A Public Relations Approach to Co-Creational Image Management in Professional Sport

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Research Background:
Due to the high-profile nature of professional sport, public relations (PR) plays an important role in the successful operations of sport organizations (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Bravold, 2012). Regardless of a sport entity’s size or scope, assessing and managing public perceptions are paramount to sustained success (Pedersen, Laucella, Kian, & Geurin, 2017). Nonetheless, deliberate image construction has become more difficult due to increasing interactions among the organization and its stakeholders (Grunig, 2013). In part, due to such increased interactions, Ihlen and Verhoeven (2012) noted an increased importance for scholars to view PR in a social theory context, with the goal of building trust and “developing (or destroying) a company’s legitimacy or ‘license’ to operate in its community” (p. 1). In fact, legitimacy has been identified as a key driver of PR activity (Russell & Lamme, 2016). Thus, from a social theory perspective of PR, it can be reasoned that communicating such outward displays of identity, both on and offline, are legitimacy-seeking actions that could drive organizational image management.

As legitimacy is sought by an organization, but granted by its stakeholders, organization messages need to be viewed from both organizational and audience perspectives. This research adopts an interdisciplinary understanding of organizational image, in which image was considered the symbolic representation of the organization, created by its members and communicated to its stakeholders to influence their perceptions (Gioia, Hamilton, & Patvardhan, 2014). Lock, Filo, Kunkel, and Skinner (2015) demonstrated that these perceptions of organizational images by stakeholders could be scrutinized through legitimacy dimensions, formed from social judgments made regarding the organization (Bitektine, 2011).

Research Objectives:
How does (i) organizational identity and (ii) image influence internal understanding of organizational legitimacy?
What are the antecedents to achieving equilibrium between perceptions of legitimacy held by (i) internal and (ii) external stakeholders?

Research Method:
This research used a single embedded case study design. A multi-team sport organization was chosen as the focus of the study due to its unusual and revelatory nature (Yin, 2014) in terms of the relational interaction of image creation and interpretation amongst its teams. The semi-structured interview was deemed the appropriate data collection instrument as it provided reliable, comparable data focused on the topic area (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). A total of 54 purposefully selected internal and external interviews were conducted to provide insights into how the sport organization viewed its own identity, how it communicated to its stakeholders to influence their perceptions (Gioia, Hamilton, & Patvardhan, 2014). Lock, Filo, Kunkel, and Skinner (2015) demonstrated that these perceptions of organizational images by stakeholders could be scrutinized through legitimacy dimensions, formed from social judgments made regarding the organization (Bitektine, 2011).

Research Findings:
Analysis revealed that employees viewed brand and organizational image development as overlapping concepts, closely tied to the organization’s identity and sense of legitimacy, with little distinction observed between team brand and organizational image. Most employees of the organization viewed the outward expressions of their team’s identity (image) as indistinguishably tied, or essentially analogous to brand management, a concept suggested by Agyemang and Williams in 2013. When speaking about the teams directly, interview participants mentioned the brand image each of the teams were unique. However, further questioning revealed several common attributes that formed the foundation of these images regardless of which team was being discussed. This included being
customer and community focused, transparency, and being communicative. The focus on these three attributes was viewed as a company-wide, collective responsibility, indicating that they were core to the organization’s identity. This in turn influenced their outward expressions of identity and manifested in the organization’s concerted efforts to build relationships, respond, and build traditions with its external stakeholders. This resulted in a discursive process between the organization and its audience that had the effect of employees understanding image management as a dynamic relationship among the images of its different teams and its overarching corporate identity characteristics. Specifically, it explained how the organization saw each team as “distinct, but part of a larger whole.” It also allowed employees to gain insights into knowing when team images were required to be emphasized individually, or interrelatedly to the larger whole of the organization to strengthen overall legitimacy.

The results of the organization’s outward focused identity and discursive image building processes were reflected in the similar image perceptions and legitimacy expectations held by external stakeholders. This indicated a lack of significant identity gaps, or impetuous for image changes. This process supported Gioia et al.’s (2014) claim that identity was no longer defined only by organization members, but also by its stakeholders, that identity is malleable and the consequence of the fluidity of organizational image. The organization appeared to have achieved the continuance of a strong, but flexible organizational image and identity that could adapt to stakeholder expectations (Sha, 2009), while maintaining core values (Gioia et al., 2013).

Implications:
Implications of this study signified that identity construction might not always be based on organizational considerations of “who we are” and “who we want to be.” Rather, identity change might also result purely from a consideration of the answers of two external construed image questions, “how we think they see us,” and “how we want them to see us” (Gioia et al., 2014, p. 20). Hence, external images became the means through which the sport organization’s identity was eventually defined, driven by legitimacy judgments. Employees’ understanding of what was required for team image to be viewed in the best manner, based on their understanding of audience context, reflected their perspective-driven use of team versus corporate image attributes. In other words, through using a perspective-driven approach to image management, it manifested subtle changes to team identity labels based on the perspective used.

Therefore, to achieve equilibrium among perceptions of legitimacy held by internal and external stakeholders, an organization is required to cultivate a co-created image with external stakeholders. The findings of this study indicate that this can be achieved by fostering an organizational identity that is transparently projected to their stakeholders, and those stakeholders accepted it as legitimate.

The study provided insights to allow sport PR staff and managers to design an informed strategy to foster the effective use image management. It contributes to the literature by supporting and augmenting previous studies on image through providing an understanding of how images are scrutinized, using legitimacy dimensions as a measurement tool to capture cognitive-attitudinal dispositions, and addressing image research not just as a process, but also as an outcome (Lock et al., 2015).