CSR and Community Sport Events: Balancing Sponsorship and a Public Health Agenda

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Companies are increasingly utilising corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to expand product awareness and strengthen ties at the community level (McWilliams, Siegel & Wright, 2006; Godfrey, Merrill & Hansen, 2009; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). In many cases CSR initiatives are adopted as a defence mechanism to respond to social issues and counteract criticism. Consequently, companies engaging in CSR often seek linkage to causes that intrude on societal consciousness. Whilst CSR initiatives can take on many forms, community sport event (CSE) sponsorship is a popular way for companies to boost their public image, give back to the community and counteract any possible harmful effects of their products (Becker-Olsen & Hill 2006; Cliff & Motion 2005; Pettigrew, Pescud, Rosenberg, Fergusson & Houghton 2012; Waareas 2007). CSEs are sport events staged for social, fun and entertainment value, with a primary target of local participants. These types of events are considered especially attractive vehicles for CSR initiatives due to their direct involvement with and provision for a broad range of community-based members (Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Lacey, Close & Finney, 2010).

Research relating to the criticism of CSR sponsorship initiatives tends to focus on the stereotypical realm of contentious sponsorship which traditionally includes tobacco, alcohol and gambling (Cunningham, Cornwell & Coote, 2009; Lamont, Hing & Gainsbury, 2011; Maher, Wilson, Signal & Thomson, 2006). However, products, such as soft drinks, confectionery and fast food companies are increasingly adopting CSR sponsorship initiatives in an effort to counteract criticism of their products. The dilemma here is that in a CSE environment sustainable sponsor funding and resource support is limited and highly sought. Those companies facing criticism of their products are still willing and able to give back to the communities in which they are located (Frank, 2014). When coupled with societal issues such as public health and the prevention of heart disease, diabetes and obesity, CSE sponsor relationships are bringing discussion on ethically correct CSR sponsorship initiatives to the fore.

This paper presents research findings from a study which provides perspective on and analysis of CSE sponsorship from a sport event stakeholder perspective. Specific research aims included:

(1) Examining the impact of a public health agenda on CSR initiatives enacted via CSEs

(2) Highlighting the impacts of CSR criticism on CSE management

This New Zealand based multiple case study provides insight into the opinions and intentions of key CSE sponsors within the context of their CSR objectives. The paper concludes by outlining the impact a public health agenda is having on the management of New Zealand based CSEs and a new range of sponsors.

The research findings contribute to emerging research and discussion on the relationship between CSR and sport and the increased dependency CSEs have on sponsorship as a source of funding. Previous research articles incorporating the impacts of a public health agenda within this field have tended to appear in health and nutrition focused publications. This paper extends discussion on the topic and locates it within the sport, event and business management domain.