stimulate discussion and future research in the areas of CSR in sport, sport-community partnerships, and sport and city revitalization.

Methods – Background, Data, Analysis

Currently in their 84th season, the Detroit Lions are one of the oldest American football franchises in the National Football League (NFL). They are owned by William Clay Ford, Sr.; other key personnel include: Vice Chairman William Clay Ford, Jr.; President Tom Lewand; General Manager Martin Mayhew; and head coach Jim Schwartz. In 2002, the Lions moved back to the city of Detroit, from the suburbs, with the building of Ford Field. This was a significant event for the Lions and the city and viewed as indicative of Ford’s commitment to Detroit, despite, or in face of, its economic and social hardships.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants from the Detroit Lions organization (2), the Lion’s primary community partners (5), and broader city revitalization activists (20). Each interview was approximately 1-1.5 hours long and was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviews centered on questions about the Lions’ community relations approach, role in city revitalization, goals and partnership activities. Finally, we collected archival data from newspapers, press releases, and websites. We used an analytic abduction approach to analyze the data (Peirce, 1955), an iteration between empirical data and pre-existing theoretical constructs such as strategic CSR (Snow, Morrill, & Anderson, 2003). We coded interview transcriptions and archival documents using NVivo content analysis software.
Results

Deciding on a strategic approach: economic development

Due in part to the leadership of Ford, Sr., the Lions have a long history of community engagement. In the past, their approach was more typical of professional sports CSR characterized by broad philanthropy (Extejt, 2004). A few significant events and circumstances prompted the Lions’ organization to develop a new strategy, including the successful 2011 season, an organizational restructuring that better integrated community relations (CR) into the organization, and new hires. These events opened an opportunity and commitment to develop a more strategic CSR approach around economic development that was supported from the top. The result is Living for the City, a new philanthropic initiative focused on two primary areas: 1) sustainable community health and wellness and 2) community development, with the goal of “supporting transformational efforts that improve the wellbeing of metro Detroit’s underserved communities” (Living for the City, 2013).

Formulating the approach: matching resources with need and developing partnerships

To develop this initiative and decide what areas to focus on, the team went through a concerted, bottom-up process of understanding the needs of the city. The Lions went into the community to listen and learn from key groups and organizations involved in city revitalization efforts. The Lions’ then identified how their own strengths mapped to a long list of community needs, and, in turn, narrowed the areas of focus to those topics that were the best fit between city need and team resources and goals. Thus, the Lions were deliberate in their selection of focus areas (health and wellness and community development) for the initiative.

Using their needs assessment, we found that the Lions strategically reached out to community partners that aligned with the two focal areas. In concentrating their community engagement efforts, the number of organizations the Lions support dropped by approximately 80 percent, resulting in some transitions pains. However, the team’s approach is now anchored on unique, meaningful, formalized community partnerships with several key, well-respected non-profits in Detroit. These relationships have, so far, resulted in a number of innovative and successful joint programs and activities. We found that there are several key themes that more specifically characterize these partnerships and relate to their success: respect and humility, an enabler role, authenticity, mutual benefits, and brokerage (we detail each in our full paper and provide illustrative quotes).

The Lions have also worked to integrate the Living for the City theme across the broader organization with their marketing sponsorship plans, game day production, and other corporate social responsibility efforts. As with any new program, the Lions’ new CR initiative continues to evolve and grow, with potential for improvement around growing existing programs and formalizing and routinizing aspects of the initiative. The Detroit Lions also recognize that there is a potential to increase their impact by sharing their approach with other teams.

Discussion and Conclusions

As the literature on sport and CSR continues to grow, we need to look broadly to expand our understanding of excellent sport CSR that makes a real commitment and contribution the community. This case illustrates how teams can play a role in economic development and community revitalization that goes beyond the effect of sports venues and mass sporting events. Sports teams can be leaders, partners, and connectors in development efforts. By highlighting the themes that emerge from the Lions’ approach and process, this case study can inform future avenues around the evolution of CSR in sport, strategic and authentic CSR in sport, and the role of sport in communities.