

Marketization of football fan relationships in Europe: appetite, indifference or resistance?

Guillaume BODETⁱ, Loughborough University, Ashby Road, LE11 3TU, Loughborough, UK; phone: +44 (0)1509 226369 ; Fax: +44 (0)1509 226301 ; G.S.P.Bodet@lboro.ac.uk

James A. KENYON, Loughborough University, Ashby Road, LE11 3TU, Loughborough, UK; Phone: +44 (0)1509 228815; Fax: +44 (0)1509 226301; J.A.Kenyon@lboro.ac.uk

Alain FERRAND, CEREGE, University of Poitiers (France), IAE, 20 Rue Guillaume VII Le Troubadour, BP 639, 86022 Poitiers Cedex, France ; Phone : + 33 (0)5 49 45 44 89, Fax : +33 05 49 45 44 90 ; alain.ferrand@univ-poitiers.fr

Acknowledgements: the authors would like to thank UEFA for supporting this study through the UEFA Research Grant Programme, Noel Mooney for his help and advices, Edvinas Eimontas for his support to the project, and Andrius Pacevičius and Amalya Grigoryan for their valuable contribution to the data collection process. This project was funded by UEFA but neither the results nor the commentaries are UEFA's responsibility and remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

Abstract

Research question

Although relationship marketing and customer relationship management (CRM) have been recommended and increasingly used in sport settings to improve relationships between sport organisations and their fans (Adamson et al., 2006; Ferrand & McCarthy, 2009), very little is known about the types of relationships fans want and the marketing management tools used to manage these relationships, they tolerate, praise or criticize. What constitutes a relationship, and especially a good relationship, is quite subjective and depends on individuals and marketplaces. Consequently, the overall aim of this study was to identify the types of relationship fans want to establish with their national associations in the context of European football. The research objectives were fourfold and aimed (1) to define what kind of relationships fans, with different levels of commitment and different cultures in Europe, expect to have with their national football associations and team; (2) to identify, for each category of fans, the factors that can make a relationship be perceived as positive and successful; (3) to identify and distinguish the relationship management practices which are desired by fans from those which are criticised; and, (4) to identify the most relevant factors and management practices to improve sport fans-organisations relationships.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was adopted given the little amount of specific information regarding sport fans' relationships with their national associations and their team. Based on UEFA's membership, the countries of Armenia, England and Lithuania and were selected due to their differences in terms of geographical location, performance of their national team, the strength of their football domestic league and overall economic development; they were chosen for their diversity and not for their representativeness. For Armenia and Lithuania, two focus groups were conducted with national teams' die-hard fans (11 and 8 fans respectively) and national teams' regular and casual fans (11 and 8 fans respectively). Casual and die-hard fans were distinguished using Tapp & Clowes' (2002) criteria. To avoid having

focus groups cannibalised with discussions about clubs, individual interviews were chosen in England and concerned 6 casual and regular fans and 4 die-hard fans. The questions asked during the focus groups and individual interviews were developed around the four objectives of the study plus a section dealing with relationships with football clubs when relevant.

Findings

From an overall perspective, not all fans look for personal, regular and long-term relationships with their national team or football association, which is in contradiction with one of the basic assumptions of relationship marketing (Harris and Ogbonna, 2008). Several factors can be identified to explain this finding and the existence of a strong relationship with a professional football club, personal characteristics such as time, or little appetite for committed relationships can be put forward. Information, perceived image, identification, emotional bonds and trust were also found to significantly influence fans' commitment in the relationship which is in line with the Business-to-Business literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Also, elements of good governance (transparency, clarity) were found to be important factors but not for all fans and all countries. Despite identifying interesting findings, the qualitative nature of this study does not allow for generalisations within the countries investigated and beyond, and a following quantitative study will be needed to do so.

ⁱ Contact author