Building a Sport Club Brand Following a Franchise Failure: Third and Long

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It is well documented that corporate image has a significant impact on business success (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Kowalczyk & Pawlish, 2002; Pope & Voges, 2000). Furthermore, it is established that brand equity is a key marketing concept towards building a successful business when understood and employed favorably (Aaker, 1991; Gladden, Milne & Sutton, 1998). Since corporate image and brand equity commence concurrent to the birth of an organization, launching a new business enterprise has immediate and potentially lasting influences on the target audience (Schultz & De Chernatony, 2002). Some contend that an organization’s image is one of the most valued and important assets it can build (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007). For sport organizations, building brand and the emotional attachments of consumers are critical features towards establishing fan affinity in the marketplace (O'Reilly & Seguin, 2009). Although much has been written in the extant sport management literature detailing how to build a positive image and brand, there is a dearth of literature examining what happens when a professional sport franchise comes back to a city where it has had previous failures?

While such occurrences are rare, there are examples from various professional sport leagues in North America (e.g., Winnipeg Jets in the National Hockey League, Charlotte Bobcats in National Basketball League, Houston Texans in National Football League, Montreal Alouettes in Canadian Football League) where franchises have returned to the city they previously departed. In these cases, the new franchise may be positively and/or negatively affected by the previously failed attempts.

This research study explores the particular situation of a professional sport franchise’s attempt to come back to a city despite two previously failed efforts (i.e., 1996 and 2005) to be sustainable. The study examines if there is a lingering effect of past failures on the franchise trying to (re)establish itself in the market in terms of corporate image and brand equity. In addition, the study seeks to understand what stakeholders believe to be key marketing aspects for the new franchise to achieve a more sustainable brand within the city.

To conduct the study, a single embedded case study design was chosen. First, archival materials were collected in an effort to inform the research, describe the context and to include possible questions thought relevant to ask within the semi-structured interviews that followed. Various media forms were collected and analyzed such as newspaper articles from local and national newspapers, websites from governments, fan groups and the organization, and documents detailing the history of the two previously failed franchises. Next, twenty-one interviews with various stakeholders (e.g., consumers, government officials, franchise owners, lobby groups, amateur football organizations etc.) were completed, transcribed verbatim and analyzed. Three types of codes were generated through the analysis of the qualitative data: open codes, axial codes and selective codes. These codes ultimately produced emergent themes.

Four major themes were identified through the coding process: 1) Embracing the Football Tradition; 2) Improving the Sport Facility; 3) Forming a New Identity; and 4) Communicating the Brand to build Awareness. The results provide significant information about the perception of the future franchise in the city and the important historical remnants of the previous franchises. Ultimately, findings demonstrated that stakeholders held both favorable and negative images of the previous franchise efforts. Thus, findings highlight the importance of embracing certain aspects of the history while building a new, modern and refreshed brand that can move on from the past. The presentation will further discuss the findings in relation to corporate image and brand equity theory.
References


