Reflective practice

Personal branding project in a sport marketing class

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this practice paper is to describe an experiential learning opportunity that sport management educators could integrate into coursework to enhance their students' understanding of building a personal brand. This project best fits into a course focused on sport marketing and consists of four components: 1) Individual brand video, 2) Personal Brand Audit, 3) Personal Brand Audit, 4) Project Critical Assessment. The personal branding project has many benefits for students, which include understanding the importance of developing a strong personal brand and the opportunity to obtain feedback and assistance in the process of auditing their current personal brand. While this is especially vital for senior-level students as they prepare for entry into the job market and a sustained career in the sport industry, this strategy can also be adopted for entry-level and graduate-level courses.

1. Introduction

The traditional lecture format of classroom instruction is no longer sufficient to educate students (Williams & Williams, 2011) as scholars argue a better alternative to learning is to engage students through active and experiential learning (Ackerman & Hu, 2011; Taylor, 2003). In the former, "greater emphasis is placed on students' exploration of their own attitudes and values" (Keyser, 2000, p. 36); while the latter allows students to apply course content to "practical situations" (Diacin, 2018, p. 114). Both guide students to understand how the course concepts not only function in the professional world but also how they can be personally applied (Ackerman & Hu, 2011). Marketing scholars, in particular, have found active and experiential learning helps students develop skills such as analytical reasoning, critical thinking, verbal communication and written communication (Peterson & Albertson, 2006; Robson, 2019; Smith & Van Doren, 2004; Taylor, 2003).

1.1. Individuals as brands

Aaker (1991) defines a brand as a name or symbol used to identify goods and services from those of competitors. As such, the earliest definitions focused on brand management strategies of corporations (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006; Keller, 1993; Wood, 2000). Recent research, however, has evolved to include individuals as brands, i.e., "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts" (Thomson, 2006, p. 104). Individuals as brands are not limited to celebrities or athletes (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006); the everyday person can also be considered a brand (Kheder, 2015), and as the digital age grows to make information about individuals readily available, developing and managing that persona through personal branding has become

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extremely important (Petruca, 2016). Personal branding involves identifying and promoting an individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience (Shepherd, 2005). This process may be similar to product branding, which begins with establishing a brand identity, positioning the brand, communicating brand messages to the marketplace, assessing brand performance, and leveraging brand equity (Ghodeswar, 2008). In turn, the purpose of this practice paper is to describe an experiential learning opportunity that sport management educators could integrate into coursework to enhance their students' understanding of building a personal brand.

2. Teaching sport management students about personal branding

Over the course of the semester, content on branding in and through sport broadly and personal branding in particular was integrated into classroom discussion. Furthermore, lecture material on brand segmentation, targeting, brand positioning and the marketing mix also known as "the 4 Ps" (i.e., product, price, place, and promotion) contextualized within the context of the sport industry, informed students on how to develop, refine, and manage their personal brand in theory but also in practical applied ways. For instance, one of the noted benefits of personal branding is the ability to give individuals the opportunity to promote themselves in the crowded sport industry marketplace (Kheder, 2015). Given the general draw to working in the sport industry and competitive nature of obtaining employment in this field (Mathner & Martin, 2012), adopting this assignment can help students gain an edge on the competition by aiding in student comprehension of the branding process. This is key as Lee and Cavanaugh (2016) suggests, "a salient area for sport management students to learn is how they can more effectively differentiate themselves from their counterparts" (p. 78). Thus, in conjunction with day-to-day course content the purpose of this exercise was: 1) to provide students with an enriched understanding of branding concepts from a practical perspective, and 2) to allow students to assess their own personal brands critically.

3. Personal branding application in the classroom

Two sections of a sport marketing course with 26 students enrolled, in a Southwestern university in the United States (U.S.) participated in an experiential learning project related to personal branding in and through sport organizations. This project was designed for undergraduate students in a sport marketing class. The project entailed four components: (a) Individual Brand Video, (b) Personal Brand Audit, (c) Personal Brand Development Video, and (d) Project Critical Assessment. Each respective component was administered during the duration of the semester. The assignment descriptions for each component are provided.

3.1. Individual brand videos

To begin, early in the semester the students completed the Individual Brand Video, that is, a succinct 1-min Flipgrid video describing their current individual personal brand. Flipgrid is a free and easy to use social learning platform where students can create, record and post short videos on specific subject matter and also respond to classmates' posts in an online space. In doing so, students were asked to describe their personality. This was done by asking questions such as: What is your name? Where are you from? What is your image or identity? What is your reputation? What makes you valuable? These prompts were provided as a guide to help students reflect upon the concept of personal branding broadly and their personal brand in particular.

3.2. Personal brand audit

Next, in the Personal Brand Audit students were required to complete the following tasks: (a) Conduct a Google search on the term "brand audit", (b) Complete a free personality test of choice (e.g., brand personality quiz), (c) Revisit the question prompts addressed in the Individual Brand Video, (d) Carry out a personal SWOT analysis addressing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of their personal brand, and (e) Evaluate their social media and web-based presence, including an assessment of current artifacts and alignment across various social media platforms. While completing this step, students were encouraged to seek further feedback from family and friends as part of an introspective critique of their personal brand. Students submitted their final personal brand audit in the form of a 500–650-word written document. In conjunction with the Individual Brand Video, this focused on raising self-awareness, which Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova (2018) note as an integral step early on in the personal branding process. Furthermore, the personal brand audit provided the space for students to consider how they are strategically utilizing their various social media platforms and be mindful of how it may be helping or hindering their position on the job market, both of which are important for job seekers (Lee & Cavanaugh, 2016).

3.3. Brand development video

Following this, the Personal Brand Development Video prompted self-reflection (see Gorbatov et al., 2018). Subsequently, the students completed a two-to-three-minute Flipgrid video describing how their personal brand had developed throughout the semester with a specific focus on what the student learned about personal branding, why it is important, and how the student modified or adjusted their personal brand throughout the learning process. Similar to the Individual Brand Video, the following question prompts were provided: What did you learn about personal branding? How did your understanding and/or view of branding yourself change? What steps have you taken to control or manage your personal brand for professional development purposes? How did these steps affect the development of your personal brand overall? While this component of the project was vital in gauging student's understanding and growth that transpired over the course of the semester, a final step was necessary to assess the strengths and weaknesses

of the overall project.

3.4. Critical self-evaluation

Finally, in the Project Critical Assessment, the students were asked to provide feedback on the personal branding project itself by responding to questions administered via a discussion board. This allowed them to critically evaluate the pros and cons, while providing feedback and suggestions to improve the project moving forward. The following questions were posed: Overall, how do you feel about your experience with the personal branding project? What are the strengths of the personal branding project? What are some areas of improvement for the personal branding project? What additions could be made to make the personal branding project more useful for your professional development? Extra space was also provided for additional questions, comments, and/or concerns. Overall, the feedback garnered was overwhelmingly positive as many students expressed they were satisfied with the project as a whole and the experiential learning component in particular finding it extremely useful as they prepare for entry into the job-market.

4. Reflections on the project

This project has many benefits for students, which include understanding the importance of developing a strong personal brand and the opportunity to obtain feedback and assistance in the process of auditing and refining their current personal brand. Additionally, through this process, students not only come to understand themselves and what differentiates them from others in the marketplace but how personal branding can be used as a tool for their benefit. Being proactive in this endeavor gives students the opportunity to enhance their social capital (Paivi & Back, 2017; Tarnovskaya, 2017), strengthen their digital footprint via social media maintenance (Peter & Gomez, 2019), and increase career opportunities within the sport industry (Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013; Schlosser, McPhee, & Forsyth, 2017). As such, while this project is especially vital for senior-level sport management students as they prepare for entry into the highly competitive job market and a sustained career in the sport industry – this is something all students can benefit from and lessons they can implement for the rest of their lives.

4.1. Benefits of the project via student feedback

Student feedback provided in the Project Critical Assessment indicated students not only enjoyed this assignment but found the process to be extremely valuable for their professional development. For example, one student expressed, "The project as a whole is a major positive in my opinion. I just wish I had been taught these lessons at an earlier age in college!" Likewise, another claimed, "I felt that I had a positive and eye-opening experience with this personal branding project." Finally, one student acknowledged the advantages of the design of the project as a whole, stating, "I believe the biggest strengths of the project was that it kept students engaged throughout the semester, and allowed us to take what was taught inside the classroom and apply it to our everyday lives."

5. Conclusion

In sum, the purpose of this project was twofold: 1) to provide students with an enriched understanding of branding concepts from a practical perspective, and 2) to allow students to assess their own personal brands critically. Integrating discussions on the significance of personal branding over the course of the semester helped to make this come to fruition. Thus, while this project can be utilized in and of itself, the authors encourage additional and intentional discourse on personal branding to be included in conjunction with this to maximize student learning. Examples include but are not limited to traditional lecture material on personal branding, guest speakers from the sport industry who have developed a strong personal brand, prospective employers who can speak to what they look for in a potential hire, and more. In conclusion, while it is still an emerging topic, "there is sufficient evidence that personal branding leads to a variety of beneficial outcomes, such as enhanced credibility, visibility, prestige, promotions, or monetary rewards" (Gorbatov, Khapova, & Lysova, 2019, p. 10). This project was geared towards helping students maximize their opportunity for employment in the sport industry including sport marketing positions. We encourage sport management educators to consider adopting this project and call for further research which investigates personal branding and career outcomes unique to the sport industry.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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