Corporate Social Responsibility in Sport

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Marketing
Saturday, June 6, 2015
60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop
Abstract 2015-224 11:05 AM
(Joliet)

Overview of the Field
Within the global debate surrounding pro-social development, environmental citizenship, and corporate sustainability, the corporate social responsibilities (CSR) of professional sports organizations have received significant attention from scholars, sport managers, sport sponsors, fans, and policy-makers. However, while approaches to CSR are reaching mature levels in some industries, it was only recently that professional sport started to embrace the concept for its own specific means (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Breitbarth & Harris, 2008).

In particular, the Journal of Sport Management was the first academic outlet in sport to holistically embrace the topic via the special issue “Corporate Social Responsibility in Sport” (JSM, 2009, Volume 23, Issue 6). The guest editors argued that “… sport is unique for being both a social and an economic institution, and as such, well-suited to be interpreted by the business principles and practices of CSR” (Bradish & Cronin, 2009, p. 692). More recently, The Handbook of Sport and Corporate Social Responsibility by Paramio, Babiak, and Walters (2013) provided a first attempt to frame the uptick of the topic within academia and industry by bridging the sport management and CSR academic fields.

To date, research evidence has suggested that the CSR debate still warrants consideration by sport managers and administrators. Arguably, CSR-oriented organizational strategies and activities facilitate sport organization competitiveness, and are less dependent on short-term sport performance. As such, the practice is concerned less with what kind of goals are achieved (e.g., sporting success, profits), but how the initiatives are achieved and received by the masses. For example, policies and ethics have become key values under close scrutiny especially from commercial and media partners, political actors, and fans, because sport (in general) must preserve both the commercial and the symbolic qualities of the varied sporting products.

Rationale for Roundtable at 2015 NASSM Conference
The roundtable discussion will provide an opportunity to summarize and review empirical, conceptual, and methodological developments in the field of CSR and sport over the past decade. Moreover, the panelists will reflect on the “research calls” published in the 2009 Journal of Sport Management special issue on CSR. It is believed that both the ‘state of the union’ presented by the panelists, who are renowned scholars in the field, and the discussion amongst participants will lead to a substantial contribution and avenues for the future direction of CSR research. Additionally, the session is expected to unite scholars in better bridging the theory-practice divide for CSR-based evaluations. Prior NASSM conferences have attracted a large number of papers directly relating to the topic of the proposed roundtable. However, those contributions and the respective authors were scattered around the program. The roundtable will provide an essential forum to discuss the future of CSR-related scholarship, and inspire discussion regarding the relevance of the topic for teaching and educational delivery methods (e.g., case studies). Given the development of the field since the late 2000s, the panelists will provide a ‘state of the art’ overview on CSR in sport. Based on a substantial amount of articles on the topic of CSR in sport from, mainly, North America, Europe and Australasia, they trace major developments, emerging issues and point out significant gaps on theoretical, contextual and methodological levels. Combined, they have a substantial track record of researching, publishing, presenting and advising about CSR in sport on a global scale. The following themes will serve as a foundation to the discussion:
Developing Strategic CSR Partnerships. Many professional teams and international governing bodies have leveraged sport’s broad appeal by forming strategic partnerships with public or private interests having aligned CSR values and objectives. In some cases, these partnerships blur the line between shared social initiatives and corporate sponsorships, sometimes attracting criticism from a skeptical public (Kellison & Mondello, 2012). This component of the roundtable will explore the formation of public and private partnerships with sport CSR initiatives. At the heart of this discussion will be (1) the unique advantages that strategic partnerships provide and (2) the challenges CSR partners face when deploying joint programming, and (3) how to implement an effective CSR program. Through developing a strategic CSR approach, sports organizations can have a stronger positive impact on the community, while also realizing greater benefits for themselves (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). As the literature on sport and CSR continues to grow, we need to expand our knowledge around CSR approaches that are not just strategic, but authentic, genuine, and ultimately sustainable in the context of sport. It is proposed we can develop more effective CSR programming if we gain a better understanding of the organizational processes, practices, and structures that support strategic and authentic CSR in sport, from the decision-making phase through execution.

Regional and Cultural Differences in CSR in Sport. Convergence of business behavior and consumer attitudes is often assumed in the context of internationalization. For example, it is argued that within the European region, there is substantial pressure for cross-national convergence among CSR activity (De Schutter, 2008). However, the diversity in socio-political-economic-cultural context make it necessary for sport researchers and managers to consider such context in order to embrace a meaningful and effective approach to CSR within the their region(s). For example, while the US and UK are considered to traditionally follow an ‘explicit’ understanding of CSR (e.g. philanthropy), central European countries have historically embraced a more ‘implicit’ approach (e.g. stakeholder integration). Comparative research of (sport) consumer responses to similar CSR initiatives in various context are now available and question the appropriateness and effectiveness of widespread ‘managerial mimicking’ in respect to social-/community-focused activities of (professional) sports organizations worldwide (e.g. European basketball clubs adapting NBA’s CSR activities).

CSR Evaluations: Social and Environmental Concerns. Empirical research on sport organization CSR and ESR strategies have been encumbered, due to a lack of outcome assessments and impact studies. This gap has been particularly pronounced when considering how both CSR and ESR practices have influenced the intended beneficiaries, the organization (in general), and the environment. This is considered a problematic gap in the literature since many CSR and ESR programs are supported through stakeholder investments, corporate partnerships, and grants (local, state, and federal). To assuage this concern, and build on the existing scholarship, this roundtable aspect will focus on social and environmental program evaluations. The main argument is that while many organizations may lack the resources and acumen needed to conduct proper evaluations, the need is critical for both ROI calculations and the additional social “paybacks” of the initiatives. This discussion will be centered on two current social program evaluations (i.e., “Magic Bus” and “Move-It”), and the researchers’ ongoing ESR agenda focused on benchmarking the environmental strategies of Public Assembly Facilities.

Proposed Outline
• Introduction (7 min): CSR in sport - key developments and issues
• Input (10 min presentation each) followed by critique/discussion (5 min each)
  o Topic 1: Strategic CSR partnerships with public and private interests
  o Topic 2: Cultural and regional differences in CSR in sport
  o Topic 3: CSR evaluations - social and environmental concerns
• Wrap-up (8 min)

References


