

Building brands and relationships beyond sport

Aims and Research Questions

Revenue from non-match events, that not involving the team, is vital for most professional sports clubs (PSCs) as they may not generate sufficient income from the sport alone to maintain professional status. The article examines how clubs in the English Football League (EFL) have diversified beyond sport into new markets (Lee, Parrish & Kim, 2015) and the branding approach adopted.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The construct of brand architecture is used to explain how PSCs structures their portfolio of products/services. Most organizations have a brand portfolio, which is the set of all brands they offer for sale to buyers. Decisions need to be made as to which names, logos and symbols are used in marketing.

Brexendorf and Keller (2017) posit that branding strategies span a continuum, with at one end an umbrella approach, known as a “branded house”, where the same master brand name is used for a number of related products e.g. Virgin. Or at the other end of the spectrum a “house of brands” approach. A strategy that involves using different brand names for different product categories, e.g. Procter and Gamble use Crest for dental hygiene and Pampers for nappies. In between these two approaches lies a mixed approach deploying two or more brand names. It happens when a firm uses a master brand and sub-brand in a combined relationship with the intention of communicating meaning to consumers, The construct has been applied in a sporting context to examine the structural relationship between leagues and PSCs. Kunkel, Funk & Lock (2017) view the league as the master brand

and the teams as sub-brands, despite the lack of common ownership. This is because the former devise governance regulations. The teams act as sub-brands delivering the core product of games.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

The study adopted a multi-stage qualitative approach combining secondary sources and semi-structured interviews. The EFL website, club websites and brochures were examined and interviews conducted with the commercial staff of 21 PSCs. This helped to build a picture of the 80 teams who played in the EFL for the three seasons commencing from 2015-16.

Thematic analysis was used to contrast approaches to branding.

Research/ Finding and Discussions

The EFL market sport brands through a range of football competitions and a community brand through the EFL Trust. The PSCs themselves market three distinct brands: 1) teams, 2) a league instigated club community trust (CCT) and 3) a stadium. The first two are marketed by the efforts of both the league and the clubs. The CCT operates corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in the same geographical areas as the club, although it is a separate legal entity. The stadium brand that operates from within the venue is developed independently by the PSCs offering events such as conferences, concerts and funerals. Empirical evidence suggests the league takes little part in the operation of these brands, and they are managed by the individual PSCs (Kunkel et al., 2017).

Within their venues PSCs have also developed a category we term “stadium sub-brands”. These are located inside the stadium and include: business clubs; comedy clubs and restaurants. Some of the PSCs have gone a stage further and allocate a separate brand name to their conference and events business, to that of the stadium.

Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

The findings add to the extant literature on brand architecture by observing how PSCs diversify by developing brands unrelated to sport. In terms of brand strategy there is a marked difference between the approaches of the league and the clubs. The former uses the EFL name and logo as an umbrella that appears on all the products/services they market, a “branded house” approach. Conversely the PSCs use a range of different names, through adopting a “house of brands” approach (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017). This is influenced by brand ownership, tradition and the need to position non-match brands in different markets. However, in a sporting context there is a strong link between brands as physical consumption takes place in the same location, the stadium.

The research demonstrates how developing the brand portfolio can help both leagues and PSCs expand into different markets and work with a wider range of stakeholders. The development of other revenue streams leads to them being perceived as ‘more’ than a sports club (Pritchard, 2016). This perception is particularly prevalent amongst markets based in close geographical proximity to the venue, concurring with Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) that their strength lies in their locality.

References

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