

Sports Branding – A Complex Process

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Abstract

"Sports and entertainment have been convergent ever since the dawn of capitalism" (Carter, 2010, p. 26). From this point of view, throughout the years, sports stakeholders and every person involved in sports activities understood the necessity of promoting sports as a social phenomenon. However, the evolution of sports branding, the complexity of the process of sports branding has evolved and today consists rather in promoting each part of the sports process.

Therefore, the present article aims to highlight the sum of processes, which stand behind sports branding. Thus, sports branding is a concept that can be analysed through different perspectives such as product branding, personal branding, corporate branding, place branding and last but not least events branding. All these concepts are not convergent but rather seek to explain different areas finding practical application in sports as well as in other fields of activity.

Key words: sports branding, product branding, personal branding, corporate branding, re-branding
J.E.L. classification: M31, M39, Z20, Z29

1. Introduction

Throughout the past 20 years, the process of branding has had the same path: research, developing a strategy, design, positioning and communication through different channels depending on the strategy (Cortsen, 2016, p. 35). The only significant change regarding branding was probably the change that occurred regarding the channel of communication (due to the evolution of digitalization and online environment). On the long term, this involves the shift of focus from campaigns created around a single creative idea to campaigns that identify more ingenious and attractive ways to engage consumers in active ways. Thus, one of the main components of branding is communication, because it not only reflects the creativity of the process but also it acts like a differentiation factor. Because of this, sports organizations have adapted their communication, many of them developing their own media channels, communicating their progress in real time.

Sports, or more precisely all the elements that compose it, must adapt to the modern era, and its rigours that come along with the necessity of commercial success, so therefore the success of sports is reflected on the success of each organization that is involved in the process and of each component of that organization.

2. Theoretical background

The present article aims to underline the importance of concepts such as: **brands and branding** as a process. The key understanding of branding as a process lies mainly in Wally Ollins view over this process. However, over the years several definitions have emerged, underlining the importance of understanding the different types of branding. Therefore concepts such as **1) product branding; 2) personal branding; 3) corporate branding;** will be explained in the following article. There needs to be a clear understanding of the fact that these concepts have a general appliance, however the present article has a theoretical approach over the importance of understanding how this concepts can work in the world of sports. Finally, the concept of **re-branding** as a process will also be explained from both a general view and an applied view in the field of sports.

3. Product branding in sports

Product branding is understood as being the way in which a product interacts with its consumers through its design, its logo and message. If done properly, following some basic principles, sports branding can be sustained in time because it creates a powerful connection between product and consumer throughout their lives. The greatest challenge is given by the possibility in which the message is transmitted to consumers. The message must start from branding idea and this idea often comes as an answer to a set of questions that are carefully selected and addressed. The structure of the questions is aimed at (Adamson, 2010, p.41):

- a) Target audience;
- b) Competition;
- c) Ways of succeeding on the market.

Product branding was easier to achieve when there were no websites, smart phones, interactive games or social networking. Product branding strategies that are developed today aim at multiple platforms. Positioning product branding must capture the main attributes, benefits and values of the brand.

When we refer to sports and product branding, the word "*product*" is referred firstly to sports itself as being the product of which we refer to. In this sense, there can be given a number of examples of sports products that are on an expansion mission such as: women's football, cycling, golf, swimming etc. These sports have had major developments in the last 10 years.

A distinction between sports product branding and the branding of sports products must be made due to the fact that the last one represents a way through which sports organizations choose to communicate their brand, their corporate brand, by placing it on different products. It can also represent a partnership between a sports product manufacture and sports organization, a partnership that both agree on and decide to develop and promote.

Thus, coming back to product branding of sports, the organizational support of the sports federation must be taken into consideration. Both sports leadership (referring to the central organization that manages a certain sports branch) and the affiliated members of a sporting federation must realize the fact that their actions can lead to the increase or decrease of the popularity of sports. That is why it is mandatory that the decision factors must choose their target audience, their possible competition regarding target audience and make sure that their sport is perceived firstly as a recreation activity that fills in ones spare time to the detriment of competitors.

The way of transmitting the benefits of practicing certain sport becomes thus the main way on which decision makers must focus their attention. If the benefits of practicing certain sport are being well transmitted to an individual being convinced to practice the sport before watching its professional events, it is fair to say that the chances of that certain sport to grow on the market would be significantly increased, thus finally leading to the commercial success of professional events as well. Therefore, the success of a professional sport is given firstly by the promotion of amateur sport, and a good example in this way is given by the high numbers regarding the number of amateurs playing football. In a study made by the International Football Federation (FIFA) numbers reveal that in Brazil and Germany the number of amateurs football players is over 15 million amateur players, which also leads to the highest number of professional participants (Germany and Brazil having the highest number of professional football players from both South America and Europe).

In the process of product branding of a certain sport, or all sports generally, an important amount of support can be offered by local and central public authorities that can help increase the popularity and the identification of a certain nation with a certain sport. It can also financially support the developing of infrastructure and the number of variables that can assure the success of sports. On the flipside of the coin, they can also negatively influence the process by means of stopping the sports organizations effort to brand its activity.

4. Personal branding in sports

Mostly understood as being a perception regarding individuals, build on the interactions that consumers try to have with the athlete, personal branding can change in both positive and negative ways due to the athletes actions, his/hers conduct playing a huge part in the way she/he is perceived. (Montoya & Vandehey, 2009, p.51).

In sports, an important part of one's personal branding is being played by his/hers performances. But it is not a general rule, many athletes having proved that their success when it comes to the idea that marketing can transcend their performances in sports, proving that even if/when you're not at your top performance you can still have your own brand that can have a huge financial impact (mostly to themselves but also to the teams where they played (if the case)): David Beckham, Shaquille O'Neal, Maria Sharapova, Kimi Räikkönen, Kobe Bryant and many more.

The real challenge of a particular individual is to offer the full experience in sport.

Willingly or not, many athletes offer their fans a full experience, meaning that they manage to transmit a branding idea and then keep and further develop their fan base by becoming a sports icon. It is usually the case of athletes that practice mostly individual sports (Roger Federer, Conor McGregor, Floyd Mayweather, Manny Pacquiao, Tiger Woods etc.). This is not a general rule, there are cases of athletes who's success in team sports has made them also famous and helped them create their own individual brand (Michael Jordan – Air Jordan brand, Cristiano Ronaldo – CR7 brand etc.)

Each individual athlete branding process begins from a branding idea that stands behind him, some choosing to brand their sports success (by simply branding their name/ initials, Jordan, CR7, Tiger Woods TW, Roger Federer RF), others their lifestyle (Floyd Mayweather – TMT, Conor McGregor – The Notorious, The Mac Life etc.).

They key concepts behind communicating the personal brand of an athlete combine sports and entertainment. It can feature a large number of promotion materials such as:

- presenting the athlete in its natural environment, with him either performing or training;
- presenting the athletes opinions, values, history, by either directly interviewing him or indirectly presenting him (by interviewing his entourage, family, training partners or coaches)
- Inside access to his/hers lifestyle
- presenting his/hers fashion choices etc.

In some cases, due to the intense promotion of an athlete, members of his entourage can also become famous and develop their own brand. It is usually the case of their coaches. Some sports, like boxing, MMA or Jiu Jitsu have given their fan base a high number of famous coaches, like Floyd Mayweather Sr., Freddie Roach, John Danaher, John Kavanagh, The Gracie Family members, coaches that although they created their own brand while being associated with a world champion, later on went on to train and develop other champions or simply benefiting from their own personal brand.

Thus communicating represents a key part of personal branding.

5. Corporate branding in sports

Corporate branding refers to the practice of developing and promoting the brand of a corporate entity, using its brand name as opposed to promoting individual products or services. It is a way broader concept that product branding, having an impact on its stakeholders, on the whole way the products, the services, the identity, the organizational culture are designed, promoted and evaluated. (Tudor, 2014, p.11)

Some consider that "*branding should focus firstly on building a positive image of the brand itself within the consumer range (firstly through advertising), and only afterwards on offering a positive experience*". (Fisher-Buttinger & Vallaster, 2010. p.42)

Developing corporate branding in sports might be one of the most complex processes if we look at the complexity of international business process in sport. If "*The Olympics reflect international business at its most intense*" (Griffin & Pustay, 2011, p.8), then sports corporate branding might be one of the biggest challenges in terms of developing but mostly communicating the sports corporate brand. It involves strategic planning regarding social responsibility, developing good

commercial relationships with sponsors (both parties having the need of a strategic common goal), and last but not least, creating a brand capital (Cortsen, 2014, p.24). All this means that corporate branding exceeds the simple understanding in which branding is the developing of a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (Shank, 2009, p.51)

Corporate sports branding must take into consideration a series of variables, that exceed the general interpretation of a symbol, logo etc. Yes, logos and symbols do matter, but they represent a small part of the process. Sports organization might change their logos, but what does truly matter when it comes to sports branding is the brand experience, the atmosphere that a sports organization can offer to its public whether we refer to sport clubs or generally to a major sports competition that's being organized by a one or more major association/s.

If we refer to sport clubs, there are many instruments that help create a unique brand experience such as: fan-clubs, charts, foundations, and charity, own media channels, museums, books, DVD's, restaurants/coffee shops, club shops, social media etc. All these are platforms through which clubs can create and offer their own brand experience.

Most of the sports clubs try to keep their branding identity close to the communities for whom they were created, their local communities, and thus the corporate branding process is very close related to the place branding process. The image of the club becomes an identity that has already raised a loyal capital of public among the local ones, and wishes to promote that identity nationally/regionally/globally.

By representing a local community, a sport club develops rivalries with other local communities and their clubs as well. There are many cases of such different types of rivalries in the entire sport world, but if we refer strictly to football, such examples could be classified by the idea that is promoted such as:

1) Promotion of local independence desires of the local community (in Spain: Barcelona FC, Athletic Club Bilbao; in Brazil: Grêmio Foot-Ball Porto Alegrense)

2) Promotion of a deep local origin that is opposed to the capital cities of certain countries (SSC Napoli, Olympique de Marseille etc.)

3) Promotion of local rivalries that globally identify both clubs: (Spain: Betis Sevilla vs. FC Sevilla, Real Madrid vs. Club Atlético de Madrid, Germany: Borussia Dortmund vs Schalke 04, Italy: AS Roma vs. SS Lazio, Inter Milan vs. AC Milan)

4) Promotion of a local identity of a community recognized worldwide (Liverpool FC as „scouses”, Newcastle United FC fans as „geordies”, FC Bayern Munchen fans as „bavarians” etc.)

5) Promotion of different local rivalries between the upper and the lower classes (Argentina: Club Atlético River Plate vs. Club Atlético Boca Juniors. River Plate fans are called *Los Millonarios*, having its headquarters in the Núñez neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, a wealthy part of the city, while Boca Juniors were founded by poor Italian and Greek immigrants living in the poor neighbourhood called La Boca.

6) Promotion of different rivalries between different ethnicities (France: Corsica derby, between Ajaccio and SC Bastia. Ajaccio fans represent the Italian community living in Corsica, while Bastia fans represent the French community living on (in?) the island)

Place branding also helps the growth of sports organizations, sports arena and sporting events being often promoted as tourism destinations.

A branding strategy implies certain mandatory stages, but every author has its own opinion regarding these stages:

In one opinion (Olins, 2009, p.55), the branding process has 4 stages:

Stage 1: Research, analysis, recommendations;

Stage 2: Developing the brand idea (image and spirit);

Stage 3: Release and presentation (communicating the vision within the organization and also externally)

Stage 4: Implementation (effective achievement)

In another opinion (Adamson, 2010, p.76) there are 5 main stages of branding:

Stage 1: Developing the brand idea after a prior research within and outside the organization;

Stage 2: Extracting the essence of the idea in order to achieve a strategic communication plan;

Stage 3: Choosing the brand name;

Stage 4: Choosing the branding signals that will be transmitted:

- Brand name, colours, slogan, music and all communications related to the marketing process
- Brand design, product functionality, and design
- Brand outlets, online experiences
- The behaviour of people inside the organization
- The services provided by a brand are a signal regarding everything that is felt in connection with the brand

Stage 5: The actual communication;

As far as sports clubs are concerned, if the branding process has already been carried out, usually sports clubs are faced with the re-branding process. The re-branding of a company is defined as "that practice whereby not a representative name is created, but a different position in the minds of stakeholders as well as consumers and a new identity distinct from that of competitors." (Juntunen & Saraniemi, 2009, p.57).

Re-branding is required when (Tudor, 2014, p.44):

- The brand has a confused or non-existent image;
- The company wants a change in the way it approaches the promotion of products and services;
- The company changes its identity through various changes at the shareholder level;
- The company's image is altered due to management errors;
- The company goes into a new business and its current position on the market is no longer adequate;
- A new, possibly very strong competitor, targets the same market;
- The competition has sabotaged the company's current brand, turning it into an inefficient mechanism;
- The organizational culture is renewed;
- The company wants to broaden the scope of the current brand, but its position on the market does not allow this;

The re-branding process of a corporation can involve up to seven main phases and includes many internal and external actors (Juntunen & Saraniemi, 2009, p.42):

Phase 1: Release - is the first phase of the process of identifying the strength behind the need to change the existing brand;

Phase 2: Analysis and decision-making - includes an analysis of the current situation and the reasons that brought the company at this stage, as well as an analysis of the market, competitors and possible alternatives.

Phase 3: Planning - it's seen as a broad phase that involves a plan to create a new brand of the company.

Phase 4: Preparation - consists of preparing plans for testing and launching the new brand.

Phase 5: Launching - involves communicating the new company brand first to stakeholders in the company, as well as to employees, and then to the general public.

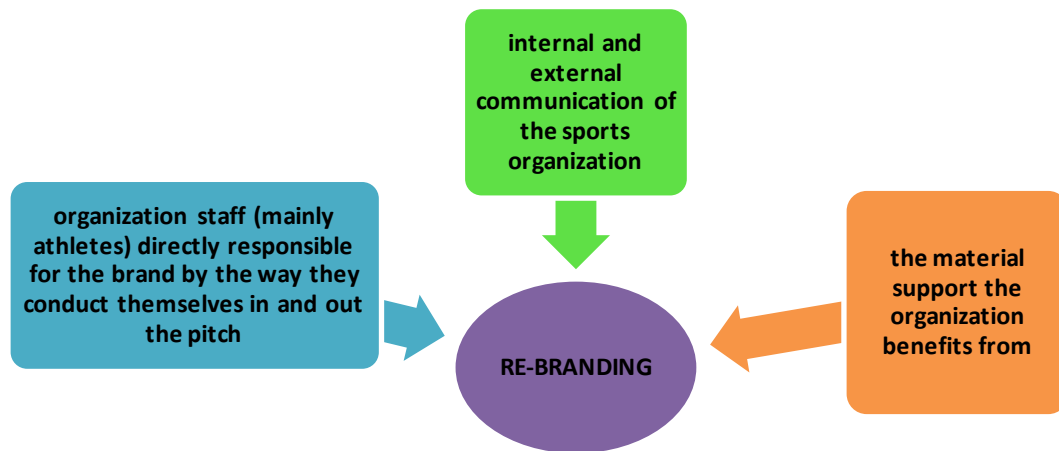
Phase 6: Evaluation - Includes measuring the success or failure of the re-branding process. Although a difficult process, it must be related to the original purpose

Phase 7: Continuation - Requires the necessary measures following the final assessment to achieve the initial promises regarding the brand.

Applying these principles to sports, we can understand that sports organizations are periodically choosing to revive their existing brands through a variety of changes in the means by which they communicate their brands to their consumers, whether they are annually changing their sports equipment kits, the logo, whether they come with new promotional products, new destinations for promotional tournaments, new charity actions, etc. All of this is part of a permanent re-branding process through which clubs expand their fan base and help promote the product brand of their sport.

If we were to synthesize we could say that there are 3 decisive factors in the sport re-branding process, namely:

Figure no.1. The rebranding process



Source: Elaborated based on previously provided data

Last but not least, the importance of the platforms chosen for the communication of this process, namely the means of online communication, must not be forgotten. Each sports organization must be active in promoting their brand online, through social networks (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube), micro-blogs (Twitter), or different search engines and applications.

6. Conclusions

The re-branding process actively and permanently contributes to the ongoing life of sporting organizations, regardless of the form of the sporting entity or the sport itself.

The branding process has different manifestations, different points of view regarding its components and the way we apply it, but there are some key facts that can be found in all visions of this concept. The first is that at the basis of the process is a brand idea, representative, whether we refer to a sport, a person or an organization. The brand idea differentiates from competitors and is at the basis of the choices of which branding signals need to be transmitted.

As far as the re-branding process is concerned, it should be seen from two perspectives:

- The first one according to which it refers to the corporate visual identity;
- The second one according to which it refers to the internal and external communication process of the organization;

In the context of sports globalization, it is very important to understand how the branding / re-branding process influences the evolution of sports as a social activity, due to the fact that the way in which sporting organizations choose to promote themselves as well as the sport that they represent actively contributes to their commercial evolution and the evolution of the sport itself.

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