Sport Brand Ambassador Programs: Brand Manager and Participant Experiences and Perspectives

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Marketing - Branding (Other) Thursday, June 1, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 8:55 AM
Abstract 2017-010 Room: Princeton

Brand ambassador programs have become more prevalent amongst sport apparel, shoe, equipment, and nutrition companies in recent years. These programs utilize everyday users of their products to represent their brand and serve as social influencers amongst the general population. For example, Oiselle, a women’s running apparel brand, has a team of women of varying ages and running abilities who receive apparel and discounts in exchange for wearing Oiselle apparel at road races, posting about the brand on their own blogs and/or social media, and who are actively involved in their local running communities (Bergesen, 2012). Other brands such as Brooks, lululemon, Patagonia, and Saucony, also use brand ambassador programs to promote their brands amongst consumers.

While brand ambassador programs vary in structure, they often involve a contract between the sport brand and the ambassador specifying the terms of the ambassadorship. They also often involve free products for the ambassador in exchange for promoting the brand via social media, on the ambassador's personal blog, or in-person at participatory sporting events such as road races or triathlons. Additionally, some programs provide ambassadors with a unique code that others may use to receive a discount when purchasing products from the brand’s website. This provides the brand with one form of measurement for assessing individual ambassadors’ impact on the brand.

Burmann and Arnhold (2009) define brand ambassador programs as a form of user-generated branding (UGB), which they describe as “the strategic and operative management of brand related user-generated content (UGC) to achieve brand goals” (p. 66). Brand ambassador programs allow brands to select specific consumers or fans to co-create meaning for the brand (Burmann & Arnhold, 2009). Additionally, Burmann (2010) identified benefits of these programs such as cost efficiency, the ability to trace consumer contact, and the ability to receive immediate feedback about the brand. Within the sport management literature, the only known study to focus on UGB examined user-generated content (UGC) that running brands featured on their Instagram accounts (Geurin and Burch, 2016). This study uncovered higher levels of engagement with UGC that the brands featured on their accounts than with the content the brands created themselves, lending additional credence to the potential power of UGB.

UGB research focused specifically on brand ambassador programs is currently limited to the field of tourism management. In an examination of ambassadors for cities, regions, and countries, Andersson and Ekman (2009) identified similar benefits of UGB as Burmann (2010). They concluded that ambassador programs created a “symbiotic co-branding situation” (p. 49) and were more effective than advertising. Rehmet and Dinnie (2013) studied brand ambassadors for tourist destinations and uncovered positive impacts on the ambassadors themselves, such as an increased sense of belonging in their communities and positive recognition by third parties, both of which led to a desire to become further involved in their ambassador role. Both of these studies, however, highlighted a lack of collaboration between the brand organization and the ambassadors. The ambassadors reported high levels of motivation to serve as ambassadors, but were disappointed that they received little guidance regarding their role. Burmann (2010) called for additional research on brand ambassador programs to identify success factors for brands as well as motivations driving the ambassador program participants. Additionally, Geurin and Burch (2016) encouraged sport management researchers to incorporate the perspectives of brand managers and their followers in future UGB research.

Responding to these calls for additional UGB research focused specifically on brand managers and brand ambassadors and/or brand followers, the purpose of this study was twofold: first, to develop an understanding of sport brands’ ambassador program marketing strategies; and second, to develop an understanding of brand ambassador participants’ experiences in these programs.
The first phase of this research took place in the spring of 2016, when the researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with six sport brand managers who oversaw brand ambassador programs. Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the most prominent brand ambassador program goals were to achieve a return on investment, reach new markets, provide an authentic representation of the brand, and develop a meaningful connection with ambassadors. Respondents indicated that the greatest benefits of their brand ambassador programs included brand awareness, generating new sales via their affiliate programs, and aligning their brand with specific sports. The challenges of managing such programs included managing communication between the brand and the ambassadors, engaging those ambassadors who were not very active in the program, and determining how to grow the program in the future.

The second phase of this research is set to take place in the winter of 2016/17, when the researcher will conduct additional semi-structured in-depth interviews with at least six participants (ambassadors) of sport brand ambassador programs. Once the interviews are completed, they will be qualitatively analyzed to identify themes (Altheide, 1996). The following research questions were developed to guide this phase of the study:

RQ 1 – What motivates brand ambassadors to become involved in sport brand ambassador programs?
RQ 2 – How do brand ambassadors describe their experiences in brand ambassador programs?
RQ 3 – In what ways do brand ambassadors believe such programs could be improved?

The findings from these ambassador participant interviews and their relationship to the findings from phase one of the study (brand manager interviews) will be the focus of this presentation should it be accepted for inclusion in the 2017 NASSM Conference. The findings from this research add to the dearth of literature on this topic within the sport management field and will assist sport brands in developing a better understanding of participants’ perspectives about brand ambassador programs. This understanding can lead to the development of new or refinement of existing brand ambassador programs to provide the best experience possible for both brands and ambassadors.

This research was funded by the NASSM Janet B. Parks Research Grant.