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#RLNEWERA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO THE MARKETING PLANNING ACTIVITIES OF RUGBY LEAGUE CLUBS IN THE UK

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Abstract:

AIM: The sport of rugby league in the UK has embraced a new 'whole game' philosophy following the 2013 Policy Review that restored promotion and relegation (RFL, 2015). The resulting 2015 season competition format included a 12 team elite Super League, a 12 team Championship, and a new 14 team League One. In its 2015-2021 strategic plan, the Rugby Football League (RFL) outlined its vision to increase the visibility and profile of the sport in the UK, through an integrated marketing and communication plan (RFL, 2015). The integration of all league competitions through promotion and relegation facilitates an opportunity to increase the the visibility and profile of Championship teams. The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate the marketing activities that Championship teams have implemented to take advantage of the RFL's new era.

LITERATURE REVIEW: The sport marketplace in the UK is currently saturated, with consumers having a wide choice of sport and leisure offerings to engage with. This competitive environment requires sport industry managers to realise the contribution that marketing in general, and strategic marketing in particular, can make to the success of their organisation (Brooksbank, Garland & Werder, 2012). Strategic marketing planning has been stated as an appropriate policy for a wide range of organisations, from large multi-nationals to not-for-profit and small to medium sized enterprises (Harris & Jenkins, 2001). Regardless of size, many sporting organisations now employ marketing specialists to manage the contribution of marketing in the planning process. Despite this, it has been suggested that the sports industry is guilty of complacency in relation to marketing and promotion of their product (Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick & Funk, 2009). Unfortunately there is currently a limited understanding of the marketing activities that have been utilised within rugby football league.

METHODOLOGY: A qualitative research design was employed to investigate the RFL's marketing strategy and the marketing planning activities of Championship RFL clubs. A purposive sampling technique was used, with semi-structured interviews carried out between July 2014 and January 2015 with appropriate representatives who had responsibility for marketing activity within their organisation. The sample included 12 participants, comprising of 1 RFL Executive Officer, ten Championship Club representatives, and 1 League One club representative, who had been relegated from the Championship. An interview guide was developed in line with a strategic sport marketing planning framework (Shilbury et al, 2009). The interview guide facilitated the data collection of key areas including: identification of marketing opportunities, strategy determination, strategy implementation, evaluation, and the exploration of barriers and facilitators to planning activities. All interviews lasted between 35 minutes to 65 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then analysed using MAXQDA11 qualitative software package.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION: The RFL had a marketing strategy with clear objectives of how to grow interest in the sport. Despite this, results indicate that 7 out of 11 Championship League clubs did not have a formalised strategic marketing plan in place. Instead, there was a reliance on a range of reactive and short-term marketing tactics to engage fans and increase attendances. Primary barriers recognised as impacting a club's ability to develop and execute a coordinated strategic marketing plan were organisational structure, limited staffing resource, limited expertise and limited finance. All 11 clubs welcomed the restructuring of the league as they believe promotion and relegation would reinvigorate interest amongst their supporters and present an opportunity to broaden their fan base. Clubs felt they would benefit from a more formalised approach to strategic marketing planning to maximise engagement and take advantage of the change in league structure.

IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS: Due to the limited staffing resource, finance and expertise acknowledged within clubs, it is essential to develop shared expertise and resource across the sport. Without the development of shared resource there will continue to be a gap between the leagues and clubs off field performance. The findings support that greater commercial development is needed in Championship clubs to address the aforementioned barriers in the strategic marketing planning process. This will allow clubs to efficiently and effectively allocate marketing resources to engage supporters and generate a new fan base, especially within the restructured league format.

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