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Destination Marketing Using a Sport

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Abstract

This case showcases how destination marketing and sports marketing can be strategically integrated to serve as a focussed destination marketing approach. The case focuses on how a destination, Fujairah, one of the seven emirates of the UAE, marketed itself using a global sport, the 8-Ball World Pool Championship. The case shows the stages from inception till execution of the whole event. Alongside, it demonstrates how 'Internal Marketing' at a community level played a role in its success. It also shows how the characteristics and nature of the sponsors and their support brought a positive snow ball effect on the final outcome.

Introduction

Countries across the world are constantly evolving economically, socially, and culturally and are going to great length to exploit their resources and market themselves using well thought out strategic tools and programmes such as tourism (France), investment (China), production excellence (Germany), infrastructure (Japan). Tourism contributes to as much as 9.8% of the world's GDP which amounts to as much as USD 11,381.9 billion as of 2014 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2015). It is credited to 8.4% of the United Arab Emirates' GDP amounting to USD 52,825.2 million (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2015). Tourism has especially become an important source of revenue in the developing countries. It has also become a source of particular interest for the oil producing countries as they seek out alternative options of revenue amidst the slump in oil prices.

In the domain of Tourism, two branches namely sports marketing and sports tourism have attracted global attention of global sports enthusiasts, global sports professionals and direct and indirect stakeholders associated with sports. It is a very challenging but rewarding approach to try and market a destination using sports, especially since it involves the plethora of stakeholders including the community, the Government, the players, the sports bodies, the sponsors and the audience and hence requires great efforts for effective planning and execution to register success. While doing so, a strategic confusion is possible - Is it marketing a destination using a sport or marketing a sport in a destination?

The data and information needed for the study was obtained by way of 6 interviews with the executive members of the World Billiards Tournament organising committee in Fujairah, 4 interviews with players and 5 interviews with Fujairah residents involved with the organising committee .

The Bride of The Arabian Sea

United Arab Emirates, one of the fastest growing countries of the Middle East is comprised of seven 'Emirates' namely, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain. Each emirate has been known for its own unique grandeur. UAE in its growth path has also established itself as a popular vacation destination. The UAE has had a steady Non-Oil GDP growth rate of 4.6% (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2015). The country is ranked

17th on the global competitiveness index (Global Competitiveness Report 2015-2016, 2016). In terms of tourism, the emirate of Dubai has been ranked the 4th most popular global destination, not to mention the emirate of Abu Dhabi ranked as the third most growing destination city. Fujairah, the “Bride” of the Arabian Sea, located in the Eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula is on its way to establish a similar trend.

Fujairah represents 18% of the country’s total land area (Fujairah Statistics Center, 2015). It is the only emirate which is situated completely along the Gulf of Oman, which makes its location a strategic access way to major shipping routes of the world making Fujairah, the world’s top oil bunkering port and hence UAE’s ‘window’ to the globe. Despite this, Fujairah remains to be discovered by the international market and more efforts for creating visibility to the global visitors is called for. Fujairah is bestowed with beautiful beaches, mountains and culture and hence the quiver is full, only to be supported by intensive marketing efforts (Davidson, 2005).

The Emirate’s Promotion - Phases

His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, the Ruler of Fujairah, and His Highness Sheikh Saleh Bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, the Chairman of the Fujairah Department of Industry and Economy and the Chairman of the Fujairah Port, have been committed to making tourism and sports as the key drivers of growth of the emirate (Ditcham, 2009). His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, contemplated the promotion of the emirate in phases. The first phase was aimed at creating and developing awareness and gaining the recognition from the world by communicating about the emirate and its tourism features. The second phase was accomplished through marketing of Cultural Events in the emirate. The third phase was accomplished by marketing the emirate as an ideal destination for Sporting Events.

Phase 1 – Fujairah-An Ideal Tourism Destination

His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, established the Fujairah Tourism and Antiquities Authority in 1997 (Fujairah Tourism and Antiquities Authority, 2007), as the official government body vested with the duty of boosting the emirate’s tourism and promote the emirate internationally. It was responsible for the overseeing the major hotel and resort projects in Fujairah. The Fujairah International Airport, opened in 1987, is the only international airport on the east coast of the country, making its location strategically important to both the cargo and passenger based traffic. Housing prestigious and upscale luxury resorts such as the Le Meridien Al Aqah beach, Hilton Fujairah Resort, Fujairah Rotana Resort & Spa and the likes, the emirate put its active foot into the tourism market. Despite these heavy investments, the emirate still felt wanting in terms of its visibility across the global audience.

Phase 2 – Fujairah-A Melting Pot Of Cultural Events

Apart from the various hotels and spas, cultural events were considered as a strategy to attract tourists. Some of the early attempts included the ‘Fujairah International Mono Drama Festival’ organized in 2002. The success of this festival saw the creation of an official association in charge of it. The year 2009 saw over 92 countries participating in the festival, giving the emirate the exposure it much needed. In addition to the Mono Drama Festival, the emirate also holds ‘Theatre Performances for Youth Festival’, International Folklore Shows and the International Children’s Carnival. Despite the success of these events, a need existed to gain global attention towards the emirate, a unique positioning to catch the eye of the world, which lead to Phase 3

Phase 3 – Fujairah- A Destination To Play, Watch And Sponsor Global Sporting Events

The emirate of Fujairah was attempting to transform itself and gain global presence by using a series of destination marketing strategies. As pointed earlier, the emirate had used hotels, resorts as well as cultural events to promote itself, but now the emirate had to move to a unique positioning. This pursuit led them to organise global sporting events and using these events as a means to gain the global exposure the emirate needed. Some of the early attempts of the emirate to organize global sporting events included the establishment of the Fujairah Marine Club, which organizes water sport events like the Jet Ski Race Heat 5, the Fujairah Classic (A Fishing Tournament) and a Formula Boat Race. Besides the water sports, the emirate also hosts other events like the annual Fujairah International Body Building Festival, a 'blood-less' Bull Fighting Festival and a GCC bicycling competition.

Fujairah's Need for a Global Sport

Though sporting events as mentioned above were organized to attract the international audience, there was still a need to gain the much needed exposure by the emirate. It became evident that what was needed was a sport which was unique and had an international presence, a sport that so far other destinations had not actively endorsed especially in the GCC countries. However, the selection of such a sport was a complicated decision, as it had to be done within the constraints of the emirate's available infrastructure and resources, which was why many sports such as tennis, badminton, soccer and basketball could not be organised in the emirate, as other emirates in the UAE already had the competitive advantage hosting these sports. The emirate then considered Golf but had to take it out of consideration as it lacked the necessary infrastructure. Finally after evaluating all the various options available, 8-Ball Pool was chosen to be the sport as the emirate had both the infrastructure, being the clubs and the resources needed to promote the game and take it to the international level. Fujairah won the contract to host the World 8-Ball Pool Championship after winning the rights to host the same from the World Pool Billiard Association (WPA). Fujairah is the fourth city in the world and the first city in Middle East and Asia to have had the privilege and responsibility of hosting this event. This event put Fujairah on the international map and gave it the exposure it so much wanted.

The World Billiards Tournament Organising Committee in Fujairah

The year 2004 saw the establishment of World Billiards Tournament Organising Committee, which was completely responsible for all the facets of the event year after year. The committee consisted of members from the Fujairah Insurance, Free Zone, Port, Airport and other government bodies.

The World 8-Ball Pool Championship - 2010

The world championship hosted by Fujairah was a grand success with almost 64 world renowned players from across 35 countries participating (Gomes, 2010). The emirate was flooded with spectators from around the world, which included royal dignitaries including the crown prince of Brunei. But organising a successful event as this came with its own challenges and difficulties, but in the end it was how the event was organized and executed that made the magic come to life and which was what the emirate of Fujairah had to offer. Fujairah's intentions in hosting the event were clearly focussed - to put the emirate on the global map for billiards, to make it an international tourist destination and to help promote local players and teams.

Hurdles Along the Way

The 2010 world championship unlike previous tournaments and events faced its own unique challenges, in part, due to the recession. Recession had a snowball effect, adding to the inherent difficulties in organizing the event.

The First major issue was to do with time. Many of the major operations got delayed owing to operational delays resulting in players getting late notifications, which made their confirmations late as well. This in turn resulted in the delay in the visa arrangements, causing the postponement of the flight and hotel room bookings.

Second issue was to do with escalated costs resulting from the delays. The severe time constraints reduced the possibility of evaluating suitable alternative courses of action. Thus, discounts and concessionary pricing in air fare and hotel bookings could not be arranged. Late Visa applications meant additional fees for the urgent visa approvals, badly needed to bring in the international players.

These time constraints gave rise to the third issue, the additional man power that was needed to compensate for the delays, as the number of tasks to be completed was the same but the time available to do was less.

The fourth issue was that of getting the sponsorships needed to cover for all the increased expenses, but that proved to be a difficult task due to the global economic downturn. Previous tournaments conducted in 2008 saw more than 20 sponsors participating, but in 2010 there were no sponsors at all initially. So on the one hand, the costs were increasing and on the other hand the available funding was proving difficult to cover the expenses.

The Fifth issue was that the event that year was being conducted for the first time at the Fujairah Tennis & Country Club, and being an event of this scale, it caused additional operational problems in terms of the preparation and setup. In addition to that it proved difficult to attract international spectators as the competition was posed by other more established indoor games that were scheduled to take place in the club at the same time.

Last but certainly not the least were the managerial and the attitudinal problems that were caused due to the difference of opinions, between the organizers and sponsors.

Capturing the Goal – A Communal Leap

The time available to organise the event was the major constraint and it was slipping fast and had to be addressed. This was a major issue and it was with the help of Emirati volunteers from Fujairah, both boys and girls, some of whom were working professionals, that it was addressed. Apart from this, students from colleges and universities in Fujairah also gave a hand. Put in specific terms, the Fujairah community as a whole took it as their home event and worked towards making it a success. The Emiratis put their dedication, commitment, time and involvement in trying to meet the strict timelines needed to organise the event.

Students from various colleges and universities were approached, which saw a total of 60 students joining hands without any concern of pay. It was Esprit-de-Corps in action. It was the entire Fujairah community working with a direction and a sense of responsibility towards making the event a success in their emirate. In addition to that, the good relations with the hotels, the reputation of the tournament itself and the past successes saw some of the resorts willingly giving discounts even at the last minute. The issue of finding sponsorship was overcome, in part, due to the good relations with the other emirates and in part due to the tournament's reputation. Etisalat's coming on board attracted other sponsors, in spite of the recession and the short 2 week

deadline. In an attempt to cut costs and due to the lack of funds, the price money was decreased from \$200,000 to \$120,000. The Emirate's Government, especially His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, the Ruler of Fujairah, and His Highness Sheikh Saleh Bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, the Chairman of the Fujairah Department of Industry and Economy and the Chairman of the Fujairah Port not only gave their full support but also provided additional funds to bolster the organising effort.

Key Players – The Stakeholders

The Government of Fujairah was the most important stakeholder, followed by the WPA, the main body responsible for the sport worldwide. Other important individual stakeholders included Mr Khaled Al Mazroui, the then General Manager of Fujairah International Airport and Chairman of the Organising Committee and the man in charge of overlooking all strategic decisions concerning the event. Another important individual related to the organising of the event was Mr Ahmad Ibrahim, the official Tournament Director & Promoter and the man responsible for the development of the sport in the region. He is also the first Arab chosen to represent the WPA, which made his role that much more vital. Lastly, Mr Sultan Al Sharaa, the marketing manager of the event, vested with the responsibility of promoting and creating awareness about the tournament.

The Initial Speed Bumps

The biggest difficulty faced during the initial years of the tournament was creating awareness, letting the world know of the tournament and to attract the audience. In a region dominated by soccer, promoting pool required additional marketing efforts and strategies, far from the conventional, to create the awareness about the sport and as such the tournament. The first step was to educate the local crowd about the game itself to generate awareness.

The second challenge was to communicate and position Fujairah in the minds of the global players as a destination of choice for sports. Fujairah was finding it difficult to promote itself for sports when other emirates like Dubai and Abu Dhabi already had a preeminent position on the same. Hence it proved difficult to raise the needed funds for organising an event of such scale. Sponsors argued that the game was not popular and lacked exposure, also that Fujairah being a not so popular destination, the event was better hosted by Dubai.

The Plan

The 2010 tournament was aimed to attract the international audience, especially from the US. The reason for focussing on the American audience was the fact that they represented one of the highest percentages for global travel especially for sports, among other events (Physical Activity Council, 2015). The US especially showed a high percentage of the younger generation taking part in individual sports such as Pool and thus the events such as the World 8-Ball Pool Championship (Physical Activity Council, 2015). The planning for the event had commenced a year in advance in 2009, where the initial design for tournament was established. Numerous meetings took place between the organising and the marketing committees, during which the companies for sponsorships were researched, confirmed and then approached. To determine the players who would be participating, numerous qualifying matches took place around the world to conclude with 64 top players who would qualify for the tournament at Fujairah. Ten spots were registered for the GCC and then one for each of the continents, from where the WPA picked the cream of the crop. The referees for the tournament were handpicked and trained by Michaela

Tabb who was a world renowned player herself. The overall campaign that was finalised for the tournament included a lavish opening ceremony, a Gala Dinner and a Closing ceremony. The opening ceremony that included dance and music performances, showcased the emirate's culture.

Promoting The Event

An event of this scale depended on the sponsors. In order to gain the interest of the sponsors and the audience for a sport that was far from popular in the region, especially for an event of this magnitude, demanded massive marketing efforts. One of the strategic decisions accommodated for that purpose was the change from the existing agency to a new agency as the official marketing consultant for the tournament, expecting a fresh perspective and out of the box thinking to guide the planning and execution of the tournament. In addition to this, an official Marketing committee, PR committee and a Media Centre was established. Unlike previous years, the overall marketing theme was revamped, where it saw outdoor advertising being used extensively. In addition, TV channels such as ESPN, STAR and online presence were also involved.

Funding the Event - Sponsorship

The committee after the evaluation of operational costs and prize money, set a tentative budget of AED 3 million. The number of sponsors thus needed was based on the estimated balance sheet of costs and expenses, a year in advance. Effective research was done to find the sponsors that would be complimentary and who are not competitors. In order to achieve this, each company was well researched, studying their goals and targets and their international presence. The sponsors were split into 3 tiers: the diamond sponsor or the title sponsor, the gold sponsor and the silver sponsor. The 2010 event saw Etisalat, a major telecommunications service provider in the Middle East to be the diamond sponsor, contributing AED 500,000. The major reason for choosing Etisalat to be the title sponsor was its international presence and its affiliation in sponsoring other international events. All the advertising and PR were done in with Etisalat being involved heavily. The 2010 event saw 4 gold sponsors as compared to 7 from the previous event, mainly owing to the recession. Each of the gold sponsors contributed AED 350,000. The Fujairah Country Club provided the complimentary gym, tennis and swimming facilities. The silver sponsors each contributed AED 250,000 and saw the likes of PepsiCo, Crystal Arc and others. PepsiCo, additionally provided the water and drinks throughout the tournament. Despite the impact of the recession and the short time line of 2 weeks, the committee managed to raise funds summing to AED 3 million, thus achieving their goal. Some of the sponsors such as Knightshot and Bronzewick carried on from their past connection to the event. Knightshot was the official pool table provider.

Putting the Word Out - Media

1. Public Relations

Local newspapers including both English and Arabic ones such as Al Khaleej, Gulf News, Al Ittihad and Al Bayan provided the coverage for the entirety of the tournament. Additionally, the international billiards magazine 'Total Sport' also featured the event in its editions. Dubai Sports, a local sports channel aired the entire tournament live. In addition, other local sports channels such as Fujairah sports, Abu Dhabi sports, Al Jazeera sports and Kuwait sports also

aired the tournament but not live. Negotiations were also underway with ESPN to broadcast the event live. Few radio stations such as the Coast FM also gave live updates.

2. Advertising

The event was advertised using 4 different media, Print media, TV, Radio and Outdoor media. Outdoor media across Fujairah and Ras AlKhaimah were extensively employed, including lamp posts, billboards and hoardings across major streets and city areas that showcased the highlights of the event.

3. Online presence

To reach a wider international audience, the tournament was streamed live on the WPA's official website. In addition, social media was also used to reach out and attract audiences.

4. Direct Marketing

The title sponsor Etisalat, sent out AED 300,000 worth text messages to potential spectators, out of their own customer database, free of charge.

Counting the Smiles

After the tournament's successful completion, the committee conducted a series of satisfaction surveys with spectators and sponsors to map their satisfaction, and get their recommendations. Based on the results, it was evident that the spectators were thoroughly satisfied with the experience they got, the sponsors were more than satisfied with the exposure they got. In addition discussions were done with the referees and volunteers to find out potential points of improvements. Discussions also took place among the various committees and the government bodies involved to evaluate their rating of the whole tournament to lay the plans for the next year, incorporating all changes and improvements. Etisalat, which was the title sponsor, delighted with its experience in 2010, went on to be the title sponsor of the tournament for the next 2 years.

The Net Result- Standing at Victory Lane

The emirate has now become synonymous with the World 8-Ball Pool Championship, and the emirate has got the exposure that it much longed for and deserved. All the stakeholders were extremely satisfied and geared for the next year's event. The WPA was so satisfied that it decided to increase the number of players from 64 to 96. The 2010 world championship's success in Fujairah also caught the eyes of other countries who later were interested to bid for the tournament with WPA. The event had made Fujairah the tourist destination it so wanted to be. Both the destination and the sport promoted each other, a complementary success indeed. Today, Fujairah attracts number of tourists from across the world. It has also gone to host other such championships such as the international taekwondo championship, which is held every year in the emirate. The emirate's popularity has only been on the increase, due to which the tourism has also increased. A clear evidence of which is that the emirate had around 4000 hotel rooms and is now increasing 2000 rooms to accommodate the growing tourist influx (Abbas, 2014). The emirate attracted 750,000 people in 2010 which has steadily risen to 1.7 million in 2014 (Abbas, 2014).

Conclusion

The World 8-Ball Pool Championship held at Fujairah would not have been a successful event, without the sheer determination, passion and the well-coordinated efforts of the various committees, the stake holders such as the Fujairah government, the sponsors and the WPA, not to

mention the people and community of Fujairah itself. The success of the 2010 event has only driven the committee to go ahead on its mission to look for new projects and platforms to benefit and promote the emirate.

Questions

1. Did the Sport event promote the destination or the destination the sport?
2. What is Destination Marketing?
3. Who are the major stakeholders that contributed to the success of the campaign?
3. What were the reasons behind the committee's success in organizing the event?
4. What is Internal Marketing?
5. What was the media mix used in promoting the event? Would online media be an effective substitute completely replacing offline media, when used for promoting destinations?
6. What made the 2010 World 8-Ball Pool Championship different from other sporting events?
7. What is sports tourism? What are the different types of sports tourism?

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