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Research Paper

Encoding destination messages in media coverage of an international event: A case study of the European athletics indoor championships

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ABSTRACT

The destination management strategy of enhancing destination brands or market position via international sport events is one of the main reasons for destinations to engage in event bidding. The strategy raises important questions regarding the process of encoding a destination's brand values into the media reports from an international sporting event and what the perceived challenges of that strategy are.

The process has been explored from a destination perspective in a case study during the recently completed 2013 European Athletics Indoor Championships in Gothenburg, Sweden using data from multiple sources before, during and after the event. Public relations strategy and the persuasive communication model have been employed to structure the description.

The study shows that the destination marketing organization (DMO) is involved in two different processes in order to influence the message transmitted from the event. The TV broadcast process is negotiated before the event and the news coverage process is occurring during the event. The latter relates to the DMO's attempts to persuade gatekeepers of international media to include the destination message in their reports by the use of both direct and indirect cues and activities. One tenth of the reports from the event are about the destination rather than the sport. Key differences between the two processes are presented, as well as a synthesis model of information-based communication and persuasive communication in the setting of an international sport event. Challenges to the strategy were e.g. media professional's formal assignment and the match between event and destination values in order for the DMO to communicate a newsworthy message.

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1. Introduction

The destination management strategy of enhancing destination brands or market position via international sport events is one of the main reasons for destinations to engage in event bidding. Faulkner et al. (2000) appoints positioning, branding and image benefits as one of three key goals for an event-hosting destination. There is a widespread view that hosting international sporting events will provide destinations with valuable media attention (Lee, Taylor, Lee & Lee, 2005) which has the power to influence a destination's image or brand (Kim & Morrison, 2005; Whitson & Macintosh, 1996) and advance the city's market position (Brown, Chalip, Jago & Mules, 2002). (Zhang & Zhao, 2009, p. 245) argue that 'mega-events are regarded as a valuable opportunity for broadcasting the identity and core values of the host city.' Hudson, Getz, Miller and Brown (2004) concluded that the primary goal to destinations hosting sport events was to attract media coverage. The strategy to communicate via the publicity of an international event can be understood as news media may be seen as credible sources (A. Smith, 2005), which will contribute to the effect a message has on its receiver (Fiske, 1990). The strategy is cheap compared to advertising space (Falkheimer, 2007) and in contrast to most destination publicity it is not incidental, meaning it can be better controlled and planned in advance (Dore & Crouch, 2003).

All publicity is not good publicity (Falkheimer, 2007) and accordingly a destination marketing organization (DMO) might aim to influence the publicity stemming from the event. There seems to be a critical moment in that process; the transfer of the desired message from the DMO to the international media. It is the process of encoding that message into the media coverage of an international sporting event that the article aims to describe. How does a DMO act to influence the publicity induced by an international sport event and what are the perceived challenges to the strategy?

Linked to the research question is the concept of event media management defined by (Fairley & Getz, 2003, p. 130) as 'the deliberate management or manipulation of media coverage to achieve both strategic and tactical objectives for the event, it sponsors and the host destination'. In this study it is solely the destination perspective that will be in focus. Event media management has been approached

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in previous studies, Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules and Ali (2003) addressed the role of events in building the destination brand. A number of themes were found and media coverage was one of them. M.F. Smith (2005) discussed how Philadelphia utilized the media present to cover the 2000 Republican National Convention. Morse (2001) described Australian tourism organization's (ATO) activities to use the media attention during the Sydney Olympics in 2000; e.g. the execution of a visiting journalist program and how TV broadcasters were approached with ideas to gain "extra airtime". In short ATO identified the crucial link between the destination and the media professional and saw international publicity as one tool to reach the communicational aims that were set for hosting the Olympics. Concrete methods used in publicity programs to bridge the link between the destination and media were movies, press kits and media familiarization tours (Dore & Crouch, 2003). Mackellar and Fenton (2000) also dealt with the question of how travel media representatives should be accessed and found a "mismatch" in expectations concerning the outcomes between the destination and the media. Related studies add comprehensively to the understanding of the research topic but to provide a more thorough answer to the specific research question posted here a more in-depth description from the DMO perspective of the process is attempted.

2. Theoretical frame

2.1. Destination's aim to benefit from event media coverage – an act of communication on two levels

The research question is addressed through the framework of public relations strategy theory. PR and publicity is one of the modes for an organization to communicate a message in order to reach set organizational goals, e.g. to achieve goodwill to maintain and improve important relations. A second role for PR can be to support the marketing of products argues (Fill, 2009, p 576) and suggests a definition of public relations as 'a range of activities, of which relations, publicity and event management appear to be the main ones used by practitioners'.

Communication is frequently described in different models. The model of information-based communication is appropriate to describe the macro process of the destination's intention described in the introduction, to communicate via the event. The model illustrates the key actors; the sender (the DMO) and the receiver (potential tourists), as well as the key functions of encoding, decoding and response (Schramm, 1971; Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Lasswell, 1948). The model of information-based communication has previously been employed in the event context by e.g. Masterman and Wood (2006) and Andersson, Jutbring and Lundberg (2013). The macro communication is primarily a matter of provision of information, rather than a two-way dialog. It is the limited part of the sender's encoding that will be focused on in the study.

Fig. 1 shows the limited part of the information-based communication model that will be studied, the encoding from a DMO perspective in an international event setting. The information-based communication model relates to a destination's assumed overall aim of providing information via the publicity of an international event.

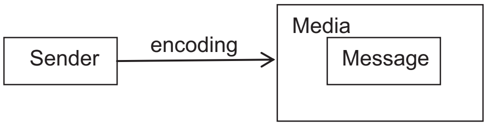

Fig. 1. Model of the intended DMO communication macro level.

In practice, as argued in the introduction, there is a suggested exchange of information between the DMO representatives and the media professionals. To understand the attempts to influence publicity on the micro level the persuasive communication model will be used. The DMO presents its message to the news gatekeepers (the media representative) in different forms in order to persuade them to include the destination's message into the reports (Mackellar & Fenton, 2000). The DMO has not the position to coerce the addressed media professionals, only advocate and magnify advantageous information in different forms. Smith (2009) argues that persuasive information is something else than propaganda. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest a framework of public relations models and argues that the very purpose of a press/publicity communication is propaganda and that the content not necessarily has to be the "complete truth" with the aim to convince the receiver. In the persuasion model it is clear that the message is reflecting the sender's point of view, but has to be trustworthy and credible to be persuasive. However, both models are basically similar as they agree on a one-way transmission of a message from sender to a receiver by being convincing or persuasive. To communicate persuasively in an effective way Smith (2009) puts forward that credibility (expertise and honesty) in the eyes of the receiver is of great importance. Other aspects contributing to effective persuasive communication are charisma (personal charm) and control.

2.2. PR action strategy: what to do?

The strategy is central in the planning of public relations and should be focused action and contents in order to reach the communication goals. Action strategies can be proactive or reactive and content strategies deal with message related issues e.g. as contents, source and cues of how to signal the message. It is possible to implement under favorable conditions and point of time fitting the sending organization (Smith, 2009; Fill, 2009). The proactive action strategies relevant in this study are the related communication strategies "publicity" and "newsworthy information" (Smith, 2009). Fill (2009, p. 576) uses the concept of media relations, in the context of the publicity, and defines it as 'a range of activities to provide media journalists and editors with information'.

Publicity is a form of PR that compared to other market communication tools has the value of having the message expressed by a third credible part (the news media). Fill (2009) argues that it is common knowledge that not everything gets into the paper or on TV, the news content is selected by a gatekeeping editor or reporter, an "autonomous agent" (Gartner, 1997) which makes the information more credible in the eyes of the audience. Publicity is also considered cost effective; 'editorial publicity is 7–15 times cheaper' (Falkheimer, 2007, p. 84). Publicity as a PR strategy has the potential of reaching an audience off-guard, not expecting a commercial message and the news context might add some dramatization to the message (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman & Hansen, 2009). A way for an organization to pass the gatekeeper and get the intended message published is to present it in the context of a larger issue already on the media's agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Information considered as newsworthy might occur naturally within the organization that on its own merits will pass the scrutinizing eye of the gatekeepers, who are the sole authority to judge which information is newsworthy and which is not. Newsworth can be understood by analyzing the relationship between the intended message, media's agenda and the interest of the key public. An organization's message that is on the media agenda and of interest for the public is the most newsworthy, while a message that links to issues on

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