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# A Descriptive Analysis of Corporate Environmental Responsibility in Major League Professional Sport

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## Abstract

This article explores corporate environmentalism across North American major league professional sport through a webpage content analysis of disclosed business practices and programs. The results of the content analysis reify previous academic work, which suggests corporate environmental responsibility in professional sport is varied. Yet, the results also point to an increasingly standardized approach to integrated/operational business practices focusing on materials and resources, and energy and atmosphere, as well as campaign-based programs focusing on corporate social marketing. The findings identify an opportunity for professional team sport organizations to innovate new cause-related marketing and cause promotion programs, and point to a key role for senior leaders in leveraging advanced capabilities to catalyze knowledge development in other business practices and programs. Additionally, by establishing common areas of success, the findings present an opportunity for professional team sport organizations to communicate their environmental successes collectively.

**Keywords:** *CSR, environment, professional sport, resource*

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## Introduction

While reports detail how sport organizations affect the natural environment (Grant, 2014), producing a sporting event has a relatively small ecological footprint in comparison to other industries (McCullough & Kellison, 2017). Despite this juxtaposition, professional sport in North America is amidst a “greening” movement (MacMillan, 2016) where evidence supports the pervasiveness of environmental action across the sport industry (see Blankenbuehler & Kunz, 2014; Chard & Mallen, 2013; Ciletti, Lanasa, Ramos, Luchs, & Lou, 2010; Francis, Norris, & Brinkmann, 2017; Mallen, Chard, & Sime, 2013; Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013). To this end, Casper and Pfahl (2015) suggest “the inclusion of environmental issues into all aspects of organizational operations will eventually become routine and part of the fabric of sport business” (p. 11). However, previous studies show the collective response to environmental issues to be both vast (i.e., a high proportion of teams are implementing such initiatives) and diverse (i.e., the types of initiatives are highly differentiated).

The aim of our research is to further understand the connection between what types of environmental efforts are being implemented and how these activities are becoming standardized across sport organizations. This study examines environmental efforts in the context of major league professional sport, and, thus, the apex of sport organizations in North America. To do so, we analyze environmental efforts through content disclosed by professional team sport organizations (PT-SOs) and their partners online—the presence of which is indicative of the pressure and drive to communicate CSR and environmental sustainability to stakeholders (Trendafilova et al., 2013). First, we establish the extent of environmental efforts across major league professional sport, and, second, we interpret what these trends mean in relation to how major league professional sport is moving toward a standardized approach.

## Framework

Specific corporate endeavors, like utilizing renewable energy or hosting green-themed events, become corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives when understood as “discrete undertakings, intended to improve societal welfare” (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009, p. 260). Subsequently, we consider discreet undertakings that integrate environmental concerns into mainstream operations as a product of corporate environmental responsibility (CER), which broadly refers to a company’s duty to cover the environmental implications of its operations (Mazurkiewicz, 2004). In professional sport, CER focus areas include recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, waste reduction, and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification (Blankenbuehler & Kunz, 2014), as well as ethically based efforts, including educational initiatives in schools and addressing local environmental damage and degradation (Pfahl, 2013).

A resource-based view of the firm posits the organization as a bundle of resources (Barney & Arikan, 2001). Babiak and Trendafilova (2011) apply a re-

source-based view to suggest CER in professional sport falls into two broad forms: operational business practices and campaign-based programs. Similarly, Nguyen, Trendafilova, and Pfahl (2014) differentiate between built-environment innovations and operations management, and stakeholder engagement strategies. On the one hand, the implementation of operational business practices is a function of facility managers who are responding to a number of motivating factors (e.g., stakeholder pressure, financial cost-benefit, and competitiveness; Uecker-Mercado & Walker, 2012). On the other hand, PTSOs deliver externally focused event, campaign, or program-centered activities often in the pursuit of legitimacy among stakeholders (Weaver, Trevino, & Cochran, 1999). Such campaign-based programs are typically a product of community relations departments (Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014) and/or professional team foundations (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006).

Babiak and Trendafilova (2011) categorize operational business practices as high commitment, and campaign-based programs as low engagement. However, there is a growing consensus that the key to reducing the impact of sport stadia on the environment is to integrate these measures into the design of the building from the outset (Belson, 2018). In fact, Dwaikat and Ali (2016) claim green features add little or no extra cost to construction costs overall. As such, recent advancements in green architecture question whether operational business practices are indicative of a deep commitment. Similarly, Heinze et al. (2014), in their study of the Detroit Lions community engagement efforts, suggest PTSOs are moving toward more strategic and authentic forms of campaign-based CSR programs. In doing so, community relations departments are investing specialist resources toward need-based issues at a local level, which, again, questions whether these efforts are representative of a low level of engagement. Nevertheless, there remains distinct differences in the internal management of resources by PTSOs, which justifies an investigation that makes this delineation.

Kotler and Lee (2005) propose a categorical framework of corporate social initiatives (CSIs), which are “activities undertaken by a corporation to support social causes and to fulfill commitments to corporate social responsibility” (p. 22). There are six categories of CSIs: 1) cause promotions leverage corporate resource to increase awareness and concern about a social cause, 2) cause-related marketing establishes donations with product sales, 3) corporate social marketing focuses on consumer behavior change through targeted campaigns on a range of societal issues, 4) corporate philanthropy involves a direct contribution from a corporation to a charity or cause, 5) community volunteering/employee engagement encourages staff to volunteer with nonprofit organizations and causes, and 6) socially responsible business practices are discretionary corporate efforts to improve community well-being and/or protect the environment (Kotler, Hessekiel & Lee, 2012). Alternatively, green building standards create a standardizing framework for integrated, operational business practices. For example, the United States Green Building Council’s (USGBC) LEED v4 for building operations and maintenance core themes include: 1) location and transportation, 2) sustainable sites, 3) water efficiency, 5) energy and atmosphere, and 6) indoor environmental

quality (USGBC, 2018). A modification of Kotler and Lee’s (2005) framework, through the identification of socially responsible business practices as operational business practices (see Figure 1), allows for this one category to be expanded to six based on the LEED v4 core themes.



**Figure 1.** A resource-based perspective of CER categories based on Kotler and Lee’s (2005) CSIs and LEED v4 core themes

In summary, the CER typology proposed in Figure 1 consists of 11 categories—six of which are operational business practices and five are campaign-based programs, and provides a relevant framework from which to understand CER as it relates to PTSOs at an industry-level.

### Methods

The sampling frame for this study consisted of the member organizations of Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer, National Basketball Association, National Football League, and National Hockey League. The sample was exclusive of PTSOs located in short-term temporary venues (i.e., awaiting the construction or opening of new stadia/arenas). Ultimately, 96% of the franchises who were active across the five leagues were included in the sample population ( $n=140$ ).

CER was explored through a systematic and objective content analysis (Berelson, 1952) of team, venue, league, partner, and third-party websites. Specifically, CER was understood as any activity implemented by a PTSO and/or their host venue, and each activity was related back to the CER categories highlighted in Figure 1 (see Table 1 and 2). The content analysis was conducted in April and May

2017, and included three complimentary approaches: 1) team and venue websites were reviewed, 2) a key word search was used within the team and venue websites, and 3) a key word search was used within the Google search engine. Key words were derived deductively from the findings of Blankenbuehler and Kunz's (2014) study that used a similar process of data collection. Specifically, key words included "sustainability," "recycling," and "LEED." Where a PTSO had a collective name for their CER campaign (e.g., the Philadelphia Eagle's 'Go Green' initiative), this was used as an additional search term. To capture CER in its entirety, all PTSO efforts since the inception of the Philadelphia Eagle's Go Green campaign (i.e., August 2003 to May 2017) were included. Finally, if a PTSO had been involved in multiple implementations of the same activity over this period, only the most recent was recorded.

Descriptive statistics were used within the data analysis process. Specifically, the percentage engagement of all PTSOs in each CER category and form were calculated. In addition, as each PTSO received two scores (the number of operational business practice categories implemented, and the number of campaign-based program categories implemented), CER on a team-by-team basis was compared to the mean industry scores.

**Table 1**

*Operational Business Practices by LEED Category and Credit Category*

LEED Category	LEED Credit Category	Example CER Activities
Location and Transportation	Bicycle Facilities Green Vehicles	Bike racks Preferred parking and electric vehicle charging stations
Sustainable Sites	Protect or Restore Habitat Rainwater Management Heat Island Reduction	Use of native plant species Stormwater harvesting Sustainable roof
Water Efficiency	Indoor Water Use Reduction Outdoor Water Use Reduction	Low-flow urinals, toilets, and faucets High efficiency irrigation technologies
Energy and Atmosphere	Optimize Energy Performance Advanced Energy Metering Renewable Energy Production Green Power and Carbon Offsets	Energy efficient appliances Energy management system Solar and wind power Renewable energy certificates
Materials and Resources	Storage and Collection of Recyclables Environmental Product Declarations Sourcing of Raw Materials  Material Ingredients	Recycling and composting Locally sourced food Recycled material used in construction and renovations Recycled-content food ware
Indoor Environmental Quality	Indoor Air Quality Performance Interior Lighting	Air quality management system Efficient lighting and lighting control

**Table 2**

*Campaign-Based Programs by CSI Category*

CSI Category	Example CER Activities
Corporate Social Marketing	Game-day sustainability awareness (e.g., themed games) Community-based sustainability awareness (e.g., educational initiatives) Community recycling drives Alternative transport promotion
Corporate Philanthropy	Fundraising and grant giving
Community Volunteering	Community conservation projects (e.g., tree planting or neighborhood clean-ups)

Note: PTSOs were found to be inactive in the categories of Cause Promotions and Cause-related Marketing

**Results**

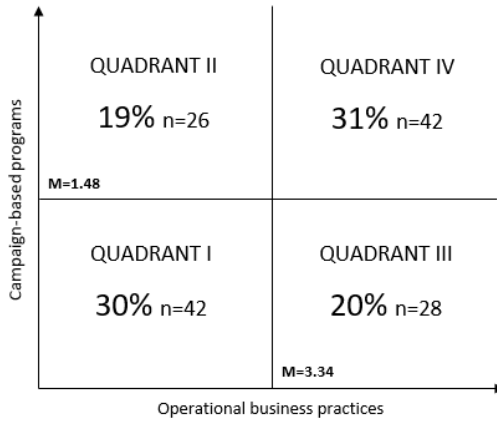
The content analysis revealed all PTSOs in the sample had implemented at least one CER activity. As highlighted in Table 3, the most standardized activity groupings were materials and resources, corporate social marketing, and energy and atmosphere, and, at the other end of the spectrum, there were no PTSOs active in environmentally focused cause-related marketing or cause promotion.

**Table 3**

*CER Implementation by Category*

CER Category	PTSOs (N=140)	
	No.	%
Materials and Resources	122	87
Corporate Social Marketing	115	82
Energy and Atmosphere	109	78
Community Volunteering	72	51
Location and Transportation	72	51
Water Efficiency	68	49
Indoor Environmental Quality	53	38
Sustainable Sites	44	31
Corporate Philanthropy	20	14
Cause-related Marketing	0	0
Cause Promotion	0	0

On average, PTSOs had engaged in activities across 3.34 operational business practice and 1.48 campaign-based program categories. Using these mean industry scores as a coordinate plane, PTSOs can be placed into quadrants. Figure 2 displays the distribution of PTSOs by quadrant.



**Figure 2.** Quadrant distribution of PTSOs by CER implementation

In looking at the implementation of CER by quadrant (see Table 4), three categories emerge as the most standardized: materials and resources, energy and atmosphere, and corporate social marketing. The results suggest that CER implementation in these core categories is relatively consistent across all quadrants. As an example, PTSOs in Quadrant I are exclusively focusing on these highly standardized efforts, and even in Quadrants II and III where PTSOs are demonstrating a higher commitment to campaign-based programs over operational business practices, or vice versa, there appears to be an ongoing commitment to these core efforts. Next, PTSOs in Quadrant II appear to be more active in community volunteering (i.e., another campaign-based program category), while PTSOs in Quadrant III appear to be more active across operational business practices outside of the core efforts relating to materials and resources, and energy and atmosphere. Finally, PTSOs in Quadrant IV appear to be balancing their commitment to both operational business practices and campaign-based programs.



**Table 4***CER Implementation by Category and Quadrant*

CER Form	CER Category	Quad. I (n=42)		Quad. II (n=26)		Quad. III (n=28)		Quad. IV (n=44)	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Operational Business Practices	Materials and Resources	33	79	17	65	28	100	44	100
	Energy and Atmosphere	23	55	16	62	27	96	43	98
	Location and Transportation	11	26	10	38	20	71	31	70
	Water Efficiency	6	14	3	12	24	86	35	80
	Indoor Environmental Quality	6	14	3	12	15	54	29	66
	Sustainable Sites	3	7	0	0	14	50	27	61
Campaign-based Programs	Corporate Social Marketing	26	62	26	100	20	71	43	98
	Community Volunteering	8	19	23	88	2	7	39	89
	Corporate Philanthropy	2	5	6	23	1	4	11	25
	Cause-related Marketing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Cause Promotion	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

## Discussion

The analysis supports Trendafilova and colleagues' (2013) claim that CER in professional sport is varied. Specifically, there is evidence of majority PTSO involvement in CER across the categories of materials and resources, corporate social marketing, energy and atmosphere, community volunteering, and location and transportation, which is set against very low or nonexistent involvement in CER across the categories of corporate philanthropy, cause-related marketing, and cause promotion. Arguably, for the CER categories with low or no implementation, adoption of related programs has yet to reach a diffusion "tipping point" (i.e., 10–25% of system members) that would seemingly trigger rapid adoption (Rogers, 1995). Therefore, potential exists for PTSOs to innovate new programs in these categories.

Looking deeper at the data, an increasingly standardized approach to CER implementation across materials and resources, energy and atmosphere, and corporate social marketing exists. Arguably, the standardization of CER within the categories of materials and resources, and energy and atmosphere reifies previous work that describes such efforts (i.e., recycling and energy reduction) as straightforward low-intensity, high-visibility starting points (McCullough, Pfahl, & Nguyen, 2016). Similarly, a majority of PTSOs are hosting green-themed games, and, thus, exposing fans to highly visible campaigns that seek to improve the environment. Yet, within these highly standardized categories are a number of activities that Trendafilova and colleagues (2013) refer to as larger scale integrated activities (e.g., solar and wind power, using recycled content in construction/renovation projects). Evidence of gateway activities including more integrated, operational business practices supports the notion that advances in green building design capabilities (Belson, 2018) are active in changing what the sport industry considers as legitimate "low-hanging fruit."

Finally, the results suggest PTSOs move from CER awareness to knowledge through either an operational or campaign-based focus, which becomes the “known area” of “advanced knowledge” (McCullough et al., 2016, p. 12). Specifically, some PTSOs appear to leverage their commitment to corporate social marketing to enter in to community volunteering efforts (i.e., another campaign-based program). Alternatively, some PTSOs appear to move from a commitment to materials and resources, and energy and atmosphere-related CER activities to a more holistic approach that includes activities under location and transportation, water efficiency, sustainable sites, and indoor environmental quality categories. The internal management of resources dedicated toward CER is a likely explanation for this form-specific progression. For example, responsibility for CER often sits within different departments (or, in the case of third-party operated facilities, different organizations), which creates the potential for silos to exist that incubate knowledge.

### Practical Implications

Three key implications for practitioners exist. First, the scarcity of cause-related marketing and cause promotion efforts presents an opportunity for PTSOs to innovate new programs. A look to other sectors points to the pervasiveness of cause-related marketing efforts (Aghakhani, Carvalho, & Cunningham, 2018), and the salience of this tactic is replicated in the academic literature (Guerreiro, Rita, & Trigueiros, 2016). Antecedents to campaign-based CER programs are predicated on the influence of social stakeholders like environmental interest groups (Dögl & Behnam, 2015). As an example, since 1985, outdoor wear brand Patagonia has donated 1% of its total annual sales to grassroots environmental groups (Rogers, 2018). However, best practice guidance for cause-related marketing includes some common key points, which include: the cause is related in some way to the brand, the partnership extends beyond the contribution of money (from sales) to the exchange of time and expertise, and the campaign involves multiple media channels (i.e., both social and earned media) (Smith, 2016).

Second, Cilletti and colleagues (2010) suggest there is an opportunity for PTSOs to improve the effectiveness of their CSR communication efforts. One way to improve effectiveness is for sports to follow in the footsteps of the NHL in establishing a league-wide sustainability report. A more standardized approach to CER across a number of categories presents an opportunity for leagues in other sports to play a lead role in celebrating this success collectively. To this end, Johnson and Ali (2018) recommend “we must be willing to critically explore how sports organizations and leagues are leveraging changes to their operational processes to construct themselves as green leaders” (p. 56).

Third, we suggest a key role for senior leaders in recognizing and leveraging success from one form of CER to then be used as a catalyst for exploring opportunities in the other form. Interestingly, a number of new CSR-specific director-level positions are emerging in PTSOs whom likely possess the authority to ad-

dress such imbalances. For example, the Charlotte Hornets hired a Director of CSR in December 2016, and the Atlanta Hawks hired a Senior Manager of CSR in December 2017. The CER typology presented in this paper could serve as a simple reference point for senior leaders to understand both where the organization's areas of advanced knowledge and knowledge deficiencies exist. Similarly, the CER typology could present an opportunity for PTSOs to evaluate their CER efforts against their peers by offering a means to differentiate efforts at a category level instead of comparing individual activities, which is arguably where the diversity of effort exists.

### Conclusion

The movement of PTSOs toward CER standardization in certain categories of operational business practices and campaign-based programs challenges the notion that environmental efforts will continue to be varied as teams and leagues realize their unique resources and culture (Trendafilova et al., 2013). This research supports the notion that CER is becoming a point of parity within professional sport, and how PTSOs are successfully increasing their awareness, knowledge, and understanding of environmental issues (Casper & Pfahl, 2015).

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