AN EXAMINATION OF BRANDING STRATEGIES FOR SELECTED
MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF BRANDING STRATEGIES FOR SELECTED MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL ORGANIZATIONS

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The implementation of successful branding strategies is crucial for all sport organizations to enhance revenue, sponsorships, and brand loyalty. To facilitate successful practices, it is important that organizations are aware of the most common branding strategies as well as the strategies of their competitors. The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices of branding strategies for the five Major League Baseball franchises in the state of California. Data were collected from five selected Major League Baseball teams. The instrument utilized in this study was a checklist covering branding strategies with an additional section for notes. The results from this study indicated that there is much consistency amongst Major League Baseball teams’ websites, yet each team displayed individual approaches in displaying their brand image. As trends and strategies continue to evolve, it is important for organizations to reflect and progress.

Keywords: branding, Major League Baseball, strategies, professional sport
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Background of Study

All sport organizations depend on their fans in some way. Regardless of the motive, “The sports fan can be found just about everywhere, in all walks of life and in all parts of the world. What holds true across the board is a strong familial tie that expands with the bonds forged at home to the society at large. And science has shown it gets wired into your brain” (Scarr, 2011, para. 1). Some individuals have been born and bred as loyal sport fans to a particular team, while others develop fan loyalty over time due to life experiences, places of residence, etc. Regardless, all loyal fans share excitement, passion, and love for the game - and of course their team. As explained by Van Schaik (2012), loyal fans associate with their team and the team becomes a part of their identity. Therefore, fans themselves are a significant factor in the brand image of an organization. With that said, it is crucial for organizations to create unique branding strategies, which allow them to stand out from other teams and other forms of entertainment. Simultaneously, these strategies should shape the fan culture of a particular organization, as fans are also the ones who represent the organization in public.

The successful implementation of branding strategies is important, as it can enhance revenue, sponsorships, and long-term success. Achievement in these areas is also directly related to the fans. Santomier (2008) stated, “The predominant approach of the most successful global brands is not about reach and frequency, but rather about discovering ways to encourage consumers to invite brands into their lives” (p. 18). This
relates to the required creativity and innovation necessary to capture fans locally, nationally, and globally. Such creativity is vital for organizations, considering the variety of options fans have for entertainment. With a wide array of sport teams, organizations must determine the best practices in maintaining their organization’s brand, while also implementing new and exciting strategies.

Review of Literature

Research for this review of literature was conducted at Robert E. Kennedy Library on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. In addition to books and other resources, the following online databases were utilized: Business Source Premiere, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar. In this review of literature, several aspects of branding are covered including: branding and fan loyalty, digital branding and revenue, and branding and sponsorship. According to Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2007), “A key point about branding is that it goes much deeper than the names, symbols, and marks of an organization. Branding really is about what a customer thinks and feels when she sees the marks of a particular brand” (p. 173). Therefore, the following research examines the best practices of branding strategies in professional sport.

One primary aspect of a successful brand image is to create and maintain brand loyalty. In terms of professional sports, this is also known as fan loyalty. Fan loyalty is developed through positive fan experiences and memories known as “intangible associations” (Gladden & Funk, 2004, p. 194). According to Gladden and Funk, “In team sport a wide variety of associations are formed, most of which are intangible and
experiential…Some might see the game as an opportunity to watch their favorite team, while others might view it as a social outing” (p. 194). It is important for sport marketers to understand these fan motives and brand associations when moving forward with new marketing activities. Once the loyal fan base is established, organizations can further improve their brand image by implementing strategies such as, “heightened communications through a variety of mediums (email, mail, and special “limited access” events)” in order to “enhance and reinforce the degree to which committed consumers feel they are treated and truly a part of a team” (Gladden & Funk, pp. 194-195). These customer-oriented focal points help to provide interaction and incorporate the brand into the loyal fans’ daily routine. When customers feel “special,” they are more likely to remain associated with, and follow, that team. An organization’s website is a useful tool to increase the frequency of fan interaction. Video clips are one example of involving fans through a team’s website (Gladden & Funk).

Although there are numerous branding strategies that benefit organizations, there are also a few strategies organizations should be cautious of, and potentially avoid. Contrary to what many organizations may believe, branding strategies should not solely rely on a star player(s). Gladden and Funk (2004) described such caution:

In a time of open markets and frequent player movement (even among the most talented players), building a branding strategy based on a player or players may not be the most advisable strategy for communicating with highly committed fans. Instead, this research suggests the sport marketer should focus on providing an entertaining experience for the highly committed fan. (p. 197)
This is not to suggest that athletes should be left out of campaigns completely. However, it is crucial for organizations to place more focus on the fan experience. Players could be incorporated in other ways, such as special access competitions and appearances to increase fan interaction.

Additionally, event marketing is a beneficial tool for developing and enhancing fan loyalty. Close, Finney, Lacey, and Sneath (2012) explained, “Firms use event marketing to accomplish a variety of goals. Brand awareness, sales, and image enhancement are the common reasons for participating in event marketing” (p. 6). Close et al. also stated, “Event marketing offers an additional advantage, in that it actively engages the consumer with the brand and its personality. Firms investing in event marketing have the means through which they may create a hands-on experience for their target market” (p. 6). This certainly holds true in the professional sport world – when the gap between the team brand and fans can be filled, there is great potential for success. According to the MPI Foundation (2004), “Event marketing offers better ROI than any other marketing communications medium, outperforming public relations, Internet advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, and print and broadcast advertising” (p. 7). Therefore, events have significant power in uniting fans, creating valuable experiences, and projecting the brand image to the community and society at large.

An example of event marketing in professional sports includes interactive fan festivals. According to Jowdy and McDonald (2002), fan festivals include various forms of entertainment, food and sport for all ages. Fan festivals have the power to develop long-term associations, which are necessary for professional sport organizations to maintain and increase fan loyalty. Due to the cost associated with game attendance, as
well as competition, fan festivals are a great way to reach other potential consumers and
strengthen consumer (fan) relations. Jowdy and McDonald explain the fan festival
rationale:

Although most interactive fan festivals are ticketed events, ticket prices are lower
than most major league competitions and, once inside, the festival attractions are
free. Short-term revenue was not a priority when leagues first created fan
festivals. The rationale behind the development of interactive fan festivals was to
promote the brand while giving a large number of fans the opportunity to engage
and connect with the sport/event. (p. 296)

As previously mentioned, it is crucial for organizations to create and expand upon
those individuals who are loyal to their brand. The more loyal fans a brand has, the
greater the opportunity for increased revenue. Therefore, this next portion of the
literature review focuses on digital branding and revenue – recognizing the best practices
for reaching fans through social media. As social media has expanded the opportunity
for instant communication, “Fans expect their favorite teams and athletes to communicate
via these channels” (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 397). Due to such expectations,
social media has become a key component in terms of digital branding. In an interview
conducted by Ballouli and Hutchinson, Amy Martin (founder of Digital Royalty)
explained how social media can “provide fans a peek behind the scenes” (p. 396). Martin
also stated, “One of the pieces of advice we give our clients is to think about their tonality
when they enter into the social-media space…they should consider what tonality they
would use in a social setting with people, versus a hard-sell type of message” (p. 397). In
relation to this idea, speaking to fans as if they are part of the team (instead of merely an
advertising audience) can enhance the brand image and values demonstrated by an organization. Similarly, Wikman and Cottrell (2013) stated, “As you engage your fan base daily, they become more aware of your products, services, and brand. And as they become more aware, they get more comfortable with your company and this increases your chance of earning their loyalty” (para. 17).

In terms of revenue, organizations should think about how social-media can reduce cost. Social-media is a cost effective way to promote events, conduct low-cost and quality research, and provide timely customer service (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 399-400). Considering the significance of social media and its maintenance of fan relationships, it is crucial for organizations to use it effectively. Access to social-media also comes with the staffing to support and maintain it. Once fans have more accessibility, they expect constant communication in return. With the proper implementation such as efficient response rates, behind the scenes sneak peaks, and promotional strategies, social media can be a leading asset for an organization. A last piece of advice from Martin is as follows, “The most important thing to remember is to have fun and make sure that your brand’s personality shines through” (p. 399).

Another important focal point is branding and sponsorships. One critical component for organizations to remember is that sponsors are also customers (Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2008). Therefore, the branding strategies previously discussed regarding loyal fans also relate in terms of seeking sponsors. Regarding sport sponsorships, sponsors feel that good communication and complete use of the sponsorship package are crucial to success (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2005). Sport organizations must keep that in mind when reaching out to potential sponsors – the
mutual relationship, and unique sponsorship package qualities, should be promoted in order to enhance sponsorship opportunities. Co-branding is also relevant, as sport organizations must work with their sponsors and participate in co-branding at times. This relationship can be beneficial for both parties, as well as the public. For example, Santomier (2008) stated, “Through new media-driven integrated partnerships, sponsors and sport properties are able to develop products and services specific to their primary consumers” (p. 25). Once again, digital branding comes into play. Similarly, “New media technologies have significantly increased the value of sports sponsorships worldwide…” (Santomier, p. 27).

The integration of brand loyalty, digital branding, and sponsorships is crucial to the success of a sport organization. When the best practices of branding strategies are incorporated, organizations provide a basis for success in terms of revenue, fan loyalty, and securing sponsorships, all contributing to the organization’s overall image.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices of branding strategies for the five Major League Baseball franchises located in the state of California.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How are events utilized to maintain an organization’s brand?
2. What are the best practices associated with digital branding?
3. What are the best practices associated with branding in terms of sponsorship?
4. What are the best practices associated with branding in regards to fan engagement?

Delimitations

This study was delimited to the following parameters:

1. Information was gathered from websites of Major League Baseball teams in California.
2. Sponsorships, events, digital branding/social media, and ballpark attractions were analyzed.
3. Data were collected during the fall of 2013.
4. Information for this study was gathered utilizing internet research and a checklist for branding strategies.
Chapter 2

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices of branding strategies for the five Major League Baseball franchises located in the state of California. This chapter includes the following sections: description of context, description of instrument, and description of procedures.

Description of Context

Best practices of branding strategies were examined for five Major League Baseball teams: Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, Los Angeles Dodgers, Oakland Athletics, San Diego Padres, and San Francisco Giants. Major League Baseball (MLB) is a professional baseball league in North America. The MLB consists of 30 professional baseball teams that are divided in two leagues – 15 teams in the National League and 15 teams in the American League. Within each of these two leagues are three separate divisions: East, Central, and West. California is home to five of these teams, all displaying varying levels of success. In North America, other professional sport leagues include the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Hockey League (NHL). With popularity in professional sport across the board in North America, branding strategies have become a critical focal point for all leagues and teams. Although demographics vary across each MLB team, MLB as a whole serves a wide fan base. According to Nesbit and King-Adzima (2011), “Since 1993, when the Gallup organization began its survey, 49% of Americans on average have
claimed to be fans of baseball” (p. 494). According to Street and Smith’s Sports Group (2008), “19% of avid MLB fans earn between $50K and $75K” (para. 1). Also, Street and Smith’s Sports Group (2010) explained that the MLB is one of the major professional sport leagues in the United States that “boasts the highest level of female fans” (para. 1) along with the NFL.

Description of Instrument

The instrument utilized in this study was a best practices checklist developed by the researcher (see Appendix A). The checklist was designed with three columns: the first column lists 34 branding strategies, the second column includes a space to check whether or not the branding strategy was utilized/included on the team website, and the third column was designed for notes regarding the implementation of each branding strategy.

A pilot test was conducted on 3 NBA teams: Detroit Pistons, Los Angeles Lakers, and Golden State Warriors. After reviewing these 3 teams’ websites, adjustments were made to the checklist. The following branding strategies were added to the checklist after reviewing the 3 NBA teams: co-branding, venue info, countdowns, promotions, virtual tour, championships, and contacts.

Description of Procedures

Best practices of branding strategies were examined for five selected Major League Baseball teams: Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, Los Angeles Dodgers, Oakland Athletics, San Diego Padres, and San Francisco Giants. Research was executed over a
10-day period, November 1, 2013 to November 10, 2013. The instrument utilized in this 10-day results phase was a best practice checklist developed by the researcher on Microsoft Excel. The best practices of branding strategies were analyzed by accessing the selected teams’ websites. The results were measured utilizing the “yes/no” checklist and additional qualitative data from the instrument. The “yes/no” checklist referred to the corresponding branding strategies listed on the instrument. The qualitative data came from detailed notes regarding each branding strategy, collected through careful website examination. The checklist was utilized five separate times, once on each of the five Major League Baseball teams. The demographics and results for each of the five selected teams will be discussed in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3  
PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices of branding strategies for the five Major League Baseball franchises located in the state of California. A best practices approach was utilized to examine five Major League Baseball teams: Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, Los Angeles Dodgers, Oakland Athletics, San Diego Padres, and San Francisco Giants. This chapter includes the following sections: background of teams & fan demographics, most common branding strategies, and website content by team.

Background of Teams and Fan Demographics

Each of the five selected Major League Baseball team’s websites display the significant and historical aspects of their home stadiums and the valuable experiences created within these stadiums. Three of the team websites – Oakland Athletics, San Diego Padres, and San Francisco Giants – also display specific fan demographics. This section presents the background and fan demographics provided by each team’s website.

First, the Angel Stadium of Anaheim, otherwise known as “The Big A,” has been the home of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim since it’s opening day on April 1, 1966. Walt Disney Imagineering served as the manager of design and construction of Angel Stadium of Anaheim. This stadium has a capacity of approximately 45,050. The Angels claim they’ve topped 3 million fans for 11 straight years.
The Los Angeles Dodgers, 2013 National League West Division Champions, promote their slogan, “A Whole New Blue.” Dodger Stadium, home of the Los Angeles Dodgers, has undergone recent stadium upgrades and is the third oldest continually used park in Major League Baseball. Dodger stadium has seen more than 147 million fans since 1962, and in 2007 set an all-time franchise record when they surpassed the 3.85 million mark.

O.co Coliseum is home to the Oakland Athletics – 2013 American League West Division Champions. The Oakland Athletics’ slogan is “Green Collar Baseball.” The fan demographic of the Oakland Athletics is primarily East-Bay based with 28% in Alameda County, 20% in Contra Costa County, 19% in Santa Clara County, 7% in San Francisco County, 6% in San Mateo County, 6% in Solano County, 7% in Sonoma County, 3% in Marin County, and 3% in other. A’s fans encompass all age demographics. Sixty-seven percent of fans are college-educated, and 67% of fans make over $50,000 annually. Fifty-seven percent of fans are married, and the gender of fans is slightly skewed with 64% male fans and 36% female fans.

PETCO Park, home of the San Diego Padres located in the heart of San Diego’s downtown Gaslamp Quarter, attracts fans from throughout San Diego County, Southern California and visitors from around the globe. Since the opening of PETCO Park in 2004, the Padres have won two division titles, a CY-Young award-winning pitcher and been home to multiple Gold Glove winners. The Padres rank third among all MLB teams in highest unique visitor percentage. More than 1 in 3 San Diego residents attended a Padres game last year, and the median income of Padres fans is $74,840.
The San Francisco Giants, at their home stadium AT&T Park, lead all Major League Baseball teams in fan engagement. The San Francisco Giants also lead in total attendance among all Bay Area major sports. The San Francisco Giants slogan after their 2010 and 2012 World Series Championship became “+TOGETHER WE’RE CHAMPIONS.” Regarding fans, 41% of Giants fans fall into the 40-59 category, but fans range from all ages. The gender breakdown for Giants fans is 55.4% male and 44.6% female. Thirty percent of Giants fans fall in the $50,000-249,000 income bracket. The 3 largest counties of residence among Giants fans is as follows: 21.9% in Santa Clara County, 17.9% in Alameda County, and 13.7% in San Francisco County – other counties listed include San Mateo, Contra Costa, Marin, Sonoma, Napa, and Solano.

Most Common Branding Strategies

After analyzing each of the five selected Major League Baseball teams, each team’s website display many similarities, such as the MLB brand image, as well as their own brand image. The website layout, tabs, and organization of content are consistent among all MLB teams. The following includes the website tabs that exist on each team’s home page header: News, Video, Scores, Stats, Schedule, Roster, Community, Fans, Stadium, Tickets, Mobile, Shop, MLB.TV, Fantasy, and Teams. Each team’s home page also contains the following: Video Corner, Latest News, Also Trending, Blogs, Merchandise, and Social Media. Some videos are displayed on every team’s website as they are related to MLB in general – for example, an MLB fan thank you video. Regarding social media, each team has all of their social media sites displayed at the bottom of their website home page, with links to those actual sites. The social media
sites utilized for each MLB team include: Facebook, Twitter, Google +, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Instagram. Two out of the five teams examined have a ballpark Wi-Fi network. Under the social media section, each team also included “At the Ballpark,” the official MLB ballpark application, as well as free newsletter registration. Also, all teams have a link at the footer of the website labeled “Advertising Opportunities” leading to sponsorship information.

Overall, there is consistency with website design amongst MLB teams. However, once the common tabs/links are accessed, there is variation in the content, design/layout, and organization. With that said, the next section highlights website content by team.

**Website Content by Team**

This section provides the results of each team’s branding strategies in terms of their use of banner and home page, social media, events, sponsorship, ballpark attractions, and mascot on each of their respective websites.

The Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim website banner includes the team logo and a button to “place deposit” for 2014 season seat deposits. The Angels incorporated their fan appreciation through social media with an Instagram post stating, “Thank you Angels Fans! 3 million fans for 11 straight years!” A few of the Angels’ main special events include: Angels Fan Cruise aboard the Carnival Inspiration/Baja Mexico, Angels 5k Fun Run + Health Expo, Angels Baseball Foundation Golf Classic, Holiday Photo on the Field, and many other community events. The Angels do not have an official mascot, but instead have Angels Strike Force, a female cheerleader-like interactive squad that performs various tasks at home games. The Angels market their home stadium as “The
Big A.” Unique features of this ballpark emphasized by the website include: terraced bullpens in the outfield, the Outfield Extravaganza (rock fountain), the Pepsi Perfect Game Pavilion (a youth-oriented interactive game area), and more. In terms of the “Advertising Opportunities” link, the Angels do not provide specific information or additional tabs, but provide contact information for Director of Corporate Sales as well as the MLB Advanced Media contact for Online Opportunities.

The Los Angeles Dodgers website banner displays 2014 season ticket purchase. Also included is their most recent championship logo: 2013 NL-West Division Champions. Information regarding special events was not displayed, yet stadium rental information for events was provided. Regarding social media and special access, Dodgers REWARDS was developed with the following description: “Dodgers REWARDS Think Blue and Win. Connect, Be Social, Collect, Win. Win rewards by completing the social activity you already do!” In terms of sponsorship opportunities, the “Advertising Opportunities” tab leads to a white screen with a brief description/list of marketing opportunities sponsors may have access to. Below the description is contact information for Director of Corporate Partnerships, MLB Advanced Media, and Public Relations. As far as ballpark attractions, the Dodgers promote their stadium upgrades and amenities – new entry plazas, kids play areas, new home team clubhouse, etc. The Dodgers do not have an official mascot, but promote their ballpark history as the third continually used park in MLB and stands as one of the most unique and picturesque settings in sports.

The Oakland Athletics website banner includes the logo with their slogan “Green Collar Baseball,” as well as the logo for their 2013 AL-West Division Championship. An
image of star player Cespedes is also included in the border. Special events included on the A’s website include: Beer Festival, Community Fund Golf Classic, Little League Days, and Breast Cancer Awareness Day. Regarding sponsorship, the “Advertising Opportunities” link for the A’s leads to a green and gold page labeled “SPONSORSHIP.” The right hand side has an ongoing slideshow with the following statement, “Experience America’s favorite pastime with one of the American League’s original eight franchises by partnering with the Oakland Athletics.” There is also an “Inside Sponsorship” box with the following bulleted links: About the A’s, In-Stadium Ads, A’s Community Fund, Hospitality Events, Demographics, Broadcast Media, Testimonials, Game Day Promotions, Retail Promotions, Print Media, Online Sponsorship, Special Events, Contact Us. The A’s website also displays their mascot – Stomper the elephant.

The San Diego Padres website banner includes their logo and background photo of a birds-eye view of the stadium and surrounding area. A photograph capturing pitcher, Cashner, in action is also included. Special events displayed on the website include their November event, Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s Light the Night Walk at Petco Park. The Padres “Advertising Opportunities” link leads to a page with the same banner/border as the home page, labeled “Sponsorship Opportunities.” The Padres include a photo-based slideshow of players, fans, stadium, and equipment with the following tabs below: About, Signage, In-Market, In-Park, Video Board, Community, Publications, Hospitality, Online, and Contact. The website also includes the Padres Mascot, Friar.

The San Francisco Giants website banner includes their logo as well as an advertisement for their new dugout store open this holiday season. The top of the Giants website border states, “3 MILLION THANKS” and the right hand side states, “OUR
FANS ARE GIANT. #SFGTHANKS.” The primary special events marketed on the Giants website were the Snowbomb Ski & Snowboard Festival at AT&T Park, Amaluna from Cirque du Soleil, Fight Hunger Bowl, Holiday Heroes, and The Giant Race (Half – 10K – 5K – Kids). The “Advertising Opportunities” tab on the Giants website leads directly to a video of highlights and fans, with a background image of AT&T Park. This video pops up immediately while the page loads, and can be skipped. The sponsorship page is black and orange with the following statement in the center, “The San Francisco Giants are dedicated to enriching our community through innovation and excellence on and off the field.” The bottom of the page consists of scrolling statistics: 2013 attendance (3,369,107), Giants hold the longest active sellout streak (246 games) in MLB, 54% of Bay Area prime time television viewers tune into Giants games, Giants lead all MLB teams in fan engagement, 57.6% of Bay Area Adults (18+) identify as Giants fans, 2012- AT&T Park was the 5th most Instagramed location in the world. The upper right hand side of the page includes the following tabs: About, Signage, Activations, Media, and Hospitality. Finally, the left hand side of the page includes a box with the following tabs: History, Fan Engagement, Technology, Community, Sustainability, Giants Marketing Group, and AT&T Park Events. They also promoted Toyota Fan Zone’s Spring Training Sweepstakes with the following statement: “Don’t miss out on Toyota Fan Zone’s Spring Training Sweepstakes! Our friends at the Toyota Fan Zone are giving away a trip for 4 tickets to Spring Training and a meet & greet with Buster Posey! ‘Like’ their page to enter!” Regarding AT&T Park, the Giants market their home stadium by mentioning their 2008 Sports Facility of the Year award by Sports Business Journal and Sports Business Daily. The Giants mascot Lou Seal was promoted
through a link labeled “Lou Seal Appearances” with the following information: ballpark visits from Lou Seal, Lou Seal at your private events, get your own Lou Seal bobblehead.

The results presented in this chapter demonstrate a variety of styles and focal areas in terms of projecting a team’s brand image through their website. Whether it is fan appreciation, championship recognition, or star player highlights, each team incorporates their unique brand image and their own style of providing information, despite the common layout across all MLB teams. A detailed summary, discussion, and recommendations of the findings will be presented in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of successful branding strategies is a crucial factor for all sport organizations to enhance revenue, sponsorships, and brand loyalty. It is important that all organizations are aware of the most common strategies as well as the strategies of their competitors. A primary aspect that should frequently be observed to determine such trends includes team websites. This concluding chapter will include the following: a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, limitations, conclusions based on research questions, implications of the findings, and recommendations for future research.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices of branding strategies for the five Major League Baseball franchises located in the state of California. Due to popularity in professional sports nationally, organizations must execute unique branding strategies, which allow them to stand out from other teams and other forms of entertainment. In doing this, organizations must determine the best practices in maintaining their brand image, while also implementing new and exciting strategies to project their brand image to their fans, community, and society at large.

In Fall 2013, data were collected from five selected Major League Baseball teams: Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, Los Angeles Dodgers, Oakland Athletics, San Diego Padres, and San Francisco Giants. The instrument utilized in this study was a best
practices checklist covering 34 branding strategies with an additional section for notes. The qualitative and quantitative data came from detailed notes regarding each branding strategy, collected through careful website examination by the researcher.

The results from this study indicated that there is much consistency amongst Major League Baseball teams in website layout and content categories, particularly in terms of their home page and navigational tabs. All teams studied included latest news, video corners, blogs, merchandise, social media, advertising opportunities, and more on their websites. However, under each common category, teams displayed individual approaches as far as the amount of information included and the style of providing that information. The concluding trends included fan appreciation, championship recognition, team/stadium statistics, and star player highlights.

Discussion

The home page and banner of each website proved to be a primary aspect in displaying a team’s brand image. Overall, each team’s website portrayed much similarity in regards to their home page, navigational tabs, and banner. Such consistency portrayed success in the brand image of MLB in general. For instance, all of the home pages incorporated the team colors and logo. Through examination, it became evident that the website banner is utilized for one to three main focal points for an organization’s fans to view at first glance. With that said, some differences did exist. The San Francisco Giants were the only team to incorporate fan appreciation in their website banner, and they are also a leader in fan engagement. This leadership could be due to their display of fan appreciation across multiple mediums, as well as other fan engagement tactics.
Another item displayed on two of the teams’ websites, Oakland Athletics and Los Angeles Dodgers, were championship logos, demonstrating success and pride within those organizations. A common tactic was including a button for season ticket deposits on the banner. This provides convenient access for fans, while placing emphasis on ticket sales for the upcoming season. The website banners reflect the initial image of a brand. Although Mullin et al. (2007) discussed that branding is much deeper than the names, symbols, and marks of an organization, it is important that the symbols are incorporated, distinguished, and recognizable. This is especially true on a team’s website, in which the brand symbols should be apparent and aesthetically appealing, leading to more significant branding strategies. Teams should continue to include their logo and colors, championship logos, and season ticket deposit links, as well as adding a means of fan appreciation. As championship logos cannot be counted on annually, it is crucial for organizations to display unique and engaging aspects of their organization. Incorporating these in the banner allow the items to stand out devoid of clutter, easily reaching potential consumers and fans.

As mentioned previously, all teams provide the same link at the footer of their website labeled, “Advertising Opportunities.” Most variance in regards to web design occurred in this section. Some of the teams included simple information in a very basic style. Others included more detailed information, while incorporating the style and personality of their brand. In this particular section of any team’s website, the brand image and personality needs to shine through. Referring back to Kaynak et al. (2008), one critical component for organizations to remember is that sponsors are also customers. Therefore, organizations need to sell their brand image and provide a clear understanding
of why a company would want to sponsor/become a partner. Also, referring back to Chadwick and Thwaites (2005), sponsors feel that good communication and complete use of the sponsorship package are crucial to success. Three out of the five teams successfully displayed components of their sponsorship package – providing detailed information in an organized fashion, maintaining their brand image through color and logo, incorporating catchy quotes, displaying statistics, and including photographs and videos. These three teams were the Oakland Athletics, San Diego Padres, and San Francisco Giants. Other MLB teams should follow such standards, as these components depict excitement, energy, and personality of the respective organization. For the teams that only include contact information, or include brief information on a plain template that does not display their brand image, improvements can be made. This is a trend to further examine, and for all organizations to consider evaluating in terms of their tactics in relation to those of their competitors. For the teams that have well developed sponsorship pages, it is recommended that they continue to update package components, statistics, photographs/experiences, and event information.

All of the teams that were examined included social media on the home page of their website with the ability to link directly to each of the social media sites. However, a minority of the teams examined provided information regarding a Wi-Fi network at their home stadium for fans. The Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants advertised their Wi-Fi networks. Also, the San Francisco Giants website promoted their leadership as a top Instagram location, which could potentially relate to their free Wi-Fi network. Incorporating a free Wi-Fi network allows fans to “tag” or “check-in” to the ballpark right from their seats. This is one aspect of fan engagement that should be analyzed
further. With the prevalence of social media in society, especially among sports fans, it is an effective way to incorporate promotions and foster fan relationships. Referring back to an interview conducted by Ballouli and Hutchinson (2010), Amy Martin explained how social media can “provide fans a peek behind the scenes” (p. 397). This is true for the five teams examined, as they each provided all modes of social media with their links on the website home pages. The convenient accessibility to the social media sites from the home page can enhance visibility as well as the number of followers. It is recommended that each team continues to incorporate creativity with their posts to engage fans – even during the off-season with tactics such as sweepstakes and competitions.

Since the researcher had an internship experience with the San Francisco Giants prior to the study, the findings may have been impacted through subjective bias. Also, the researcher was restricted to online means; therefore, the quality and quantity of the data collected may have been impacted. For example, teams display varying amounts of information on their websites regarding statistics, fan demographics, etc; each team does not necessarily provide the same scope of information. Finally, the research conducted in this study should not be generalized to the entire professional sport industry, as the five teams examined are all in the same sport and located in the same state (California). Despite these limitations, the study does provide significant insight of how five Major League Baseball teams promote their brand image.

The evaluation of a team’s website, as well as the evaluation of competitors, provides significant value in determining the relational success in the projection of their brand image. It is crucial for organizations to maintain these sources with updated and
quality information. Although this study relied on website assessment, it is a technique that can be utilized for all organizations. As trends and strategies continue to evolve, it is important for organizations to continue reflecting and progressing.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Events are utilized to maintain an organization’s brand by reaching out to provide leisure opportunities and charitable contributions relating to the brand, or in the brand’s name, for fans and the surrounding community.

2. The best practices of digital branding include frequent posts providing fans with a behind the scenes glance of the organization, promoting sweepstakes, and utilizing a tone that would be used in a social setting.

3. The best practices of branding strategies in regards to sponsorship include: designing the sponsorship page with the organization’s color and logo, providing background information and sponsor opportunities, including statistics and highlights, incorporating photos and videos, and providing specific contact information.

4. The best practices in regards to fan engagement include fan appreciation, promotions, social media, newsletters, blogs, video/photo galleries, and special events.
Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Provide at least one unique aspect of a brand in the website banner aside from logo and team colors.

2. Incorporate team colors, video/photos, statistics, and valuable marketing information for potential sponsors.

3. Incorporate sweepstakes via social media.

4. Provide a fan thank-you video, post, and/or photo directly to fans through the team home page and social media sites.

5. Future research should expand upon the study to include more teams, in other states and in other professional sport leagues.
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


APPENDIXES
Appendix A

Instrument
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