



Re-branding the NHL: Building the league through the “My NHL” integrated marketing campaign

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ABSTRACT

This article is a case study examining promotional efforts undertaken by the National Hockey League (NHL) via integrated marketing initiatives launched during the 2005–2006 season. Following the 2004–2005 season player lockout², the NHL worked to promote itself to both fervent and casual fans. By briefly assessing past marketing efforts and the dwindling popularity of the league in recent years, the article provides a fuller picture of how professional hockey was marketed in North America when the NHL returned to play. The focus is on “My NHL” and the league’s re-branding efforts as part of its new integrated communications plan. This research reveals that in its attempts to revive the sport the NHL has done a better job than with past efforts, however the current campaign must be aggressively maintained in order to successfully re-brand the league.

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1. Introduction

On 15 September 2004, National Hockey League (NHL) executives made a decision that shook the hockey world and overhauled league operations. With contract bargaining agreement (CBA) negotiations between the league and the National Hockey League Player’s Association (NHLPA) at a standstill, league commissioner Gary Bettman announced the second lockout in NHL history. The lockout lasted an unprecedented 301 days and wiped out an entire season before the groups reached a new agreement.

The agreement, signed in July 2005, rewrote the rules of the game and how the league operated (Joyce, 2005). Most notably, a salary cap was negotiated and limitations were placed on player movements aimed at helping the NHL become more revenue-driven, with increased parity amongst teams (Podnieks, 2005). Unfortunately the dispute resulted in new challenges. Locking out the players for an entire season alienated league employees and fans. The league already had popularity issues in the United States. Returning from the lockout provided the NHL with its last chance to recreate its brand and image (Elliott, 2005a). Part of building a new image meant developing innovative initiatives that created awareness and a renewed sense of excitement. Considering the league’s poor marketing history and rapidly decreasing interest in the sport, the task would not be simple.

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2. Methodology

The theoretical challenge in addressing the NHL campaign is that relatively little has been written about sports public relations in general (L'Etang, 2006) and even less about the specific role of public relations within sports-related integrated campaigns (Duncan & Moriarty, 1997). Based on the Excellence Theory (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), some scholars wonder if public relations is or should be a part of such integration. This argument seems outdated, though, since the corporate world has virtually eschewed the term “public relations” in favor of “branding” or “marketing communications.” In the professional world, for example, one would be hard pressed to find a “Public Relations Department” at any Fortune 500 corporation. Hallahan (2007) argues that integration is a critical component in Excellence Theory, “Yet, the key empirical evidence provided is fragmentary, and hardly conclusive to support for the argument favoring a single public relations department or the necessity to avoid sublimation by marketing” (p. 308).

Arguments regarding integration boil down to questions about whether public relations or marketing controls the relationship. Hutton (2001) provides context on the rivalry and discusses how marketing is “methodically reinventing itself as public relations” (p. 205). This encroachment may have detrimental effects on the field. However, he also points to a number of public relations-centric challenges, including the inflexibility of public relations theorists who ignore the need for a working relationship between the fields based on an organization's objectives. Hutton concludes that public relations will “suffer as both a practice and intellectual discipline if it is subordinated or assimilated by marketing” (p. 214). The challenge is in both defining public relations and marketing and then uncovering where (if any) boundaries exist between the two.

Rather than continue to argue for or against integration and its consequences, this paper focuses on examining integrated communications as suggested by Nowak and Phelps (1994). They suggest that an organization develops a single brand position or brand voice to maintain consistency across communications functions. Within this context, public relations is actually the dominant vehicle used to communicate with stakeholders. This relationship-building aspect of integrated communications is a primary strength of public relations practitioners (Varey, 2001). The Internet is at the heart of current integrated efforts and despite the flashy bells and whistles the medium offers, the Web is a public relations vehicle. Rather than co-opting public relations, integrated communications empowers the field to show its full potential for linking audiences and relationships (Hallahan, 1996; Harris, 1993).

The authors conducted a qualitative analysis measuring the “My NHL” campaign. Due to league confidentiality restraints, much of the reported research is reflective of analyses from newspaper, Web site, and magazine sources that regularly dedicate space to NHL-related or public relations topics. Although several interviews were conducted, those interviewed wished to remain anonymous.

3. A decade of mediocre marketing

Even when superstar players filled the ice, the NHL was never known for strong league-wide promotion. In 1988, Bud Stanner, senior vice president of International Management Corp., a Cleveland-based sports marketing firm, asked rhetorically, “Who is the best-known product endorser in the U.S. who is also a hockey player? The answer is nobody.” (Horovitz, 1988, p. 6). Although athlete-promotion techniques were changing thanks to the international marketing phenomenon created by basketball, Nike, and Michael Jordan (LaFeber, 1999), the NHL never tapped into its own star power the way other professional leagues did.

Wayne Gretzky, the closest athlete to Michael Jordan in the NHL, was not as heavily endorsed. He shied away from endorsement deals and he spent many years on Canadian teams, which hurt Gretzky's marketing potential in the United States. Unlike Jordan, he did not play for teams easily embraced by or promoted to the American public. Because Gretzky felt endorsements were secondary to his on-ice success, even after his 1988 trade to the Los Angeles Kings there were no plans to thrust him into American advertising efforts (Horovitz, 1986).

When the NHL faced its first lockout in 1994 the dispute lasted just half a season, which still enabled teams to compete for the Stanley Cup. The NHL unveiled “The Coolest Game on Earth” campaign in an attempt to market the game, which remained its primary slogan for years. However, interest in the game steadily decreased over the next decade. Use of the slogan and development of the campaign remained stagnant. Within 2 years of the lockout media analysts wrote about the missed opportunity (Fatsis, 1997).

In the late 1990s, others recognized the need for the NHL to start improving the way it promoted the game and players. Fatsis (1997) commented about the direction of the NHL saying, “The league also wants to create a buzz around its new stars. The NBA exploited the presence of Magic Johnson, Larry Bird and Michael Jordan to explode in the '80s.” He continued, saying, “The NHL mostly missed the chance to ride the coattails of Wayne Gretzky, who is nearing the end of his career, or Mario Lemieux, who is retiring,” (p. B9).

At the time, Bettman said that the NHL needed to increase its promotional efforts, but those intentions never came to fruition. Players like Mike Modano, who had been profiled in *People* magazine, were overlooked and underexposed. For the last decade, NHL executives have talked about maximizing opportunities to promote young players. Today, with Sidney Crosby, Alexander Ovechkin, and Eric Staal taking the league by storm, the NHL is experiencing a new wave of talent that can be promoted in the same way Michael Jordan was marketed by the NBA. However, the league needs to act, rather than simply watching another opportunity slip away.

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