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The delicate art of rebranding a minor league baseball franchise: Practices, pitfalls, and payoffs of rebranding the Winston-Salem Warthogs

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ABSTRACT

This case study deals with the transformative rebranding of the Winston-Salem Warthogs, a Class High-A minor league baseball franchise and affiliate of Major League Baseball's Chicago White Sox, as the Winston-Salem Dash. It was written and designed to be multi-faceted for instructors to use in various sport management courses, such as sport marketing, organizational behavior, human resource management, ticket and sponsorship sales, and public relations. There are three primary aims of the study. The first aim is to challenge students to critically assess the practices of external rebranding (with implications relative to consumer attitudes and brand equity) and internal rebranding (with workplace outcomes that favor employees and uphold brand values). The second aim is to make students consider the potential pitfalls of rebranding with regard to crisis and contingency planning and public relations. The third aim is to highlight the potential payoffs of rebranding when managers of sport organizations are willing to consider changes in views regarding the spirit and culture of the work environment (internal brand) and the overall quality and characteristics of brand marks (external brand). As a core feature of this real-world case study, interviews with stakeholders and personnel of the franchise give a glimpse at some real scenarios that students may face as they enter into the industry of team sport marketing.

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Teaching note

1. Introduction

This case study highlights problems surrounding the rebranding of the Winston-Salem Warthogs, a Class High-A minor league baseball team and affiliate of the Chicago White Sox, as the Winston-Salem Dash on the heels of an untimely, yet prevailing negative situation involving public relations. The art of rebranding can be remarkably transforming, or deeply unproductive, depending on the circumstances under which marketers operate. Often a rebrand is considered as a proactive measure, in which case an organization will attempt to seize an opportunity or thwart potential threats. For example, a proactive rebrand might occur in the event an organization is preparing for expected growth, enters into a new line of

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business, or desires to appeal to a new audience. Other times, an organization will rebrand in reaction to an event that is significant to the extent that the existing brand must be changed. Problems linked to competitive influences, negative publicity, or legal concerns are usually the cause for a reactive rebrand. Moreover, the concept of rebranding is not only important to sport marketers responsible for shaping attitudes and perceptions of external stakeholders about the brand, but also sport managers charged with designing the optimal work environment where "employees perform their role in relation to the brand promise" (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007 p. 57–70). Whether it may be planned organizational goals or macro-environmental issues that necessitate a rebrand, the decision to rebrand is just the initial step in the long and arduous process.

The aim of this case is three-fold: First, the case challenges students to critically examine the procedures of external rebranding, with implications relative to consumer attitudes and brand equity, and internal rebranding, which involves altering the culture of the work environment in a manner that is conducive to employees and the brand values (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). Second, the case requires students to consider the potential pitfalls of rebranding, particularly in the areas of crisis and contingency planning and public relations. Third, this case highlights some of the potential payoffs of rebranding when a sport organization is willing to look internally at changes that could be made to managerial viewpoints regarding stadium construction or relocation, ticket and sponsorship sales approaches, and the overall quality of brand marks (e.g., name, logo, team mascot, color scheme).

In addition, via the utilization of evidence-based knowledge collected through qualitative interviews and document analysis, this case portrays the real-life scenarios future sport managers may face as they enter into the industry of team sport marketing. With an average of 13 of minor league baseball's 160 franchises rebranding during each season (*SportsBusiness Daily*, 2010), it is apparent that many minor league baseball franchises consider rebranding key to sustaining success. Indeed, researchers argue that successfully rebranded teams generate excitement among their fan base, increase merchandise sales, open new revenue streams, expand promotional opportunities, and experience attendance growth (Dwyer, Le Crom, Tomasini, & Smith, 2011; Wachter, 2010). As such, this case study was written and designed to be multi-faceted for instructors to utilize in a range of sport management courses, such as sport marketing, organizational behavior, human resource management, ticket and sponsorship sales, and public relations.

2. Course-related topics, student activities, and classroom discussion

2.1. Organizational behavior and human resource management

Instructors of organizational behavior or human resource management might find this case beneficial for dealing with issues related to the many changes that commonly occur within an organization under the establishment of new ownership. With new ownership usually comes fresh ways of thinking about business strategy and organizational structure, such that traditional ways of doing things under the old business model are disrupted and swapped for new methods (Varadarajan, DeFanti, & Busch, 2006). The case study is illustrative of the process of internal rebranding, which encompasses long-term changes to organizational culture and human resource management within the organization, often while the more visible (public) efforts of rebranding are simultaneously occurring. According to Punjaisri, Wilson, and Evanschitzky (2008), internal branding "is increasingly seen as a doctrine to ensure employees' delivery of the brand promise by shaping employees' brand attitudes and behaviors" (p. 407).

This case illustrates an internal rebranding scenario whereby business model reinvention (see Causon, 2004), primarily by way of change in organizational structure and staffing patterns, not only helped boost revenue generation for the Dash franchise, but also reshaped attitudes and increased morale amongst its employees. For example, numerous facets of the former Warthogs' business model did not allow for employees (nor the organization) to reach full potential. Under former ownership, the franchise employed a full-time staff of just eight employees. In less than three years of taking over the franchise, the new owners had decided to increase the size of the staff to over 30 full-time employees. The new owners recognized that increasing the size of full-time staff would allow for more specialized job tasks. As a result, franchise employees became more focused on their individual job specifications through job specialization, and the franchise experienced a significant increase in ticket sales and sponsorship revenue. Instructors in human resource management courses can employ various aspects of this case while teaching about the importance of job specifications and employee specialization, and how differentiation between staff member roles can make business operations more effective and employees more satisfied.

According to Chelladurai (2006), a sport organization must be proactive in initiating and maintaining important human resource management processes such as employee training and job specialization. Taylor, Doherty, and McGraw (2008) review the importance of job specialization, defined broadly as "the degree to which specialization of job tasks is possible" (p. 50), as a way of improving worker productivity, decreasing unethical workplace behavior, and increasing job satisfaction. In the current case study, owners of the Dash franchise strategically reorganized its core business functions to be more specialized in the areas of group ticket sales and sponsorship sales. Consequently, these internal changes allowed employees to develop improved skills and experience in these functional areas, as well as devote their attention solely to their specific job tasks, thereby improving personal job satisfaction.

Questions for classroom discussion include:

1. In what ways might the refinement of employee tasks and responsibilities associated with each employee's job help improve overall business operations for the Dash?