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Michael Hutchinson
University of Memphis, mdhtchns@memphis.edu

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The Utilization of Core Values as an Avenue for Promotion in Sport: Faith based Activations as the Moral Face of Sport Organization Brands

Michael Hutchinson

Texas A&M University

Abstract

The administration of and participation in present-day sport is inundated with situations requiring individuals with varying moral paradigms to determine appropriate action. The marketing discipline has drawn considerable attention from ethical decision makers, as marketing practitioners are responsible for satisfying both active and inactive consumer 'needs.' Traditional forms of promotion within the sport setting have focused on targeting fans through financial value, cost minimization, or product giveaways (e.g., Friday night fireworks, \$1 hot dog night, bobble-head night). However, professional sport organizations have recently extended marketing endeavors to include faith based activations as a form of promotional strategy, accessing fans by means of their individual core values. The purpose of this paper is to propose a set of considerations for the proper utilization of fans' core values and subsequently present a decision making model for application prior to implementing such a promotional strategy. There is relative paucity of original research examining sport marketers' attempt to access fans core values via promotion in the sport setting. This paper will place particular emphasis on the considerations necessary for proper application of promotional campaigns targeting fans core values, via faith based activations, as the primary component for accessing target market segments. Acknowledgement of appropriate factors for consideration in application of a faith based promotional strategy and development of a related model for organizational application will be presented.

Introduction

The administration of and participation in present-day sport is inundated with situations requiring individuals with varying moral paradigms to determine appropriate action. The marketing discipline has drawn considerable attention from ethical decision makers, as marketing practitioners are responsible for satisfying both active and inactive consumer 'needs.' Traditional forms of promotion within the sport setting have focused on targeting fans through financial value, cost minimization, or product giveaways (e.g., Friday night fireworks, \$1 hot dog night, bobble-head night). However, professional sport organizations have recently extended marketing endeavors to include faith based activations as a form of promotional strategy, accessing fans by means of their individual core values. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to propose a set of considerations for the proper utilization of fans' core values and subsequently present a decision making model for application prior to implementing such a marketing strategy. There is relative paucity of original research examining sport marketers' attempt to access fans core values via promotion in the sport setting. This paper will place particular emphasis on the considerations necessary for proper application of marketing campaigns targeting fans core values, via faith based activations, as the primary component for accessing target market segments. Acknowledgement of appropriate factors for consideration in application of a faith based marketing strategy and development of a related model for organizational application will be presented.

Promotion within the Context of Sport

In their assessment of questionable ethical behaviors derived from marketing mix variables in the sport setting, Lacznik, Burton, and Murphy (1999) state that “no sector of sports marketing is more rife with ethical issues than the area of promotional strategy” (p. 48). Despite the perceived lack of ethical behavior in promotions, theoretical and empirical research directly related to targeted promotional activities in sport organizations is limited. Early empirical research pertaining to promotion in sport directly relates to the economic effects associated with event and game attendance (Siegfried & Eisenberg, 1980; Madura, 1981; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Branvold & Bowers, 1992; Boyd & Krehbiel, 1999; McDonald & Rascher, 2000; Boyd & Krehbiel, 2003; Boyd & Krehbiel, 2006). In a study examining the factors affecting professional sport attendance, Hansen and Gauthier (1989) identified four categories that impact fans decisions to attend sporting events: economic, sociodemographic, attractiveness of game, and residual preferences. The attractiveness of game category focused on the positive influences of game attendance, including such factors as star players, team contention or placement, potential for a pennant race, and, for purposes of this study, promotions and special events. In order to better understand the impact of promotions and special events on attendance, McDonald and Rascher (2000) examined the effectiveness of promotions on Major League Baseball. Their study revealed that promotions can increase single game attendance by nearly 14%. However, McDonald and Rascher (2000) accentuated the importance of future research pertaining to, among other endeavors, promotions that are best received or most desired by sporting event attendees.

In view of its growing effectiveness on game attendance and attractiveness, promotions are used to target a wide array of consumer segments in the sport setting, including senior citizens, fraternities/sororities, youth sport teams and groups, and others (Branvold & Bowers, 1992). However, little promotional consideration has been given to the potential for utilizing faith as an avenue for promotion and marketing within the sport setting. Currently, there is little to no theoretical or empirical literature regarding the effectiveness of utilizing faith as a means for marketing and promotion in the sport setting. This absence signifies an opportunity to expand the currently available research to develop a broader perspective of knowledge and understanding.

In light of this, Boyd and Krehbiel have done extensive research examining the effects of promotions on Major League Baseball. Included in their research is the examination of such factors as promotion timing and its effect on baseball game attractiveness, as well as the effects of various types of promotions in Major League Baseball (Boyd & Krehbiel, 1999; Boyd & Krehbiel, 2003; Boyd & Krehbiel, 2006). In the 2006 study examining the effects of different types of promotions on attendance, Boyd and Krehbiel discovered that, with the exception of the bobblehead collectible item, the intertwinement of a giveaway and special event, and two or more special events in one night proved to be the most popular form of promotion for all Major League Baseball games played in the year 2002 (Boyd & Krehbiel, 2006). Thus, Boyd and Krehbiel concluded that a primary implication for major league clubs was to incorporate more special events and high impact promotions into their regular season promotional schedule.

Promotion of Faith in the Sport Setting

Promotion in the sport setting has produced a plethora of creative examples for counterbalancing such circumstances as the losing season or lack of game attendance (e.g., bobble-head night, Friday night fireworks, \$1 hot dog night, etc). Yet, sport organizations have developed and applied creative promotional strategies for additional purposes, such as accessing untapped market segments in an effort to expand the current fan base and generate additional fan loyalty. Recent promotional strategies have begun to utilize faith as an avenue for promotion in the sport setting. In reference to a faith based promotional event, New York Times columnist Warren St. John refers to 'Faith Nights' as a type of sport marketing promotional activation that offers "a spiritual twist on Frisbee Nights and Bat Nights" (St. John, 2006). The specific promotional phenomena associated with 'Faith Nights' have blended professional sports, Christian music, and Christian athlete's testimonies in an effort to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in an appealing manner to younger generations. A product of the non-profit organization Third Coast Sports, Faith Nights began by partnering with the Nashville Sounds, the Triple-A affiliate of the Milwaukee Brewers. A typical Faith Night begins prior to the start of a game with a concert by a well-known Christian recording artist followed by the Christian testimony of a current home team athlete. Since its inaugural event with the Sounds, Third Coast Sports' Faith Nights have expanded from one Minor League Baseball club to six Arena Football League teams, thirty-nine Minor League Baseball clubs, and eight Major League Baseball clubs.

Considerations for Utilizing Faith in Sport Marketing

In order to appropriately apply faith based strategies to marketing initiatives, several considerations must be established throughout the planning and implementation process. A significant point relates to the desired organizational or brand image implied to exist within an organization through support of a faith based initiative. A specific set of characterizations and behaviors are generally associated with faith based programs. This typically includes an appeal to a specific demographic mix with a defined value structure. While at first evaluation this value structure is represented by similarities in religious principles, other secondary yet influential characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, age, gender, etc) may also be directly or indirectly related. Thus, sport organizations need to confirm that the belief structures of the target market in faith based activations is consistent with the organizational brand image to be projected. Robin and Reidenbach (1987) indicate the importance of identifying the desired ethical profile an organization wants to promote. Referred to as the "ethical face" (p. 54) of an entity, Robin and Reidenbach define the profile of an organization as a "projection to external publics with whom the organization interacts, identifying how the organization chooses to interact with those publics" (p. 53). Hence, sport organizations promoting faith based activations reflect a particular brand image simply by their affiliation with the source of the activation.

Another important consideration involves the influence of core values and belief structures. According to Robin and Reidenbach (1987), core values are a direct result of the ethical profile of an organization, as well as the primary tool for implementation of desired ethical behavior. This should be balanced, however, by the responsibility implicit when appealing to consumers through a vehicle that engages the consumer's core belief structure (e.g.,

faith). This requires application of marketing principles which reflect an increased moral approach consistent with the *prima facie* moral obligations and boundaries of a marketing program as proposed by Laczniak (1983). Often, the essential premise associated with structuring a particular marketing campaign is driven primarily by a desire to maximize corporate return (e.g., sales, revenue, etc). However, promotional practices that rely on accessing consumer core values or beliefs should also embed a 'moral obligation' (Laczniak, 1983). This might be considered an expansion of a more traditional marketing approach; yet, the morally aware marketer must acknowledge the implied responsibility of preserving the sanctity of consumer well-being. While marketing practitioners are well within their rights to alter consumer perceptions and develop interest in product or service availability, the morally aware marketer must equally acknowledge the preservation of consumer engagement boundaries.

A final consideration relates to the key principles of broad appeal which should be included within a faith based marketing framework. A strategy targeting specific denominational affiliations will tend to access only the consumer base which would be represented within that denomination, thus segmenting a potentially larger target market. Additionally, it should be acknowledged that this form of focused target marketing could potentially alienate other consumers who do not share similar belief structures. This potential weakness may be alleviated within a faith based marketing activity by focusing on key principles. In the case of Third Coast Sports, key principles such as the promotion of the Christian faith and Gospel of Jesus Christ have been established. Although these beliefs may alienate particular market segments, they exhibit a reasonably broad appeal across a large cross-section of faith based demographic consumers.

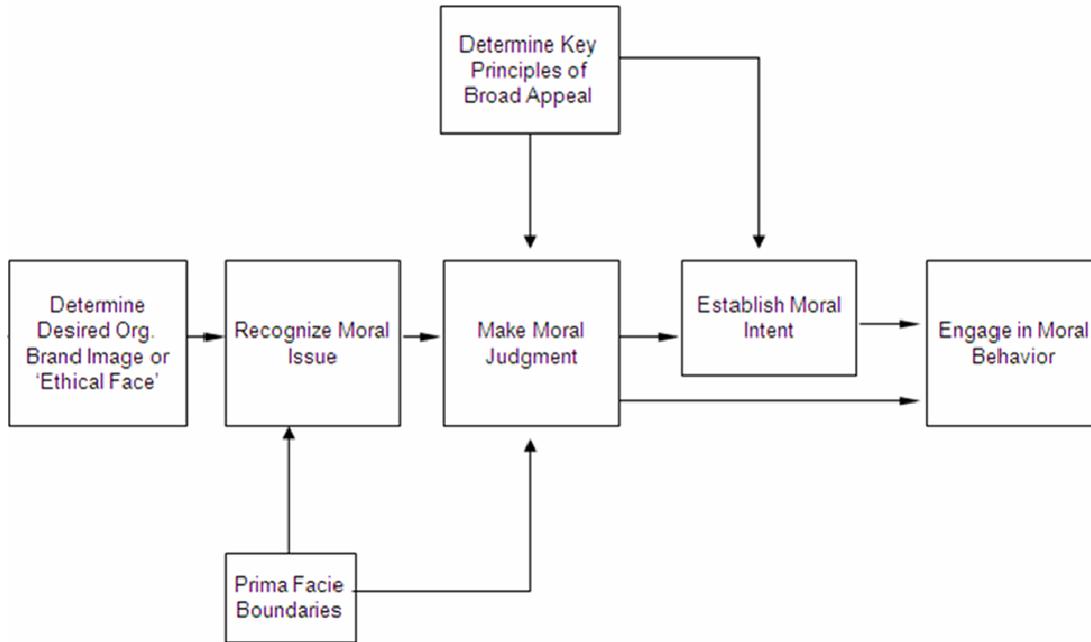
Conceptual Decision Making Model

The following decision making model employs the issue-contingent model formulated by Jones (1991) as a framework for the implementation of a faith based marketing strategy. Jones' issue-contingent model was developed to supplement previous theoretical foundations in both marketing and non-marketing literature (e.g., Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986), specifically relating to ethical decision making within the organizational setting. The basic tenet of the issue-contingent model focused on the variable of intensity and its subsequent impact on a decision outcome. As Jones' built upon the work of Rest (1986) and Trevino (1986), the resulting model provided considerably more depth to ethical decision making processes. For purposes of the current model, the four basic steps of the issue-contingent model will be retained and applied. The proposed decision making model can be seen in [Figure 1](#).

Prior to the implementation of a faith based marketing strategy, organizations must first develop the desired organizational brand image to be projected. Assuming that a faith based marketing strategy is deemed acceptable according to organizational standards (e.g., mission, vision, values), the decision making process of whether or not to further implement such a strategy may continue. Following this determination, decision makers must recognize that implementation of such a strategy may be an issue for certain stakeholders, thus encouraging decision makers to make a careful judgment prior to implementation. The *prima facie* obligations may contribute to the recognition of an issue, similar to an environmental influence. Moreover,

due to the potential to access or draw upon the core belief structure of a consumer via a faith based strategy, consideration of these prima facie obligations should also be acknowledged and prominent in the ‘making moral judgment’ component of the decision making model. It is reasonable to expect that certain accepted environmental norms might well be inappropriate for application to specific target market segments represented within the scope of a faith based activation or strategy.

Figure 1: Conceptual Decision Making Model



Finally, organizational decision makers must acknowledge the determined principles of broad appeal at both the ‘making a moral judgment’ stage and ‘establish moral intent’ stage. Determination of such key principles needs to be assessed at these stages in order to confirm that the judgment and intent are aligned with organizationally acceptable terms or principles. Based upon the previous explanations, the proposed model is appropriate for application to marketing strategies involving accessing consumer core values and belief structures (e.g., faith based activations).

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper has identified opportunities for subsequent investigation, thus furthering the knowledge and understanding within the marketing literature. Additional investigation of the relationship between faith based activations and a sport organizations brand image would prove useful. An appreciation of this relationship would provide insight into key factors meriting consideration when developing and shaping the perception within which a sport organization desires to be viewed by a consumer base. This would also aid in the development of more specific target markets, as practitioners could use this information to better integrate characteristics of desired brand representations in the design and implementation of marketing

efforts. Potential approaches might include accessing a broad cross-sectional representation of sport organizations for understanding the factors, desired outcomes, and perceived results deriving from this initiative. Research would benefit from an appreciation of the before and after event perceptions, as well as associated changes related to these types of target market access events.

The proposed model is currently a theoretical construct that has not been tested or investigated within the marketplace. This discussion, while logical from a theoretical perspective, may not represent the pragmatic considerations which are implicit in the development of a marketing strategy attempting to access broad (rather than focused) consumer core values and belief structures. Further investigation of the construct of moral and ethical obligations in a “core value” oriented marketing strategy, combined with pragmatic marketing implementation efforts, would extend the current body of work in this area. This would contribute to the development of specific praxis oriented implementation considerations to be integrated within a targeted marketing campaign. An appreciation of the moral responsibilities within a targeted campaign might also support similar efforts beyond faith based initiatives, such as increased targeted efforts related to demographic composition of consumer segments.

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