Degree of planning and strategic management in the process of branding in LFP clubs in Spain

Grado de planificación y gestión estratégica en el proceso de branding en los clubes LFP en España

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ABSTRACT

The context of general crisis and the critical economic situation in the field of professional football in Spain have led to search for new fundraising models. It is within this framework that the process of branding made by different LFP (*Liga de Fútbol Profesional*/Professional Football League) clubs must be analyzed. A strategically planned and consistently managed brand, based on a thorough investigation of the market where it operates, and aimed at the engagement of its targeted audience, becomes a recognized, differentiated and well-positioned element that offers added value to the industry. The audience's perception regarding teams and clubs creates a certain image that may lead to new funding and business opportunities within the market.

Keywords: brand image, branding, positioning, brand value, soccer industry, Spain.

RESUMEN

El contexto de crisis general y la grave situación económica que atraviesa el sector del fútbol profesional en España hace que se busquen nuevos modelos de financiación. Dentro de este entorno se hace necesario analizar el trabajo de branding que se desarrolla en los diferentes clubes que forman parte de la Liga de Fútbol Profesional (LFP). Una marca planificada de forma estratégica y gestionada de manera coherente, que investiga el mercado en el que opera y fideliza a sus públicos, se convierte en una marca reconocida, diferenciada, bien posicionada y que ofrece un valor añadido. Las percepciones que de los clubes tengan sus públicos crearán una determinada imagen que podrá traducirse en nuevas vías de financiación y más oportunidades de negocio dentro del mercado.

Palabras clave: imagen de marca, *branding*, posicionamiento, valor de marca, industria del fútbol, España.

INTRODUCTION

The show, as a form of leisure commercially exploited within professional football makes that this sport, understood as a business, has become an economic sector of great importance in Spain. Despite the current severe economic crisis, television and radio audiences continue to grow around the football sector. Sales of sports journals (and their websites) do not stop their growth as football content gains prominence in their publications (Estudio General de Medios, [EGM], 2013). Media and commercial power of Spanish football is not only reflected in media audiences. This sector, by itself, has a very important specific weight within the Spanish economy. The volume of business generated by the football stood in 2010 at 4 billion Euros (Alcalde, 2010).

José Baltasar Plaza, lawyer and bankruptcy administrator of the Rayo Vallecano –a Madrid club and football team– points out that the context of crisis that Spain lives has taken its time to reach the professional football because of the bubble in which it existed (Méndez, 2013). José María Gay de Liébana confirms that the economic and fiscal situation of the professional football clubs in Spain has been in some kind of limbo thanks to the permissiveness of the institutions. Clubs signed multimillion dollar television contracts and were funded or guaranteed by public entities and administrations. They have also enjoyed all sorts of privileges to delay their responsibilities with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), or to pay off debts with local councils and other public institutions. Spanish professional football clubs due in 2012 to the IRS over 752 million Euros (Gay de Liébana, 2013). This amount does not include the debts to Social Security (Público, 2012). We must remember that in Europe there are 23 processes of bankruptcy in professional football clubs, of which 22 are Spanish (ABC, 2012).

Considering the economic situation, Spain's professional football clubs must begin to find new and different ways of financing. Get atypical incomes must be among the main objectives of the clubs nowadays. For this purpose they should be aware of the importance of investing in creating a coherent, consistent, recognizable and well positioned brand that will attract new investors, identifies with potential clients, identify with their associates and know how to create added value. Professional football in Spain, despite being a sector so powerful economically and

so professionalized in some specific areas, does not devotes efforts to invest in brand planning and strategic management (Mars, 2013). García Vizcaíno, creative director of the agency Sra. Rushmore, confirms this fact, bearing in mind that its work for Atlético de Madrid has had great success due to the creative treatment in the strategic area of values and image, which has been made to the club through their advertising. It has pursued to convey the athletic identity, and does not talk about football or tries to sell season tickets, but refers to a way of being and aims to win sympathies (emotional) (Mars, 2013).

LANNING AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BRAND IMAGE, BRANDING

CORPORATE CULTURE. VALUES, IDENTITY AND BRAND

Along with the values and corporate identity of a company, like germs in the creation of a brand, Miguel Ángel Sanz González and María Ángeles González Lobo (2005) refer to their projection towards the future:

> Another aspect is the existence of targets by which and for which the organization is constituted and projected. As a result of this projection, the organization operates as a cybernetic system, directing its efforts in the direction that she believes to be more correct. Such activity requires defining strategies and decisions whose results must be verified, analyzed, and evaluated in terms of efficiency. Thus, it establishes a spiral process in which the organization is storing a set of experiences which will become knowledge applicable to situations of uncertainty (...). Hence the importance of generating concepts that project companies into the future. (p. 63)

As part of this process the corporate identity of the company is built through its history and most recognizable values. The image, on the other hand, is directly linked to the existence of the brand (Costa, 2003). If there is no brand, it is impossible to develop its image. Joan Costa understands the brand as a dynamic concept since its inception, construction and development through an eminently strategic management. A brand and its image is not something static and unmovable, but it is in a continuous dynamic

progress (Costa, 2005). In line with the theoretical development of Joan Costa is Joël Desgrippes, quoted by Marc Gobé (2005, p. 9):

> Branding has not only to do with ubiquity, visibility, and functions of a product or brand; it consists of connecting emotionally with people in their daily lives. A product or service only can be considered brands when they evoke an emotional dialogue with the consumer.

Within the heterogeneous brand concept, and taking into account its multidisciplinary nature of strategic management, Gobe (2005) says that:

> Corporate identity programs based on emotions must be visionary, integrated, visceral, and must reflect the genuine will of the companies to share their values with consumers. Connected identities are culturally relevant and must be supported by people, consumers and employees. They are flexible, imaginative and attractive. Dictated identities are only what they are, another logo on the door. (p. 163)

The main idea developed breaks with McLuhan's classic paradigm of communication. This change of paradigm –vital to understand the relationships established in the construction of the brand image (from planning and strategic management up to the executions)– soaks the entire branding process. As indicated by Gobe, branding seeks to connect in different ways with the brand audiences, and at the same time the brand is a receptor in the dialogues with its audiences.

BRAND IMAGE. PLANNING AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Just Villafañe (2004) defines the corporate image as the integration of their audiences' minds of all the inputs issued by a company in its ordinary relationship with them. Paul Capriotti (2005) confirms the thesis of Villafañe, pointing out that when talking about corporate image we talk about the audience's perception of an organization as social subject. It is the global idea they have about their products, their activities, and their conduct. Villafañe (2004) adds the following on the definition of brand image:

> The image must be understood as a whole, as the sum that someone has of an institution, in which the importance of each of its components, considered one by one, is diluted in comparison with the value that the integration of all of them reach in a sort of corporate Gestalt. (p. 30)

Villafañe's corporate Gestalt is shared by Paul Capriotti (2005), only that through another perspective and nomenclature:

> Individuals, based on past experiences, whether personal or social, perform a simplistic, but significant activity between the new and the already acquired, and award persons or entities a set of attributes, features or characteristics, through which they identify them and distinguish from others. These simplified schemes of things or people, of a cognitive nature, are incorporated into the people's memory, and recovered in the moments in which individuals need them to recognize, identify and differentiate such objects or individuals of others. These full of meaning schemes are therefore cognitive mental structures, since through them we identify, recognize and differentiate things. (p. 54)

BRANDING. COMPREHENSIVE TOOL FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BRAND IMAGE.

The image, as well as the own corporation and its brand, is in continuous evolution since its inception (Costa, 2005). This dynamism causes that the brand image should be planned and managed in a strategic way, to thus control that all its elements have a single, coherent and recognizable meaning. All elements (naming, logo, communication, corporate social responsibility, etc.) integrate and form a whole which we call "the brand". While it is made up of different parts, what finally is perceived by the consumer (brand image) is the sum of all of them creating synergies in favor of the sale and, ultimately, of consumers' loyalty (Ollé & Ríu, 2009). This idea directly engages with the corporate Gestalt of Villafañe (2004) and of Capriotti's (2005) significance cognitive system.

Along with the multiple elements that make up a brand, branding appears as the integral and multidisciplinary process that, through planning and strategic management, is responsible for building the brand image. Branding transmits an information or an identifier and totalizing knowledge to the audiences that relate to the brand, thus helping them categorize the perceptions and images created in their minds. Ollé and Ríu (2009) add:

> We cannot see the brand as an isolated factor, as one more element to decide; the brand is the result of all the efforts of the company. Branding has been treated for too long as a way to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

It is true that a good logo can do a lot for its brand, but always that the latter responds to strategically designed meanings. (p. 23)

Robert Jones, an expert from the international brand consultancy agency Wolff Olins, underlines that there is no doubt that branding has climbed rankings in organizations; the directors engage with brands; it is a discussion of the executive board (interview with R. Jones, cited in Gobé, 2005). Jones takes it directly from the ideas of Olins (2009), who claims an eminently strategic position for branding and its professionals (Brand Manager, Planner Brand...) within the company's organization.

There are not specific steps that ensure success within the process of branding, every brand needs their own. The term branding has an aura of adhering only to the creative aspect, but having a real process allows to go beyond personal tastes and aversions (Healey, 2009). What does exist is a logical procedure that puts a determined methodology in common, and that is defended by the majority of experts (Olins, 2009; Healey, 2009; Ollé & Ríu, 2009; Gobé, 2005; Davis, 2010). The first step in this process is research and analysis. The second focuses on the strategy to be followed by the brand. The third aims to translate the strategy into execution (brand implementation). The fourth and last step is about measuring and assessing what has been done, to return in a cyclic manner to the first step in order to correct possible mistakes.

ORDERING, NATURE AND MANAGEMENT OF SPORT. PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL IN SPAIN

LEGAL SYSTEM OF SPORTS IN SPAIN

Interest in sports, historically, has transcended socially and now it can be said that the outcome of a sporting event affects thousands of people. The State has considered adequate to protect the interests of those citizens, and therefore has created what is known as "Legal regulation of sport" or "Sport Law" (Beotas, 2006).

Diego Marín-Barnuevo Fabo (2006) explains that the legal regulation of sport in Spain regulates sports associations through the sport Law. There are first-level sports associations (basic sports clubs, sports clubs of legal entities and public limited companies),

and second level associations (sports federations, groupings of State level clubs, sports promotion entities and professional leagues). There is also the Higher Sports Council, which is responsible for the State public sports organization.

ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT OF SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS.

A services, leisure and entertainment economy like the professional sports industry requires to renew constantly to meet the continuous changes affecting its management. The need to build agile organizations, provide effective leadership, as well as to implement corporate strategies through people, is some of the major challenges that, when faced adequately, can help achieving the sports and business success (Beotas, 2006). When improving the potential of the sector, gaining efficiency and achieving levels of greater professionalization, the sports industry takes as role models other sectors of leisure and entertainment to suit them to its specific needs. Alberto Dorado Suárez (2005) determines that organizations need workers and, specialized, versatile, innovative and creative corporate policies, committed and concerned about giving consumers an excellent service and communication.

THE SPORTS MARKETING

For Schmitt (2000), the fundamental sense of marketing as social discipline is to "generate sensory experiences (emotions), affective experiences (feelings), creative cognitive experiences (thoughts), physical and lifestyle experiences (performances), and social identity experiences which are the result of relating to a group or culture of reference (relations)" (p. 53).

As in the case of marketing, there are many definitions, usages and different meanings attributed to the concept of sports marketing. Although this specialty has become an academic discipline, scholars themselves have not agreed about what sports marketing is (Pitts & Stotlar, 2002). Ramírez Perdiguero states that within the sports marketing there are many and very different products, areas, events, or possible market services so the concept is enormously broad and varies depending on its field of action. This research is carried out under the concept of sports marketing understood as a "discipline

that consists in managing all activities designed to address the needs and deficiencies of the participating primary, secondary and tertiary sport consumers; and of primary, secondary and tertiary consumers sports viewers through processes of exchange" (Mullin, Hardy Sutton, 1995, p.) (27).

Javier Rial (2007) highlights the dynamism that exists around the approach and techniques, which are part of sports marketing. From tangible elements it has passed to the exploitation of the intangible values associated with the sport. Sports marketing have also embraced the task of managing, among other things, the emotional bonding, affinity or identification with the sports organizations, athletes, or sports. The feelings generated by the sport and the possibilities in the sale of products and associated services highlight the enormous potential of the sport phenomenon within the business and commercial area.

THE PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL MARKET IN SPAIN

The market of professional football in Spain mixes characteristics of a sports service with the need to generate economic benefits in the participating companies (brands). Given the social nature of football, the study of the market behavior must go beyond the simple individual response. It should also be considered how the group influences on the individual, and vice versa, as well as how this influence is reflected in the buying process. First, potential buyers should be identified, and observe their different classifications. The importance of this difference can be seen in how marketing policies will be used (Molero & Rivera, 2012). Xavier Ginesta (2011) poses that "the commercialization of different services offered by football clubs in order to obtain higher revenues made that they be located in full competition with other companies in the world of entertainment. (…) Football and leisure multinationals have a confluence point in what some authors have termed the 'media and global sports complex'" (pp. 142, 144).

Professional football clubs should create new business and marketing ways through its potential as a brand. This has been done for years in leagues such as the English or the German. The better the business and commercial machinery of a football club functions, the more power it will have to find new ways of financing. Professional football clubs who best know how to build their brand and be positioned as such, will increase their power of loyalty. In this regard it should be considered that the consumption of sports products is marked by variables of behavior different from those of other sectors. Against a professional football team (brand) there are no replacement products and, therefore, the loyalty of the consumer (fan) towards his club is not questioned (Colmena, 2010).

PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE (LFP)

The different leagues that exist in Spain are groupings of all clubs participating in official competitions of professional character. They have to constitute themselves within each Sports Federation by legal mandate. Despite being of exclusive and mandatory constitution by public entities, these leagues have their own legal personality.

The Professional Football League (LFP) is defined in its corporate website as the sports association of private law which, pursuant to the provisions of articles 12 and 41 of the Sport Law 10/1990, of October 15, is exclusive and mandatory integrated by all Sports Public Limited Companies and Clubs participating in official State-level and professional football competitions – currently 20 teams of the BBVA League and 22 of the Adelante League. LFP has the legal obligation to organize these competitions, in coordination with the Real Federación Española de Fútbol (Royal Spanish Football Federation). It has its own legal personality and full capacity to act for the fulfillment of its purposes, and is autonomous from the Real Federación Española de Fútbol, of which it is part, for its internal organization and functioning.

The two main objectives[1] of the LFP are:

1. Organize and promote official competitions of State-level and professional football, and ensure its proper functioning.

2. Commercial exploitation, in its broadest sense, of the competitions that it organizes, within the limits established by the Sports Law.

LFP, like many others entities, has a foundation through which develops all its Corporate Social Responsibility policy[2].

CASE STUDY AND RESULTS

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this study is to know, through the processes of branding that professional football clubs in Spain develop, the degree of planning and strategic management with which they work in the construction of the brand image. To reach the general objective (and consistently with the theoretical framework developed in section 2), it is necessary to respond to a series of secondary objectives that, from the most specific to the most corporate, will provide us the information needed to analyze and reflect on an activity as comprehensive and multidisciplinary as branding.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

In order to meet the objectives proposed in the study, a quantitative methodological technique as the structured survey has been used. These surveys have been complemented by a series of in-depth interviews (qualitative technique) to leaders of different clubs that occupy strategic positions related to different processes of communication, advertising or branding, and that, therefore, help to decode and interpret the results more accurately.

As a unit of observation we have chosen the 100% of the universe. That is, the forty corporations, or brands, which formed part of the Spanish Professional Football League in the 2012-2013 season (20 teams of the BBVA League, or first division league, and twenty-two teams of the Adelante League or second division league).

QUESTIONNAIRE

When constructing the questionnaire, we reviewed comprehensively the theoretical framework developed in section 2. It has been vital to this investigation to keep at all times consistency between the theory, the construction of the questionnaire and the subsequent reading of the results, in order to make it as relevant as possible to the objectives of the study. From the theoretical foundations through which brand image is constructed in the minds of the audience through a corporate Gestalt (Villafañe, 2004), a cognitive system of meanings (Capriotti, 2005) or a significance holistic system (Costa, 2003), arises the basis for the construction of the survey and the subsequent interpretation of the obtained data.

The questionnaire consists of eight thematic blocks with their respective specific subparts. The construction and internal structure of the survey allows knowing, on the one hand, the opinion that the clubs themselves have when it comes to rating areas, departments and specific actions, as constructs that are part of a global system of meanings that helps build the brand image in the minds of the audience. On the other hand, we expected to control through strategic items, and comparison of different outcomes, if the work of clubs in relation to building brand actually exists, if it is truly strategic, and if it is consistent.

The questionnaire is structured and consists of 49 items. There is a combination of open choice questions, closed response and multiple choice. This structure allows getting the information needed to meet the objectives outlined in section 4. 1.

INVESTIGATION RESULTS

In the study participated 52.50% of all LFP clubs, which gives it a high degree of representativeness. In addition, clubs with high, medium and low budgets have participated, both from the BBVA League and the Adelante League.

Throughout the communication process with clubs there have been numerous problems to establish contact with any area that could respond to our requests. Other clubs with which there was contact declined to cooperate with the study, because of their strict data privacy policy. There have also been cases in which, in spite of having the promises of someone responsible to participate, finally there has been no collaboration, without further explanations.

The communication area of the clubs has a specific place within the organization (although there is different nomenclature to refer to this department, depending on each club). This area depends on the presidency or management (60% in a direct way, and 30% indirectly, via surcharge). Dependence is not a brand strategic matter (more than 25% of the clubs states directly that they do not have any communication plan), but a direct, personal and hierarchical control in the organization. Activity in this area remains too stuck in the work of media, to the detriment of the corporate brand work.

Corporate websites reflect the lights and shadows of their communication areas. They are very efficient in informational work (96% of clubs updates in real

time their newsfeed), but require much more corporate deployment and e-branding. Rhe percentage of clubs that do not have specific places within their websites for more or less direct dialogue between the brand and its audience is preoccupant (more than 58%).

Most clubs do not use social networks to establish dialogue and interaction with the audience. Plus, 88% of clubs also manages social media through non-specialized in-house staff. These tools are not valued enough as generators of brand image. Social networks, just like corporate websites, drag the habits of the communication area (very good in press and information, very deficient in corporate and brand strategic work).

The marketing department, as well as the communication area, has its own space within the hierarchical and pyramidal organization chart of each club. It depends directly, on more than 84% of the cases, of the presidency, or some management position attached to the presidency. This situation is incompatible with the strategic development of a marketing plan that will strengthen the brand. In addition, marketing actions barely take into account the audience's opinion, since there is hardly any feedback with it.

The study indicates that most of the clubs make official merchandising (more than 96%), and admit the possibility of negotiating possible aesthetic issues that go against the brand image with the sports brand sponsoring them at that time (more than 88%). As in the previous departments, clubs do not consider their audiences enough when it comes to implementing the brand through merchandising.

In the commercial area there is a problem related to the absence of a truly strategic planning of the department and, by extension, of the brand. A high percentage of clubs (more than 83%) modifies its values and identity to make them coincide with the sponsors. If there were a professional branding job, the brand would adopt values consistent, immutable, and perfectly recognizable to engage different sponsors, and not vice versa.

The percentage of clubs (more than 30%) who do not perform any research or analysis about their own brand is alarming. Without this basic strategic work, it is impossible to know how the brand is perceived, what are its strengths, its weaknesses, who and how

is their competence, or the market situation. Thus, it is very difficult to strategically plan and manage a brand. This is completely incompatible with a logical and coherent branding process.

The department, or persons in charge of managing the construction of the brand image in the clubs, is an entity completely fuzzy and contradictory. This process falls back into a department (not specialized for this task) under the required supervision of the presidency or management. A comprehensive branding work cannot be developed in hermetic departments without autonomy, and that also depend directly on executives without qualification in this task (but with direct power in decision-making).

Both the club's degree of perception of being a brand as the self-perception in terms of planning and strategic management are very weak (confirmed by the incoherence in the strategic data, and that they self-value does not exceed 7 out of 10 in any case).

CONCLUSIONS

Once all the obtained results from the research were analyzed, compared, evaluated and linked, the following conclusions are drawn:

a) The clubs organization charts are presidential, hierarchical, pyramidal and completely rigid. There is no position, or group of skilled strategists, addressing the strategic planning and management of the branding process to obtain a consistent and professional construction of the club's brand image.

b) Communication and marketing areas develop their strategies (it is hard to find a unified strategy in the clubs) subordinated to the presidency or management (which are ultimately who decided and approve them). These strategies in any case are comprehensive or take place throughout the entire corporation, but they have a specific functional character adapted to the specific work of each area.

c) The strategic work of initial planning based on research and analysis, cornerstone to begin any branding project, is very weak in a very high percentage of clubs (above 74%). Without this type of information that will help to develop the first step in the process of branding, seen at the

end of section 2. 3, it is impossible to conceive a strategic management in the image construction of any brand.

d) Brands must adapt to the current social, cultural and technological environment by which audiences seek interactions, emotionality and direct dialogue with the brands. McLuhan communication theory jumped into the air decades ago and brands that do not understand this change in the communication paradigm are doomed to not connect with their different audiences.

e) The Spanish professional football clubs departments should evolve into an efficient work that enhances the planning and the overall strategy of the brand. The first step to get this is that there is such a strategy (if there is a real process of branding, departmental work will be limited, inconsistent in many cases and very confusing for the different audiences that relate in one way or another with the brand):

- The communication area of the clubs should know how to evolve and adapt to new demands required by the different audiences with which the brand relates. Press activity should be a task more in an area that offers comprehensive elaborated services of corporate communication

- Marketing is vital for the financing and construction of any brand image. This department must have a more specific weight within the organization charts of clubs and has to be more visible to the audience. In addition, it should be the designated department to develop strategic research, in order to turn it into valuable information that will facilitate the success of various multidisciplinary and creative actions that contact the brand with the audience.

- Corporate websites are an international showcase for clubs, and the fastest way of contact between the brand and its audience (build-

ing relationships, affinity, communication and engagement). These sites should be managed and worked with the importance and efficiency that they deserve (e-branding).

- Social networks should be understood as a strategic tool for brand communication. It is very important to develop communication strategies on social networks involving dialogue and experiences for different audiences, and information and background to improve the brand.

f) The clubs management should understand that branding work is, in addition to necessary, an investment in the long term, not an expense. The situation of crisis affecting the majority of teams, and the drastic decline of its up to now economic sources, will force them to find new atypical ways of financing, and so they need a consistent, recognizable brand image, with added value. An efficient work in the process of branding is to position the brand, differentiate it from the competition, give it life, emotions, and values, adapt it to the market in which it operates, give it a voice and capacity of interaction, making it win commercial value, and so on. In short, it means engaging the brand with all its current and future audiences (including new investors and sponsors).

g) The work of planning and strategic management of the brand is summarized (in the long-term) in various aspects: the generation of dynamics that will help to retain existing subscribers; the creation of new partners and consumers of the brand's products and services; "evangelization" of future fans; the construction of a market value that make customers willing to pay more for the offered products; the achievement of new sponsors, more investors and more financing channels; the improvement of the relations with different institutions. In addition, it is materialized in the expansion and growth of the brand (and, thus, of the market in which it operates).

FOOTNOTES

1. See these objectives in LFP, Universidad Católica de Murcia (UCAM), Liga BBVA, "Presentación", in http://lfp.ucam.edu/presentacion/lfp)
2. See http://www.lfp.es/lfp/fundacion (2013).

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