Developing an Holistic Sports Brand Equity Framework  
- The Case of a Professional Rugby Team

Abstract

Purpose of Paper - This article investigates components/factors that influence stakeholders’ perception of a professional sports team brand and how these components can generate brand equity for a professional sports team.

Theoretical Background - Utilising the work of Gladden et al. (1998) and their initial conceptual framework, the paper develops a brand equity conceptual framework applicable to a professional rugby team, Connacht Rugby. A team that has struggled in the professional era, yet has developed a unique brand identity.

Methodology - This conceptual framework was developed through the triangulation of multiple sources of qualitative evidence, ranging from focus groups, interviews, and archival records/artefacts.

Findings – In total 25 antecedent components of a sports brand were identified. Several new components were identified from the research including; Famous on-field events, Rivalries, Fan rituals, Brand values, CSR, Pricing, Stadium/aesthetics, Fan & Team identity, Fan sub-group identities, Region/city identity, Brand community, and Commercial affiliations.

Research/Limitations/Implications – This paper hopes to make a theoretical contribution to sports branding literature, helping to build theory, and subsequent research is needed to help test the conceptual model.

Originality/Value/Contribution of Paper - This paper develops a more holistic conceptual sports brand equity model, with important sports marketing implications.

Track

Sports Marketing

Key Words

Sports Brands, Brand Equity, Professional Sports, Case
Developing a Holistic Sports Brand Equity Framework  
- The Case of a Professional Rugby Team

Introduction

Sport marketing has begun to receive considerable attention from practitioners and academics, as professional sport, competes for the entertainment and leisure monies against numerous alternatives (McPherson et al., 2000). Connacht Rugby is a professional rugby team located in the west of Ireland. The Connacht Rugby branch was founded in 1885 and is governed by The Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) that also comprises of the other three provincial branches of Munster, Leinster, and Ulster. Connacht’s Sportsground in Galway city has only a capacity of 7,000, making it hard to compete against larger rivals. Connacht Rugby competes in the Rabo 12 League and the Heineken European Cup competitions. In the past few seasons Connacht has struggled with the financial pressures of the modern professional rugby arena, transforming itself from an amateur entity to a professional rugby team brand. Despite some notable successes like beating leading French teams away from home, the team faces huge challenges. In this context, there is a need to identify and improve areas of the professional sports team brand in the pursuit of more spectators and brand loyalty for professional sport teams. The attributes and components of brands and sports brand perception owe much to the work of Keller (1993) deChernatony & McDonald (2003), Gladden et al. (1998) and Couvelaere & Richelieu, (2005). Sports marketing/branding literature, has evolved with the notable contributions of Bauer et al. (2005), Chadwick et al. (2008), Shank, (2002), and Pitts & Stotlar (1996). Recently, Biscaia et al. (2013) developed a Spectator-Based Brand Equity framework, utilising a soccer fans. Their SPBE framework provides a comprehensive conceptual model that aligns with the conceptual model developed here. However some notable omissions include fan identity subgroups, fan rituals, match-day experiences, and fan demographics.

Purpose & Objectives of Research

The most important influence on team fan loyalty for the professional sports team brand is the live sport action itself – the game (McPherson et al., 2000). However ancillary factors involving the stadia, other fans’ behaviour, team performance, pricing, identity with team and players, celebrity and high profile players and promotion also affect fans loyalty to the team. For example, some professional sports organisations develop very strong brand identities, despite being seen as perennial losers. The majority of these factors can be influenced by the professional sport’s entity to encourage a positive perception of the professional sports team brand resulting in increased brand loyalty and equity. Therefore the aim of this paper are

- To develop a holistic brand equity conceptual model for a professional sports team

Methodology

A case study research strategy was adopted as the core method by which to establish and develop a greater understanding of brand equity generation within a professional rugby team setting. The brand equity framework and its application to a professional rugby team relied heavily on the primary research conducted. The research followed the approach defined by Yin (1994). The main building blocks of research data was in-depth semi structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and access to archival records/artefacts. Documentary evidence was provided and participant observation facilitated as part of the study. Branding, brand equity and components of sport brand take on meaning within the
context of the particular discourses in which they are deployed. Certain themes resulted from the triangulation of sources resulted in 23 antecedents components of a rugby brand that were adapted into Gladden et al. (1998) brand equity model. The case study of Connacht Rugby along with the relevant customer behaviour, sports branding and marketing literature provided the perfect resources for the author to establish the key factors and components of a sports brand conceptual framework using Gladden et al., (1998) brand equity framework as a starting point. Gladden et al.’s (1998) initial sports brand conceptualisation was revisited, whereby the case analysis supported by the literature provide key missing elements from the model, that are integral in the formation of a brand equity for a sporting organisation.

To successfully market a sports product, marketers must understand everything they can about consumers (needs and wants) and their consumption behaviours to gain valuable information that can be used to developed marketing and branding strategies. This will lead to increased consumption of both the tangible and intangible aspects of the sporting entity (Shank, 1999). Due to the unique aspects of sport, several psychological and sociological factors are connected to sports marketing, such as basking in reflected glory, fanaticism, identification, heroism, culture values, social values and symbolism (Kahle & Riley, 2004). The case analysis identified three core antecedents to the creation of sports brand equity, incorporating “Internal product catalysts”, “Internal marketing catalysts”, and “External market catalysts”. Within each of these several new factors have been included in the model to accurately reflect the true make-up of a sports brand. See appendix 1, for a full model of the revised sports brand equity framework. Gladden et al.’s (1998) work had several key omissions from antecedents such as; Famous on Field Events, Rivalries, Fan Rituals, Brand values, CSR (Team Community Involvement), Pricing, Stadium, Fan & Team Identity, Fan Sub-Group Identities, Region/City identity, Brand Community, and Commercial Affiliations. A key omission from outcomes was of supporters clubs/communities.

Internal Product Antecedents
Success of team- Theorists have proposed that fans see their team as an extension of themselves. Basking-in-reflected-glory theory (Caldini et al., 1976) provides evidence that people long to identify with a winner. Success can be defined by expectations of individuals and history of the team (Kaynak et al., 200). If a team has a history of success then fans develop expectations for success to the extent that moderately successful seasons would not decrease brand equity. Success impacts greatly on brand equity outcomes such as merchandise sales, ticket sales, media exposure, attracting high profile players, and attracting corporate sponsors are greatly influenced by success of the team. Famous on Field Events – These events enter the folklore of the sports brand, and are part of its mythology. Rivalries – Similar to the research carried out by Richelieu and Pons (2006) intense rivalry with local competitors; helps formulate the unique identity of the club, positioning it. Fan Rituals – Spectators may perform specific rituals during a game that forms part of the brand’s identity (e.g. cheering, singing, silence, waving etc.) during particular moments of a game. High profile players (Celebrity player status)- Researchers have suggested that high profile celebrity players and endorsers are influential to a team both on and off the pitch because they are viewed as highly dynamic with attractive and likable qualities (Atkin and Block, 1983). McCracken (1986) has also theorized that celebrity endorsers can transfer cultural meaning from the celebrity to the team and advertised products, increasing the brand awareness of the team as well as increasing merchandise and ticket sales. Head Coach -According to Gladden at al. (1998), a coach with a proven track record can instantly enhance the brand equity of a team through publicity and expectations of success. Elite sports system infrastructure as illustrated by Böhlke & Robinson (2009) in facilitating on field success.
Internal Marketing Antecedents

*Brand Values* - Today in an attempt to derive commercial benefit from the brand values of brands sports organisations are adopting a formal and more strategic approach in linking brand values to the meaning behind the professional sports team to consumer values. *Brand Heritage* - The purpose of heritage is often, to celebrate the achievements, courage and strength of those who have come before using history, nostalgia, memory, myth and tradition. Fans identify with the past of their team, even if that past does not exist in their living memory. They must use images, symbols, designs, logos and sounds that evoke the past whilst reinforcing current (or desired) image (Chadwick & Holt, 2008). *Sponsorship Alignment* - The sponsors brand identity can impact on how the sports brand is perceived. Thus a need for alignment with their sponsors is needed (Farrelly et al., 2006).

*Team Involvement in Community* (CSR) - Sport stands as an important societal institution because it has become imbued with values and is part of the fabric of social life (Selznick, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). It has been acknowledged that sport is unique for being both a social and an economic institution, and as such, well-suited with this dual orientation to be interpreted by the business principles and practices of CSR (Sheth & Babiak, 2010). Walker & Kent (2009) also found that there was a positive response of fans and consumers perception of a professional sports team. *Pricing* - Although sport is publicly consumed, it is both a tangible and intangible. One can determine the value of the sports product by assigning it a price. The pricing philosophy of the sporting organisation will influence how the sports brand is perceived by stakeholders. *Merchandising* - Merchandising plays a key role in the exchange process by providing products for consumption through the use of a brand or image of one product or service to sell another product or service. Caldini et al., (1976) found that supporters of a team are more likely to wear the team’s logo material after victory highlighting the importance of success to increasing merchandise sales. Demonstration of identity with a team also directly influences jersey and logo material merchandise sales resulting in brand equity creation for a team.

*Stadium/Aesthetics* - The concept of place plays a key role in creating a satisfying the overall experience for consumers and is essential to the success of the sports brand (Schneider & Bradish, 2006). The stadium itself has a substantial effect on the consumers’ satisfaction with the service experience. Stadiums themselves are carriers of memory and important symbolic connotations that create value and heritage for a brand (Pitts & Stotlar, 1996). One of Connaught’s slogans is “To Hell or to Connaught”, which also is a saying of historical/cultural significance to the region. *Match Day Experience* - Brooks (1994) defines atmosphere as the excitement and level of entertainment provided by attending an event. Atmosphere and the entertainment experience in a stadium can enhance the consumers and supporters perception of the brand. *Competition/Schedule* - Competition affiliation is very important for professional sports teams as a lot of them do not possess enough brand equity to establish television contracts for home game coverage (Gladden et al. 1998). Therefore sport managers need to work closely with the competition authority to gain national and international television coverage. The competition the team is competing in also influences supporters’ expectations of the team. *Fan & Team Identity/Affiliation* - Fan identification is defined as the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sports organisation. Sport differs from other forms of entertainment through evoking high levels of emotional attachment and identification (Sutton et al. 1997). Fans with high levels of identification with a team will demonstrate long term association and loyalty to that team enduring the team’s successes and hardships (Sutton et al. 1997). By referring to mechanisms of Basking In Reflected Glory (BIRGing) and Cutting Off Reflective Failure (CORFing) proposed by Cialdini et al. (1976) it is clear that great differences exist in the level of identity
and loyalty of the diverse fans have towards the different professional rugby teams across the globe. Fan Sub-Group Identities – Within spectators there are diverse supporters, who affiliate themselves with specific sub-groups of supporters (e.g. – Die-Hard, Old School, or Newbies) Region/City Identity – The research highlighted transference between the region/city brand identity and that of the club’s. Supporters Club / Brand Communities - The supporters club is also a brand community of the professional team, a direct extension of the brand’s eco-system.

**External Market Antecedents**

*Demographic Environment* - Demographic variables such as population age, gender, education occupation, and ethnic background are found to be related to the branding and merchandising success of a team (Shank, 1999). *Media Arrangements/Affiliations* - Arrangements with local media may generate brand equity by increasing affiliation and interest in the professional sports team. Fans experience pleasure from sport by following that action after the fact (Smith, 1995). *Competitive Forces* - Competition influences brand equity generation within a region. Competition comes from teams within the same sport genre, other sports and other entertainment products. *Commercial Affiliation* - A positive relationship with the external stakeholders (e.g. rugby governing body, chambers of commerce, local commercial partners) is necessary in relation to the regulation, financing, and marketing of the professional sports team.

**Implications for Academics & Practitioners**

This paper generates numerous potential research questions with significant relevance for the sport marketer/manager. Further research into the antecedents and the outcomes of brand equity and consumer perception can be better understood using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Follow up studies need to be conducted focusing on developing validation for the components and antecedents of brand equity. The relationships within this brand equity framework could be further empirically tested, investigating the strength of linkages between the components/antecedents and the outcomes, as they may differ across sports. Future research efforts could also analyse how certain antecedents contribute to a certain outcome. Antecedents such as star player, success of team and in game entertainment experience could all be evaluated to see which antecedent contributes most to ticket sales. Within this research the components and factors that contribute to brand equity were divided into antecedents and outcomes. However it is important to note that some of the components, for example, merchandising, brand communities, fan affiliation and player identification can be both antecedents and outcomes as well and being internal and external marketing catalysts. This conceptual framework of sports brand equity framework is can be adapted to other sports organisations.

**Conclusion**

A better understanding of teams/clubs, star players and of course what leads fans to support and follow a team, is critical in order to survive in professional sports arena. This study has been largely inspired from the work of Gladden et al., (1998) and Aaker (1991) and attempted to develop a conceptual framework to better assess the links and relationships between the antecedents and outcomes of brand equity and their influence on consumer/fan perception. This paper presents a more holistic, comprehensive and refined conceptual sports brand equity model to the field of sports marketing. Understanding the nuances of a professional sports team brand helps focus and prioritise future strategic planning.
References


Appendix 1
A Conceptual Model of brand equity creation for a professional sports team (Adapted from Gladden at al., 1998)

Antecedents          Brand Equity           Outcomes

Internal Product Catalysts
- On field success
- Famous On-Field Events
- Rivalries
- Fan Rituals
- High Profile players
- Head coach
- Elite Sports Infrastructure

Internal Marketing Catalysts
- Brand Values
- History & Heritage
- Sponsorship Alignment
- Merchandising
- CSR (Team Community Involvement)
- Pricing
- Stadium/Aesthetics
- Match Day Experience
- Competition/Schedule
- Fan & Team Identity
- Fan Sub-Group Identities
- Region/City Identity
- Brand Community
- Commitment of Fans

External Market Catalysts
- Demographics of Supporters
- Media Arrangements
- Competitive forces
- Commercial Affiliations

Perceived Quality
Brand Awareness
Brand Associations
Brand Loyalty

- Media Exposure
- Ticket Sales
- Merchandise Sales
- Supporters Club
- Atmosphere
- Sponsorship
- Increased Support
- Individual Donations

Marketplace Customer Perception

*Denotes authors’ additions to Gladden et al.’s (1998) Sports Brand Equity Framework