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Abstract

The sports industry is an important one; it is estimated to be the 11th largest industry in the United States. Within this industry, individual sports, at both the amateur and professional levels, compete for talented players, supporters, government funding, and sponsorship dollars. It is therefore important for sports to manage their sports brands. We use Lederer and Hill's (2001) brand molecule concept to explain the brand management implications for a professional, national sports team, the Bulldogs, a Sydney-based team in Australia's National Rugby League competition. The brand molecule highlights for the brand manager the positive and negative atoms that comprise and give shape to the overall brand molecule, detailing the potential impact, negative or positive, and relative strength of each.

Keywords

Using, brand, molecule, concept, guide, management, marketing, professional, sports, team

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Abstract

The sports industry is an important one; it is estimated to be the 11th largest industry in the United States. Within this industry, individual sports, at both the amateur and professional levels, compete for talented players, supporters, government funding, and sponsorship dollars. It is therefore important for sports to manage their sports brands. We use Lederer and Hill's (2001) *brand molecule* concept to explain the brand management implications for a professional, national sports team, the *Bulldogs*, a Sydney-based team in Australia's National Rugby League competition. The brand molecule highlights for the brand manager the positive and negative *atoms* that comprise and give shape to the overall brand molecule, detailing the potential impact, negative or positive, and relative strength of each.

Keywords: brand, architecture, community, management

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Introduction

Sport is the 11th largest industry in the United States (Harverson, 1997; Danylchuk *et al.*, 2008) and an important economic and social activity worldwide. Sport extends into many business sectors, such as professional services, venues and events, goods and equipment, manufacturing, retailing, and the media. Mason (1999) recognised two major changes to professional sports, the first relating to competition, the other to geography. Competition has increased as new sports have emerged, or expanded into new geographic regions, and playing seasons have been extended. Competition has also increased from other non-sport forms of entertainment vying for media coverage. Sport no longer requires the spectator's physical attendance; modern communications allow the fan to choose from a variety of sports, and other entertainments, from a variety of locations and media. Sport is big business, but the competition for fans' and sponsors' support is intensifying.

Sport is in the media spotlight. The amount of media scrutiny of sports teams is more than in most businesses. Wolfe, Meenaghan and O'Sullivan (2002 p. 613) identify the 'sports-media nexus' and state "the legitimacy of the sport and the basis of its popularity has arisen almost exclusively from media attention." Sports marketing is becoming increasingly important as it involves not only the marketing of sports, but also, the marketing of non-sports products through sports (Fullerton and Merz, 2008), with the aim of achieving both on-field and commercial success. One marketing approach that might be used to manage the professional sports team is to regard the team as a brand. Organisation-based brand frameworks however, may not be entirely appropriate for a sports team brand as additional complexities need to be considered, including dealing with a diverse range of influential stakeholders over which there is often only limited control. A useful brand framework that considers the complexity of key internal and external relationships is Lederer and Hill's (2001) *brand molecule*.

The Brand Molecule Concept

Lederer and Hill's (2001, p. 126) brand molecule framework is a multi-dimensional map that reveals the relationships among "all the brands that factor into a consumer's decision to buy, whether or not the company owns them". Although applied in their study to beer and motor vehicle brands, the brand molecule concept was developed for general application to brands. Some parallels with the brand molecule can be observed with reference to Erickson and Kushner's (1999) application of network theory to explain the types of relationships which exist within sports markets. The brand molecule concept goes further, however, to not only identify these external relationships but also recognise that they may factor in the mind of the consumer of the sports team brand. This argument suggests that these relationships may contribute to the brand equity of the sports brand.

In Lederer and Hill's (2001) brand molecule, "brands take the form of atoms and are clustered in ways that reflect how customers see them" (Lederer and Hill, 2001 p. 126). The molecule identifies three categories of brands; the *lead brand*, which is central and most influential; the *strategic brand*, which exerts a strong influence over buyers, either blocking competitors or luring new customers; and *support brands* which can help "seal the deal with customers" (Lederer and Hill, 2001 p. 127). The molecule identifies the dimensions of importance,

influence, positioning, connections, and degree of control, to show how the brand might be perceived, and can thus be managed. The brand molecule's creation requires three steps: (1) taking inventory of the brands that influence customers' perceptions and choices; (2) classifying those brands as either *lead*, *strategic*, or *support*; and (3) mapping the molecule's atoms. The authors used a number of data gathering techniques with the prime objective to identify potentially critical brands.

The Research Objective

The goal of this research is not to replicate Lederer and Hill's (2001) research, but to apply their brand molecule framework to guide a proposed study into the brand of a professional sports team. We identify four objectives: (1) to identify the stakeholders who are likely to make up a sports team brand; (2) to show how the actions of stakeholders are constantly changing the structure and image of the sports team brand; (3) to show how an understanding of the sports brand molecule is of major importance for those charged with the tasks of management and marketing a professional sports team; and (4) to consider extant frameworks from the sports marketing literature that might be used to construct such a molecule.

Methodology

The approach taken is to examine the case of one professional sports team, the Sydney Bulldogs. One team is chosen, in keeping with Patton and Appelbaum's (2003 p. 66) argument that the case study researcher "must strategically select a case that is pertinent to the object of study and will allow the subject to be investigated fully". The Bulldogs, formerly known as Canterbury-Bankstown, reflecting the geographic area of Sydney the club drew its players and support, joined the Sydney first-grade Rugby League competition in 1935, and can be described as a 'team of extremes', enjoying the highs of premiership wins (eight times between 1934-2004) to the lows of political and moral scandals and even criminal investigations. It is for these reasons, as will be discussed in the next section, that the Bulldogs were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) for this study.

The first step of *taking inventory* was undertaken to identify which brands were part of the Bulldogs brand molecule. The second step was to show how, over time, the *actions* and *events* of these brands continually change the makeup of the molecule – for better or worse. Data was collected predominantly from a content analysis of a total of 750 news stories from leading Sydney newspapers during 1996- 2009, using the Factiva Database. The search items used related to the Sydney Bulldogs, and included terms such as Bulldogs, Rugby League, and Canterbury Bankstown. The value of newspapers as a source of data is identified by Veal (2006) and Cunneen *et al.* (1989). Denscombe (2003p. 214) advises that the 'press' provides a potentially valuable source of information for research purposes, but warns, however, that "the discerning researcher will realise that there are plenty of newspapers and magazines whose contents should not be relied upon to reflect anything approaching an objective account of actual events!" The warning issued by Denscombe is, in this research, the reason why newspapers were selected as the main source of data. Not only do they identify the key stakeholders, but regardless of the accuracy of accounts, they are particularly influential in forming the perception of the brand in the mind of the sports consumer. To support our longitudinal approach, rather than simply capturing a snapshot at one point in time, additional data was obtained from publicly available *Bulldogs* club documents.

Cunneen *et al.* (1989, p. 139) explain their research process as “newspaper methodology”. These authors collected newspaper clips referring to the Bathurst motorcycle races from 53 different newspapers from across, but were interested only in articles that dealt with social issues and were not directly related to racing. Cunneen *et al.* (1989, p. 140) used *details* as the unit of analysis, explaining that:

“Details were print references to people, statements made by people, events observed or referred to, numeric values or more nebulous information that might be called common knowledge or wisdom. Details in many instances were propositions. Newspaper articles like most forms of writing, are collections of ideas and the approach to content analysis used here categorises like ideas as like details”.

Similar to Cunneen’s (1989) study, we used content analysis to identify the Bulldogs’ brand *details*, that is, the important actions and events involving the key brands for the Bulldogs brand molecule. It is not the objective to count the *details* but to identify their existence. Importantly, the *details* relative to each brand help to confirm its classification as a strategic or support brand.

Findings

A content analysis of newspaper articles and publicly available club documents gave the opportunity to identify and classify key stakeholders in the Bulldogs brand. The inventory of the Bulldogs brand, based on Lederer and Hill’s (2001) brand molecule concept, is shown below in Table 1.

Lead Brand “the most influential brand”*	Strategic Brands “exert strong influence over buyers, either blocking competitors from poaching current customers or luring new users to the product”*	Support Brands “can help seal the deal with customers”*
The Bulldogs Team	Bulldogs Players	National Rugby League
	Sponsors	Canterbury Leagues Club
	Bulldogs Supporters	Government Agencies
	Bulldogs Football Club	Cultural Groups
		Schools

Table 1: The Bulldogs Brand Portfolio
*Lederer and Hill (2001 p. 127)

The Bulldogs team is identified as the *lead brand*. Three *strategic brands*, exerting strong influence over buyers were identified from the analysis: Bulldogs players, Bulldogs supporters, and the Bulldogs Club, which included the club’s management team. The *Support Brands* were identified as the National Rugby League (NRL), sponsors, the Canterbury Leagues Club (which is a separate entity from the Bulldogs football club), government agencies, and schools. The following sections provide explanation of how the brands were classified, and how they can damage or contribute to the *lead brand* – the Bulldogs.

Brands damaging the brand molecule

Some of the Bulldogs players, as strategic brands, damaged the brand of the Bulldogs. There were a number of cases reported in the media of player misbehaviour, ranging from a one

player being charged with assault and drink driving to the most serious allegations of sexual assault of a woman by a group of players in 2004. This latter incident received daily, national coverage throughout 2004 and became known as the *Bulldogs Sex Scandal*. As in other sports codes, these *branded persons* can damage the team brand when the media reports on their negative off-field exploits – such as sex scandals, drunken brawls, drug use, and errant or dubious behaviour – bringing the individuals, their club, and even the game into disrepute (Barrett, 2007).

The supporters, or fans, of a sports team take on a larger role than that of a customer even though they purchase the product by buying tickets and team merchandise. It is suggested that fans are a *strategic brand* in the sports brand molecule as they can be influential in the recruitment of new fans or the defection of existing fans. Several examples of how Bulldogs supporters contribute to the brand molecule as a *strategic brand* were recorded in our analysis. While the Bulldogs are recognised as having an eclectic fan base “from prime ministers to Australian cricket captains, to leaders of the church” (McDougall and Morris, 2002 p. 5), the behaviour of some of their supporters has given rise to negative publicity, and even a reported reluctance on the part of some fans of opposing teams, and even Bulldogs’ own fans, to attend games played involving the Bulldogs. The development of the construct *brand community* (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412), suggesting it is a “specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”, is appropriate to assist understanding of a sports team brand, such as the Bulldogs.

The Bulldogs Football Club, the brand under which the players play and the team for which fans show their support by attending games and buying merchandise, is a *strategic brand*. The physical headquarters of the Bulldogs Club brand, the Canterbury League Club, might, however, be considered a *support brand*. The Canterbury League Club is geographically embedded within the club’s historic heartland, and is where the Bulldogs administration and management is conducted, where meals are sold to, and entertainment provided for club members and visitors, and where alcoholic beverages and gaming machines are made available to raise revenue to finance the club’s operations. Leagues clubs are big business, with multi-million-dollar turnovers, and are closely associated with the football club they identify with. In the minds of some consumers however, the two organisations would be perceived as the one entity, as the line separating the two is typically a very blurred one. Activities of both the football club (that is, players) and the leagues club (that is, administration) have contributed to the near destruction of the Bulldogs brand molecule.

The breach of NRL rules by the football club management, by exceeding the permitted salary cap which could be paid to its players in order to prevent the wealthiest clubs buying all the best players to ensure a more balanced competition, is an example. The Bulldogs were penalized 37 competition points and fined \$500,000 for this breach, and suffered the ignominy of embarrassment and lost reputational capital in the process. Another *detail* which reflected negatively on the Bulldogs brand was the plan by a local development consortium to develop an \$AU800 million sports complex. This development was initiated predominantly by the Canterbury League Club, which includes in its logo “the home of the Bulldogs”. What only can be described as an ‘intriguing affair’, involving banks, politicians, and club officials, ensured that the Bulldogs were not far from the front page throughout the early 2000s. There were also a series of further allegations of inappropriate management and nepotistic appointments within the Canterbury League Club, including payments to wives of club executives.

These *highlight* examples provide evidence of how the *strategic* or *support* brands can damage the Bulldogs brand. The early 2000s were not good years for the Bulldogs, and at the commencement of the season in 2009 they were the only club which did not have a major team sponsor, due to the brand's damaged image (Masters, 2009). Perhaps reflecting their off-field problems, by the close of the 2008 NRL season, the Bulldogs were last on the competition ladder, earning the ignominious title of the *wooden-spoon* and providing a bitter pill to swallow for the club's players and supporters who had enjoyed competition supremacy only a few years earlier.

Finishing last was a wake-up call for the club. Well aware of the damage that had been done to their brand over the prior six or so years, the Bulldogs had taken steps to turn their brand fortunes around by the commencement of the 2009 season. A new management, team including a professionally-qualified marketer, brought in specifically to work towards rebuilding the Bulldogs brand, were put in place, and at the time of writing, the Bulldogs were leading the NRL competition and in contention for the minor premiership, with the most competition points at the end of the regular season. Our content analysis reveals a turn-around in media coverage for the Bulldogs through 2009, but initial coverage reveals a degree of scepticism towards the genuineness of the club's brand-building efforts. The next section demonstrates strategic and support brands can contribute, rather than damage the brand molecule.

Brands Contributing to the Molecule

Although some of the Bulldogs players were found to be damaging the Bulldogs brand, there were other strategic *player brands* who contributed positively to the Bulldogs brand molecule. Hazem El Mazri, for example, is highly regarded not only within the NRL but also the local Lebanese and Muslim communities, from which he came. The Bulldogs now have a clear management and marketing strategy, details of which were obtained via an examination of publicly-available club documents. Primarily, the club has a statement of values that are influential in the club's decision making. The planning document recognises the club's stakeholders, which include players, governments, the NRL, fans, and industry associations. Ex-players were seen as strategic brands (Masters, 2009). A brand management approach is seeking to achieve what Hatch and Schultz (2003) argue is successful corporate branding; attending to the interplay between strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate image. Part of the challenge for brand managers is to clearly define and communicate the brand values internally (de Chernatony, 1999; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001). This is evidenced in the Bulldogs plan by its player recruitment and redundancy practices: buying 'clean' players and offloading 'tarnished' players.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the appropriateness of the brand molecule concept to the brand of a sports team. Importantly, sports administrators and marketers need to recognise the existence of the brand atoms which form their particular brand molecule, and that even atoms over which they have only limited control can serve to damage or contribute to the strength of the brand.

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