Corporate Social Responsibility in Professional Sport: Investigating Partnerships and the Desire for Authenticity

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Management - CSR (Elite Sport)  Friday, June 2, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  8:55 AM
Abstract 2017-088  Room: Harvard

The increasing attention toward corporate social responsibility (CSR) in sport indicates its growing influence on brand, organizational structure and fulfillment of stakeholder needs. Recent studies have helped to produce a “theoretical foundation and practical orientation of CSR for sport researchers and managers,” focusing specifically on the rise of CSR in sport, organizational perception and definitions of CSR, consumer attitudes and beliefs, implementation and effects of cause-related marketing, integration into the local community, and international development initiatives (Bradish & Cronin, 2009). From a partnership standpoint, professional sport organizations (PSOs) often prioritize their relationships with other entities (e.g., non-profits, community organizations) in order to identify and implement their CSR initiatives (Sheth & Babiak, 2010). In the case of the Detroit Lions, the desire to engage in a more systematic and genuine – or rather, “authentic” – manner has also shown itself to be a key strategy in successful sport CSR (Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014).

This research sought to address a gap in the literature surrounding strategic and authentic CSR partnerships in professional sport by asking the question: what can PSOs do to better implement CSR partnerships that are mutually beneficial, effective and sincere? The sample population for this study was comprised of NBA, NFL and MLB employees who are directly involved in their league and/or team’s CSR efforts, such as those in league-wide Social Responsibility departments as well as front office Community Relations/Affairs staff. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the purpose of this study was to investigate PSOs’ internal perceptions of their CSR partnerships as well as to explore notions of authenticity and how that concept might be integrated into social responsibility efforts.

The first portion of the study involved a Likert scale survey that explored the PSOs’ initial attitudes toward the identification and implementation of CSR partnerships within the framework of Carroll’s (1991) levels of social responsibility: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. SPSS was utilized to calculate descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, means and standard deviations, in order to get a “big picture” view of the responses. The survey also included questions that were framed within Beckman, Colwell and Cunningham’s (2009) key elements of authentic CSR found in Chile, which defines it as demonstrating “passion for the cause, transparency, consistency, and visibility in the community” as well as “tailored specifically to the needs of local stakeholders” (Heinze et al., 2014). After completing the survey, respondents were able to volunteer for the second, interview phase of the research and further expand upon their attitudes toward the identification and implementation of their league/team’s CSR partnerships as well as discuss the associated strategies and priorities.

A total of 26 individuals completed the survey and four elected to be interviewed via telephone. While the low response rate for both phases limits the ability to generalize results, findings indicated that PSO respondents feel favorably toward their current CSR partnership efforts wherein philanthropic and ethical social responsibilities have a greater impact on identification and implementation as compared to economic and legal responsibilities. Moreover, results demonstrated that PSO respondents value key elements of authenticity (e.g., passion, connected to the organizational mission) and work to incorporate them into their CSR partnerships. Chunking and analyzing interview transcripts resulted in uncovering participants’ perceived external and internal CSR partnership priorities: community impact, social pressures/public perception, partnering with experts, brand/mission alignment, expectation management, and metrics are all key considerations within the identification and implementation processes. These discussions also sought to define the concept of authenticity in sport CSR, finding that authentic partnerships must be relatable, align with the organizational mission, prioritize collaboration and practice consistency.
The results of the study are somewhat similar to Sheth and Babiak’s (2010) research, in which they found participating sport executives ranked Carroll’s levels of social responsibility (as they relate to CSR) in the following order: ethical, philanthropic, legal and economic. In opposition to scholars like Milton Friedman (1970) and Carroll (1979) who assert that a firm’s top priority must be economic, this research as well as Sheth and Babiak’s (2010) study speculates that PSOs prioritize philanthropic and ethical responsibilities within the realm of CSR. However, lack of participation and variety (38% of respondents were classified as a “coordinator”) may prompt future research to replicate this study with a larger number of respondents, and perhaps expand the population to better comprehend organizational priorities and decision-making processes (i.e., compare CSR executives’ views with that of C-suite level stakeholders). Future research may also seek to compare the CSR priorities of team and individual sport organizations, and potentially implement a forced-choice survey scale as opposed to providing the neutral option of “Neither Disagree or Agree.” This study’s method of conducting interviews in a real-time, audio-recorded setting may have also affected the depth of information provided, possibly encouraging future research to include the questions within the survey or collect responses via email. Finally, emerging notions surrounding authentic CSR in sport pave the way for additional research. More in-depth case studies similar to Heinze et al.’s (2014) analysis of the Detroit Lions are suggested, along with research that extends into sport diplomacy programs. Researchers must also ask why authenticity might be important to professional sport organizations, as this may help explore the legitimacy of such CSR efforts and more closely examine the experiences of the intended vs. actual beneficiaries.

Overall, the findings of this study help to unpack notions of authenticity as well as present external and internal priorities that may help serve as a road map for PSOs that wish to employ mutually beneficial, genuine and impactful CSR partnerships and initiatives.