



THE ROLE OF NSA 80TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION EVENTS AS A TOOL FOR MAINTAINING INSTITUTIONAL BRAND LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

Creating a distinctive brand (employer, company, sports, etc.), achieving a corporate image and reputation as subsequent strategic processes require knowledge of key management activities. Considering educational institutions as a brand becomes a prerequisite for their successful adaptation to today's changing customer demands, highly competitive environment, and the specific conditions in which they operate.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the initiatives related to the celebration of 80th Anniversary of NSA as a tool to maintain institutional brand loyalty. The objects of study are the means, PR activities including special events, celebrations, etc. that the institution uses to maintain its brand image. The qualitative methods "Case study" and structured interviews with experts in event organization as well as participant observation were used to implement the study.

Based on the collected information, a typology of the events was made according to key criteria: according to the subject matter, according to the scale, according to the needs of the target audience, etc. In addition, a model for the implementation of integrated marketing communications related to the celebrations is outlined.

Key words: event marketing, brand management, brand image, publicity, integrated marketing communications.

INTRODUCTION

Technological development, dynamic digital transformations, and the competitive environment in which the Bulgarian education system develops, pose increasing challenges to all institutions in this sector. The overarching goal of every higher education institution is to respond as much as possible to increasingly demanding consumers (interests and needs) by offering market-oriented, integrative educational services. Alongside this, however, another strategic marketing focus is engaging audiences and differentiating a brand in the physical and digital worlds, using the toolkit of integrative marketing communications. Embracing brand management,

and event marketing as foundational concepts in the management and development of an educational institution requires knowledge of key multi-component processes.

An important theoretical concept that needs to be clarified in this paper relates to branding and the process of brand enforcement. Sports branding is a research area that falls under the umbrella of sports marketing. A sports brand is designed through a unique combination of recognizable attributes that are intended to generate value and differentiate the brand from its competitors (1).

The importance of branding concept and brand management cannot be ignored. The difference between brand and branding is described in many scientific publications. Branding can be defined as a process in which a brand is planned, managed and communicated (2). The last decade has seen a

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shift in emphasis from branding to strategic brand management. The strategic brand management process involves designing and implementing marketing programs to create and leverage brand equity (3, 4).

The branding process can be summarized by the graphical model including four interacting components - brand awareness, brand image, brand value and brand loyalty (5) (**Figure 1**).

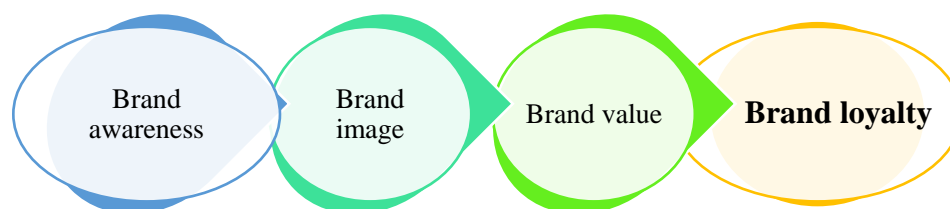


Figure 1. Phases of the branding process (Shank, 2009)

Specialized research on brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty focuses researchers' attention in two main directions: the first direction aims to clarify the attitude of stakeholders (suppliers, partners, external governmental and non-governmental organizations) towards the company. The second strand that will be addressed in this paper is the organizational level on how an organization develops a unique, distinct and enduring corporate identity in society (6).

The toolkit that can be used to achieve influence, create a corporate image, increase brand recognition and achieve brand loyalty from consumers includes a wide range of tools. Here we should look for integrativeness in the use of possible communication tools - events, public relations, advertising, publicity, etc.

Event marketing has been one of the popular corporate marketing strategies for decades. The toolbox through which it can influence public groups is extremely rich as it can transform not only their perceptions but also their behaviour. When an organization focuses on engagement, it triggers increased willingness to use and longer-term added value to consumers (7).

In the beginning, the Thoretic concept of event marketing was known as an alternative communication channel (8), gradually expanding to event effectiveness (9, 10), intentional

consumer behavior (11), and consumer-brand relationships (12).

The definition that best describes and clarifies the issues at hand here is shared by Wohlfeil & Whelan (2006) (8). They define event marketing as the interactive communication of brand values through the conduct of various events as 'three-dimensional', hyper-reality related experiences in which consumers actively participate. This in turn leads to their emotional attachment. A contemporary interpretation links event marketing to those promotional tools that are characterised by high audience participation, marked innovation, richness of experience, spatial and temporal transience (13).

Defining audiences is another activity of key importance to the operations of organizations. In sports marketing practice, the main categories are. This includes the community of people who may interact with the institution in some way, partners - suppliers of equipment, supplies and sporting equipment, financial underwriters, investors and sponsors, consumers - past, present and potential, opinion leaders - politicians, journalists etc. The goal is to create mutually beneficial relationships. PR activities that are widely used are organising special events, social responsibility campaigns, etc. *Internal* - within the organisation itself. Must be informed, motivated and made sympathetic to the activity. PR activities for internal communications, creating a good collective and a good community. Sources of various incentives -

financial and ethical create a sense of prestige, which is a two way process.

PR consists of a rich toolkit for grabbing attention and creating 'value talk' (14). These include: publications, events, news, community events, identity media, lobbying, social investment, etc. The events that are organized have different purposes - to create publicity, to generate interest, popularity, to create positive attitudes, loyalty and image towards the brands.

METHODS

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to analyze the initiatives related to the celebration of 80 years of the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" as a tool for maintaining institutional brand loyalty.

The research tasks related to the objective are:

1. Study of literature and documentary sources on the research problem - the application of the tools of integrated marketing communications in organizing events to enhance public image.

2. Analysis of all initiatives related to the celebration of 80 years of the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" and the impact they have among the public.

APPLIED METHODOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

A toolkit including the following research methods was used to implement the overall study:

1. Content analysis - research and theoretical analysis of specialized literature sources, including:

- Scientific literature on event marketing (tools, scope, objectives), promotion and communication.
- Study of organizational regulations and PR activities related to the events at the NSA Vasil Levski.

2. Methods of marketing-oriented survey - structured interview among experts (members of the organizing committee) in NSA "Vasil Levski". The position of the respondents underlines the expert nature of the overall textual analysis.

In order to realize the research tasks, a structured interview model was constructed, containing

several main research areas: promotional tools used by the organizing committee, corporate identity maintenance policy, etc.

3. Case study - used to describe a specific managerial situation related to the study of the forms of communication and interaction of NSA Vasil Levski as a leader in sports higher education.

RESULTS

Subject to dynamic changes, invasion of technological innovations, educational structures are changing their communication policy in building image, brand value and brand loyalty.

The digital presence of the institutional brand is becoming more and more preferred, but traditional channels of information and message dissemination are also being used.

In the course of the research the marketing and communication channels used by the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" in organizing the series of events for the celebration of its 80th anniversary were studied.

Traditionally, the marketing communications mix encompasses five channels: advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, personal selling and public relations (15). However, the mix of channels and media available to marketers to disseminate information and engage with potential consumers has evolved since the establishment of mass communication and continues to evolve as new technologies emerge and communication behaviors continually adapt (16).

Coordination of the different tools, effective communication to achieve awareness, image and reputation is possible through their integrated planning and application. The term integrated marketing communications has become widely established both in theoretical concepts and in their practical application.

The application of the case study method allowed us to construct a model for the implementation of integrated marketing communications related to events for the 80th anniversary of NSA "Vasil Levski" (**Table1**).

Table 1. Integrated marketing communications related to the celebration of 80 years of the NSA "Vasil Levski"

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS
CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A series of partnership agreements with companies, media, business corporations, sports, and community institutions. • Media partnerships with BNT, BNR, Darik.
PUBLIC RELATIONS (ACTIVITIES)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print Media - Self-presentation in yearbooks, newsletters and special brochures of the institution, individual faculties and specialties. • Sound media - conducting radio interviews with the representatives of the academic community, official speeches during the ceremonies. • Visual and audiovisual media - exhibitions, models, photography, video films, banners, multimedia presentations, audiovisual materials. • Media appearances of the academic leadership. • PR publications in the media.
ADVERTISING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TV announcement for the gala show "Flight to the Stars" • Publications in print and digital media. • Social media ads - Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter.
INFORMATION ON THE INSTITUTION'S WEBSITE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation and distribution of special press announcements for the organisation and implementation of initiatives. • Press releases about the events.
SPECIAL EVENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting scientific conferences and congresses "Third International Scientific Congress "Applied Sciences in Sport" and traditional scientific forums of individual departments in the Academy. • Organization and participation in educational exhibitions in Bulgaria and abroad Presentation of Bachelor's and Master's programmes of the NSA "Vasil Levski" at a traditional educational fair in Blagoevgrad - 2022 and others. • Organizing competitions, club tournaments "Choose your way to sport" - a sports festival with a demonstration character. • Awarding students for excellent grades and volunteering • Award Ceremonies of the NSA "Vasil Levski" Athlete of the Year • Participation in social initiatives. Demonstration of social responsibility. • Participation as partners in various projects (International Erasmus Plus, national programmes, etc.). • Opening ceremonies of new buildings and sports facilities Special branding of the Rectorate, academic halls and sports facilities with the initials of the institution. • Opening ceremonies of educational facilities Educational and Olympic Centre with a rich museum exposition • Special visits and tours of the institution Visits of ambassadors, presidents of federations, rectors, etc.
EMAIL MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending official invitations to the presidential administration, ministries, parliamentary committees, embassies, etc. • Subsequent sending of information and photos to key participants in the event.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active communication about events with VIPs Thomas Bach, Franz Beckenbauer, Nenad Lalawi, other presidents of international sports organizations and educational institutions.
VIDEOFILMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making videos on Youtube and Facebook
PODCASTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting podcasts in partner media
ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of an anniversary logo Merchandising Branded souvenirs and gifts Validation of the postage stamp "80 years of the National Academy of Sciences" - prestige and historical significance

Special events are part of the overall communication policy of educational institutions. In a clarifying context, the case study uses the term "special event" as a tool and process in which communication, and information flows of messages between the special event organizer and target groups, and audiences (17). The analysis of the collected information allowed us to categorize the events held, according to existing classification models (18-20). We should make

the clarification that there is no unified classification of special events in the specialized literature. Authors' conceptualizations give emphasis to different components such as audience, theme, style, scope of influence, etc. To a large extent, these depend on the intended end goal, as well as the competencies, and unconventional solutions of the people involved in the organization.

Table 2. Typology of events

Event	According to the subject	According to the scale	According to the needs of the target audience	According to the final objectives
Celebration of 80 years of the NSA	Academic	International	Scientific and prestigious	Prestigious
III International Scientific Congress "Applied Sciences in Sport"	Scientifically and applied	International	Scientifically	Prestigious
Gala performance "Flight to the Stars"	Entertainment	National	Sports and Entertainment	Prestigious, Entertainment
Solemn Academic Council on the occasion of the Day of the Academy	Academic	National	Academically and scientifically	Prestigious
"Choose your way to exercise"	Sports and Entertainment	Regional	Demonstrative, sports and entertainment	Promotion and prestige

CONCLUSION

Based on the results obtained and the discussion presented, we can argue that the concept of brand management and event marketing can be further developed and enriched in the policy of educational institutions in Bulgaria. This conclusion is a consequence of the dynamic changes of the environment in which the

Bulgarian educational system is developing, the offer of competitive educational services, the increased demands of the costumers, etc. Knowing one's own audience, both external and internal audiences, the essence of branding processes are the most essential moments in the planning and implementation of marketing

communications in order to create awareness and subsequent value.

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