Stakeholder Salience in Professional Sport Clubs: A Perspective Based on Fans’ Self-Perceptions

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Relevance/significance of the topic to sport management

A substantial amount of research on organizational stakeholders has been published over the past 30 years to assist managerial decision-making and the deployment of organizational resources (Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2012). Most researchers agree that stakeholders are people or groups that either affect or are affected by an organization’s actions (Frederick, Post, Lawrence, & Weber, 1996). Professional soccer clubs are a popular context for stakeholder research, and the club’s fans are routinely identified as salient stakeholders due to their role in support activities and influencing organizational decision-making (Miragaia, Ferreira, & Carreira, 2012; Zagnoli & Racichi, 2010). The authors of previous research have utilized the organizational perspective by asking managers to identify the most salient stakeholder (Mainardes et al., 2012). Interestingly, no previous research has utilized the fans perspective in the process of identifying the degree to which they are a stakeholder of the sport organization. Fans’ self-perception of their own level of stakeholder salience may be a more valid measure compared to the perspective of a sport organization’s managers. By focusing on the fans’ self-perceptions and understanding how they see themselves, club managers are better able to identify key fans and customize engagement tactics within a broader club strategy. As a result, the purpose of this study is to apply stakeholder theory to professional sport clubs and propose a stakeholder typology based on fans self-perceived salience to the sport organization.

Review of relevant literature

The importance of stakeholders is linked to a belief that an organization needs to advance the interests of various entities which have a relationship with or are connected to the organization (Zagnoli & Racichi, 2010). As the relationship between stakeholders and the organization strengthens, stakeholders are more likely to contribute important resources, such as time, energy and money, back to the organization (Mainardes et al., 2012). Thus, the identification of different types of stakeholders should be a priority for professional sport clubs, because understanding fans’ perspectives represents an important step toward meeting their wants and needs.

Various approaches for identifying stakeholders are found in existing literature. Clarkson (1995) classifies stakeholders as primary (those with formal relationships) and secondary (those without formal relationships). Bryson (2004) identifies stakeholders based on their power and level of interest in the organization. The most commonly deployed framework is the model of stakeholder salience proposed by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997). According to Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholders should be categorized on the basis of their power, legitimacy, and urgency attributes relative to the sport organization. This model served as the basis for recent studies conducted with soccer clubs. For example, Zagnoli and Radicchi (2010) found that fans of soccer clubs are salient stakeholders, and the relationships between these fans and the club need to be managed carefully. In related research, Senaux’s (2008) research showed that as fans’ commitment to the club increases, they should be considered as salient stakeholders and receive special attention from the club. Understanding fans’ salience as stakeholders is paramount, especially in membership-based organizations (McDonald & Stravos, 2007). For example, European soccer clubs often have diverse groups of fans attending their matches ranging from single-game attendees to season ticket holders. Some clubs also have members who pay a monthly or annual fee to receive benefits not available to other customers. These additional benefits include discounts on the club’s goods and services, voting rights for the board elections, and access to special members-only events (Biscaia, Ross, Yoshida, Correia, Rosado, & Marôco, 2015). On the basis of the stakeholder salience model (Mitchell et al., 1997), we propose that fans will differ according to their perceived power, urgency and legitimacy. These differences allow for the development of a salience-based fan typology from which each fan’s relative level of being a stakeholder can be identified, measured and compared.
Conceptual framework

The stakeholder salience model proposed by Mitchell et al. (1997) can be used to identify and better understand to which fans sport managers should pay close attention. The model incorporates three vital concepts: power (i.e., the degree to which the stakeholder is capable of influencing the organization), urgency (i.e., the extent to which the stakeholder claims for immediate attention by the organization), and legitimacy (i.e., the perception that the stakeholder actions are appropriate according to social norms and values). Mitchell et al. (1997) argue that these three factors, when combined, identify seven types of stakeholders, beyond those who would not be considered as stakeholders. The first type, “latent stakeholders”, possesses high levels of only one attribute. Latent stakeholders can be subdivided into dormant, discretionary or demanding stakeholders, and they likely require little attention from the organization. The second type is the “expectant stakeholder”. These stakeholders possess high levels of two attributes, and ought to receive more attention from the organization. These stakeholders can be further segmented as dominant, dangerous or dependent stakeholders. These three types of stakeholders require more attention from the sport club’s management. The final type of stakeholder has high levels of all the three attributes and is labeled as “definitive stakeholders.” These stakeholders should receive prioritized attention from the sport organization. With this rationale in mind, classifying sport fans using Mitchell et al.’s (1997) typology would represent an important contribution for sport managers, as it would facilitate enhanced understanding of the fans perceived relationship with the organization. Moreover, better understanding of a sport club’s stakeholders would help managers identify the fans to which they should pay the most attention, and unique fan engagement strategies for different types of fans could be developed. The application of an improved model of stakeholder salience would help to lay the foundation for measuring, comparing and satisfying different types of fans who all have different expectations, wants and needs.

Implications

Previous studies on stakeholders conducted within sport settings have not distinguished between fans on the basis of their self-perceived salience to the club. The most common method to determine who is a stakeholder has been to ask senior managers to identify stakeholders. The rationale behind this method is that only employees of the organization are capable of properly identifying stakeholders. While fans are recognized as stakeholders of the club or team, they are frequently treated as a homogenous group. The proposed typology can help sport managers to identify stakeholders based on the fans’ self-perceived levels of power, legitimacy and urgency, and diverse management and marketing strategies and tactics can be implemented. The success of a sport organization’s management often depends on correctly identifying the most salient stakeholders and highlighting who should be prioritized in strategic decision-making (Miragaia et al., 2012). This study represents an initial step toward future empirical studies and provides opportunities to continue advancing sport managers’ and marketers’ knowledge and identification of different types of sport fans, while practitioners can use the model to develop and undertake better strategies and tactics with all types of fans of their sport club.