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Ventures in Visionary Marketing

Identifying Game-Changing Branding Strategies in NCAA FBS Athletic Departments

Coyte Gene Cooper

Abstract

In today's competitive entertainment environment, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments are being faced with unique challenges when it comes to attendance figures and fan engagement. To counter these challenges, athletic departments are being forced to come up with strategies to build their brand with consumers. Thus, the purpose of the current research was to survey marketing staff members at NCAA Division I athletic departments (N = 46) to identify the peer departments considered as visionary in the area of branding. Overall, the research illustrated that In-Game Experience was determined as the most important area for maximizing efficiency in marketing. In addition, specific athletic departments were mentioned for their visionary approach in key areas, and the specific justifications for their success is explored.

Keywords: *branding, game day experience, NCAA, social media, promotions*

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Introduction

The continual evolution of the sport and entertainment industry has made it challenging for sport organizations to remain competitive from a demand standpoint (Smith & Stewart, 2010). Because of the extreme competition in these industries, sport entities such as National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments are being challenged with the high expectations of consumers who have become used to catered products (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). When you combine this with the fact that there has recently been a recession in the United States economy, the result is that many NCAA athletic departments are facing deficits due to boosters/donors, corporate sponsors, and consumers having less discretionary income (Drape & Evans, 2008).

In regard to the high consumption expectations, many top athletic departments faced challenges in their attendance at "big-time" sport events. Overall, data has shown that attendance at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions declined 3% in 2012 and 6% from 2011 (Solomon, 2013). When examining the first five weeks of the college football season, the study further indicated that 23 of the top 25 attendance leaders attendance was down, and that is an area that athletic departments need to address moving forward. Similarly, this appears to be an issue for student attendance around the country as well (Soloman, 2013). Even at powerhouse Southeastern Conference (SEC) institutions, this is an issue that is plaguing athletic departments:

> Winning isn't even necessarily a solution. The average student crowd to see last year's Georgia team—which finished season ranked No. 5—was almost 6,000 short of maximum capacity. Even at Alabama, 32% of student seats went unused by students between 2009 and 2012, when the Crimson Tide won three national championships (Kramer, 2013, para. 3).

In response to these challenges, experts have started to determine the reasons why attendance is down and much of it can be attributed to the expectations of consumers. In addition to having the option of a 3-D surround sound viewing experience at home, consumers now expect the game day experience to be more than just the game, and social media expectations play a role in their interest levels (Kramer, 2013). Thus, there is a strong need to develop a strategy that allows departments to differentiate themselves from other viable entertainment options (Mullin et al., 2007; Ross, 2007). In response, many sport organizations have started to invest in creative branding initiatives to enhance the in-game experience in a variety of elements surrounding the athletic department.

Benefits of Branding

With the challenges facing sport organizations, scholars and practitioners (athletic department personnel) have turned to the concept of branding as a strategy for differentiation when it comes to interactions with consumers (Gladden &

Funk, 2001; Robinson & Miller, 2003; Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008). While there are a variety of viewpoints on how to achieve this objective, several scholars have emphasized the importance of an entrepreneurial mindset when embarking on brand-building initiatives (Lee, Miloch, Kraft, & Tatum, 2008). Scholars also emphasized the importance of developing creative strategies to help build brand and generate revenue (Lee et al., 2008). However, it is important to provide basic understanding of the concept of brand before touching on the elements that athletic departments have capitalized on to create marketing initiatives.

David Aaker, a leading expert in branding, described brand equity as the assets and liabilities linked to a brand's name that add consumer value to the product being offered by a sport entity (Aaker, 1991). While it starts with the name, logos, symbols and/or marks, the most critical elements of branding are the individual interactions that sport organizations have with consumers on a regular basis. When these are consistently positive in key areas, research has shown that there are monetary benefits that coincide with strong organizational brand equity (Robinson & Miller, 2003; Ross, 2007; Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007). In an assessment of Division I athletic departments, Gladden, Milne, and Sutton (1998) demonstrated that there are several unique marketplace benefits (e.g., enhanced product image) that are realized from the development of a strong brand that increases its perceived value for consumers. In a similar study, Keller (2003) explained that strong brand equity leads to enhanced product value in consumers' minds, and as a result, customers exhibit more common repeat purchase behaviors (Gladden & Milne, 1999). Gladden and Funk (2001) further illustrated the value of product positioning when demonstrating that consumers with strong brand loyalty were significantly more likely to remain fans when a team struggles from a performance standpoint. Thus, it is critical for sport organizations to implement branding efforts that are suitable for the evolving marketplace.

Branding Elements

Given the importance of interactions in branding, it is a priority to recognize the key areas where consumers interact with the college sport product. In particular, it is critical to examine the elements that help to create interest among consumers leading up to events. In the area of marketing, there is a wide range of elements that consumers consider when deciding whether or not to consume a product. For marketing personnel, this includes areas such as in-game experience, promotions, social media presence, and website presence (Boatwright, 2013; Mullin et al., 2007; Nelson, 2009; Ulrich & Benkenstein, 2010). These will be discussed briefly before outlining the importance of the research and the methodology that was implemented to collect the data.

In-game experience. One current primary area of emphasis for sport organizations when positioning their product has been enhancing the in-game experience while attending games (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010). In essence, this concept relates to the fact that consumers expect an experience beyond the actual game when attending an event. As explained by Turnali (2013), there are at least 10 transactions that take place that sport organizations can utilize to improve the in-game experience: (1) ticket purchase, (2) app registration, (3) parking ticket, (4) concierge, (5) concessions, (6) merchandise, (7) game-day promotions, (8) Wi-Fi services, (9) use of technology, and (10) loyalty program. It is clear that top sport organizations are learning to capitalize on the entire experience for consumers and college athletic departments are embracing this concept as well.

Promotions. Another element of the overall fan experience that is critical for fans is the promotions presented during the consumption process. Traditionally, promotions have been associated with the actual giveaways that are distributed prior to and during an event to build interest among fans (Mullin et al., 2007). However, it is important to note that promotions have now been extended well beyond the in-game experience into other technological consumption areas (Scheiner, 2012). For example, the Baylor Bears have implemented a rewards program that allows followers to accumulate points on social media for sharing content related to the athletic department and sport programs. In exchange for their efforts, the individuals who accumulate the most points can exchange them for innovative prizes such as lunch with a Baylor coach or the chance to lead the football team out of the tunnel at the football opener (Scheiner, 2012). Regardless, if delivered during the event or online, promotions are a critical element that sport organizations must capitalize on to build interest among today's consumers.

Social media presence. For sport organizations, social media has become a critical element of building interest with consumers. As explained by Chris Yandle, Assistant Athletic Director of Communications in the University of Miami Athletic Department, social media is an essential job where you need to be able to capitalize on getting information to fans and constituents in an environment with a lot of "noise" (Boatwright, 2013). The use of social media has become about creating loyalty with consumers by placing value on interaction and unique experiences (Capelo, 2013). When handled properly, social media has been shown "to be an effective tool to boost fan interaction, forge connections between teams and leagues and their fans, sell tickets and merchandise, and help drive TV viewership (Fisher, 2011).

Website presence. One final element that will be addressed in the current research is the web presence of athletic departments. While social media and technology popularity has sky rocketed, website presence is still a critical area for athletic departments looking to enhance their relationship with consumers (Nelson, 2009). In addition to being a hub for access to social media content, websites are a central location where consumers can access information about key elements of an athletic department on a regular basis. Athletic departments also house innovative features such as creative auction items, themed ticket packages, and insider videos on their website. Thus, websites remain a critical element of marketing for athletic departments and was included in the study. Before discussing the research design, the concept of visionary organizations will be presented to guide the study.

The Value of Visionary

In Collins and Porras' (2000) *Built to Last*, the authors drew upon six years of extensive research to pinpoint the visionary companies that had differentiated themselves from other effective companies. By asking top executives to identify these visionary companies, Collins and Porras were able analyze performance to outline some of the underlying characteristics that made these companies unique in their respective fields, and as a result have influenced management across the United States and the world. Building on this study, the purpose of the current research was to survey marketing staff members in NCAA Division I athletic departments ($N = 46$) to identify the peer departments considered as visionary in the area of branding. In addition, the study examined some of the stated reasons why peers see these departments as visionary in key branding areas. The results will be used to identify some of the innovative practices that athletic departments can use to be successful in branding initiatives.

Methodology

The current research was an exploratory study that involved surveying NCAA Division I FBS athletic department marketing staff members to identify the peer conference departments ($N = 46$) considered as visionary in key marketing areas. The decision was made to ask respondents to identify peer conference departments because a panel of athletic department marketing administrators indicated that this is the scope of what employees would best understand. Prior to the actual survey distribution, a series of steps was taken to develop the instrument that was used in the research process. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the first step was to identify the key areas that are deemed as being the most important to marketing strategies in today's intercollegiate athletic environment. This was done by asking a panel of experts (athletic department marketing staff members) to identify the areas most critical to marketing success in today's intercollegiate environment. Because this focused on peers' perceptions of success in key marketing areas, there were only elements included that were visible enough that respondents could legitimately assess performance within their conference. Thus, after narrowing down these elements, there were seven key areas that were included in the survey in different sections: in-game experience, graphics production, promotions, social media, video production, website presence, and overall marketing effectiveness. Following this step, the 15-item survey instrument was created with three areas related to these key elements: (1) areas deemed most critical, (2) athletic departments deemed most innovative in key areas from a conference standpoint, and (3) strategies implemented by top athletic departments in key areas. Given that the sample was marketing staff members, the graphics production and video production areas were only included in the first section of the survey. The final step prior to distribution was a panel of experts (one senior AD in marketing, one director of marketing, one sport management faculty member, and one faculty member with expertise in research methods) examining the survey instrument.

Survey Distribution

The survey was sent to the highest-ranking marketing staff member in each FBS athletic department with the three other top ranked marketing staff members copied in the invitation. Thus, the sample was representative of 204 marketing employees in FBS athletic departments. However, the study was only seeking to receive one response from each athletic department so the actual target sample included 68 NCAA FBS athletic departments (ones with access to email addresses available online). Email was used as the distribution method for the online survey and the email addresses were acquired from the corresponding athletic departments. In the invitation, while addressed to the highest-ranking marketing staff member (e.g., senior AD in external relations, director of marketing), the message indicated to have the most appropriate person fill out the survey based on their familiarity with marketing practices in the conference. Following the initial invitation, a follow-up was resent to athletic departments who had not participated in the survey. At the end of a one-month period, the survey was closed and a total of 46 marketing staff members (67.6%) from the different FBS institutions were represented in the sample.

Data Analysis

SPSS 20.0 was used to calculate descriptive statistics relating to the areas of emphasis that were most important to athletic departments in marketing. In addition, an analysis of variance was carried out to identify the differences in responses based on the conference affiliation of the respondents. Finally, for the open-ended responses, two trained coders were asked to assess the comments and code them based on pre-determined categories. These results were combined and the basic frequencies and percentages were reported in the different areas.

Results

The results showed the importance of the marketing areas of emphasis for athletic departments that had individuals participate in the research. Overall, the data indicated that In-Game Experience (M = 4.49 [on Likert scale of 5]) was rated as the most important element to successful marketing for FBS athletic departments. In addition, as shown in Table 1, Video Production (M = 3.94) and Promotions (M = 3.94) were tied for the second most important element and Social Media (M = 3.82) came in at third ahead of Graphics Production (M = 3.73) and Website Presence (M = 3.54). These overall scores are included in Table 1 along with the different mean values reported by the six FBS conferences included in the research.

Table 1

Marketing Areas of Emphasis for NCAA FBS Athletic Departments

	Fan Experience	Video Production	Promotions*	Social Media	Graphics	Website
ACC	4.71 (.61)	3.64 (.93)	4.36 (.75)	3.93 (.62)	3.71 (.72)	3.29 (.83)
Big East	4.55 (.68)	4.18 (.87)	4.55 (.69)	3.91 (.70)	4.09 (1.04)	3.64 (.92)
Big 10	4.50 (.67)	3.58 (.90)	3.67 (.89)	3.67 (.78)	3.33 (.89)	3.45 (.93)
Big 12	4.30 (.95)	4.20 (.92)	3.80 (.92)	4.00 (.94)	3.90 (.99)	3.80 (.79)
Pac 12	4.38 (.52)	3.88 (.84)	3.17 (.98)	3.88 (.64)	4.13 (.64)	3.71 (1.11)
SEC	4.42 (.67)	4.25(.62)	3.67 (.78)	3.58 (.67)	3.42 (.52)	3.50 (.67)
Overall	**4.49 (.68)**	**3.94 (.87)**	**3.94 (.89)**	**3.82 (.72)**	**3.73 (.85)**	**3.54 (.85)**

$p < .05$

Areas of Emphasis Based on Conference Affiliation

As demonstrated in Table 1, each of the conferences that participated in the study rated In-Game Experience as the most important element for success in marketing. After this, the second most important element was split between the conferences. The ACC, Big East, and Big 10 all rated Promotions as being the second most important element while the Big 12, Pac 12, and SEC all rated Video Production second. However, when focusing specifically on the differences between conferences, the comparisons showed that Promotions was the only area where a statistical difference occurred ($F = 3.580$; $p < .05$). When taking a closer look, the data demonstrated that the ACC and Big East had a mean value at least .5 greater than the other conferences, and both had scores significantly higher than the Pac 12.

Additional Effective Marketing Strategies

Along with rating the six primary areas of emphasis in marketing, the respondents were also asked to identify any additional strategies that were critical to success in their marketing efforts. As shown in Table 2, the most common initiative related to Grassroots Initiatives (21.6%) such as youth clinics and community outreach to build interest in the athletic department. The second most commonly mentioned initiative related to Sales Strategies (16.2%), and in particular the outbound sales programs that are being implemented to move product. Following this, Customer Relations, Traditional Advertising, and Winning were all mentioned by four individuals as elements that are important to success in marketing. The remaining responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Additional Strategies Most Commonly Mentioned as Effective Marketing Strategies

Strategy Mentioned	Frequency	Example
Grassroots Initiatives	21.6% (8)	Youth clinics and team interaction that enhance ticket sales and perception in community
Sales Strategies	16.2% (6)	Outbound ticket sales to build interest
Customer Relations	10.8% (4)	Customer relations and creative outreach
Traditional Advertising	10.8% (4)	Advertising (digital, print, radio, etc)
Winning	10.8% (4)	Team performance and winning
Student Engagement	8.1% (3)	Student Engagement (ticket sales, in-game experience, special events)
Scheduling	8.1% (3)	Things we can't control such as date of game, opponent, etc
Coach/Team Involvement	8.1% (3)	Perceived connection with coaches, athletes
Email Marketing	2.7% (1)	Email marketing
Outside the Box Engagement	2.7% (1)	Thinking outside of the box and engaging fans in everyday life

Visionary Departments in Key Areas

The core element of the research involved exploring the athletic departments that are considered as "visionary" by conference peers in the key areas of emphasis that are essential to effective marketing. In addition, the research asked for justifications for the responses to determine some of the primary reasons why athletic departments are considered highly effective in key marketing areas. These results are presented in each of the six areas of emphasis in the following sections.

In-game experience. Overall, there were 11 schools that were mentioned by peers in the six FBS conferences. As shown in Table 3, there were three schools in the ACC and SEC that were mentioned and two schools in the Big East and the Big 12. Ohio State was the only school mentioned in the Big 10. When focusing on the reasons why these institutions were the best in the In-Game Experience area, the most common reason stated for being elite in this area related to a solid foundation in customer service (30.7% of respondents). Following this, the second most common reason was that the institutions had an engaged fan base and an entertaining environment (23.1% of responses each). The remaining responses are listed in Table 3.

Table 3
FBS Athletic Departments Most Commonly Mentioned by Peers for Best In-Game Experience and Justifications

Conference	Institutions Mentioned	Why? (N=13)
ACC	Duke, Virginia Tech, Clemson	Customer Service (30.7%)
Big East	Notre Dame, Syracuse	Engaged Fan Base (23.1%)
Big 10	Ohio State	Entertaining Environment (23.1%)
Big 12	Iowa State, Oklahoma	Intimate Facility (7.7%)
Pac 12	None identified by peers	Winning/Tradition (7.7%)
SEC	Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee	Student Participation (7.7%)

Promotions. Similar to the previous section, there were a variety of schools that were mentioned for their excellence in the area of promotions (three each in ACC, Big 10, and Big 12 conferences). However, Notre Dame was unique in that they were mentioned three times by peers for their unique approach in promotions. One of the most common reasons mentioned for excellence in this area was athletic department's creative, fun approach (50%) to engaging consumers. In addition, while they were creative in nature, these institutions were also highly professional in their approach and had a systematic plan in place. As shown in Table 4, other areas mentioned as influential factors were budget, engagement techniques, and use of sponsors.

Table 4
FBS Athletic Departments Most Commonly Mentioned by Peers for Best Promotions and Justifications

Conference	Institutions Mentioned	Why? (N=12)
ACC	Maryland, NC State, Virginia	Creative, Fun Approach (50%)
Big East	Notre Dame (3)	Professional Approach (25%)
Big 10	Minnesota, Northwestern, Wisconsin	Budget (8.3%)
Big 12	Iowa State, TCU, Oklahoma	Engagement Techniques (8.3%)
Pac 12	Oregon	Use of Sponsors (8.3%)
SEC	Florida, Tennessee	

Social media. In the social media category, while there was balance in the responses, there were three athletic departments mentioned more than once by peers for their presence on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. University of Miami, Ohio State University, and the University of Oregon were all mentioned as athletic departments that have a differentiated approach on social media. One of the primary reasons listed for this presence was their unique, creative approach (30.7%) and their visibility/presence (20.7%) on these sites. In addition, interactive strategies (23.2%) were also commonly mentioned for reasons why top athletic departments are successful on social media. The remaining factors are listed in Table 5.

Table 5

FBS Athletic Departments Most Commonly Mentioned by Peers for Social Media Presence and Justifications

Conference	Institutions Mentioned	Why? (N=13)
ACC	Florida State, Miami (2), Virginia Tech	Unique, Creative Approach (30.7%)
Big East	Cincinnati, Louisville, Pittsburgh	Visibility/Presence (20.7%)
Big 10	Ohio State (2)	Interactive Strategies (23.2%)
Big 12	Iowa State, Kansas, Oklahoma	Follower Base (7.7%)
Pac 12	Oregon (2)	Website Prominence (7.7%)
SEC	Kentucky, LSU	

Website. There were a total of 13 athletic departments that were mentioned for their website presence. Among them, Oklahoma University was mentioned the most as three peers discussed their success on developing a strong website. There were three reasons why athletic departments were mentioned for their strong website presence: visual appeal (46.7%), quality of content (33.3%), and ease of navigation (20%). The different athletic departments that were mentioned in this category are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

FBS Athletic Departments Most Commonly Mentioned by Peers for Website Presence and Justifications

Conference	Institutions Mentioned	Why? (N=15)
ACC	Florida State, Georgia Tech, Maryland, Virginia	Visual Appeal (46.7%)
Big East	Louisville, Rutgers, Villanova	Quality of Content (33.3%)
Big 10	Illinois, Michigan, Penn State	Ease of Navigation (20%)
Big 12	Oklahoma (3)	
Pac 12	USC	
SEC	LSU, Tennessee	

Overall marketing. In addition to the top four categories, the instrument asked respondents to identify the best athletic departments in overall marketing in their conference. As shown in Table 7, there were four athletic departments that were mentioned more than once by their peers in the survey in this category: NC State, Oklahoma, Texas, and Tennessee. In addition, when taking in to account the total mentions in all categories, the following athletic departments were the most recognized by peers: Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, and Notre Dame.

Table 7

FBS Athletic Departments Most Commonly Mentioned by Overall Marketing Presence and Justifications

Conference	Institutions Mentioned	Why? (N=15)
ACC	Florida State, Maryland, NC State (2), Virginia	Resources (21.4%)
Big East	Louisville, Syracuse, Xavier	Differentiated Approach (21.4%)
Big 10	Michigan, Northwestern, Wisconsin	Innovative, Risk Takers (14.3%)
Big 12	Iowa State, Oklahoma (2), Texas (2)	Quality Video Production (14.3%)
Pac 12	Oregon	Consistent Brand Message (7.2%)
SEC	Florida, Tennessee (2)	Other (21.4%)

Discussion

There are several findings in the current research that are worthy of discussion in the marketing context. To start, when asked about key areas of emphasis, athletic department staff clearly felt that In-Game Experience was the most important element when attempting to maximize efficiency in marketing. This was illustrated by the fact that it was rated over one half point higher than any other marketing area included in the research. Thus, when creating a marketing plan, it seems logical that athletic departments focus on the unique elements (e.g., concessions, entertainment, technology) that will allow them to provide a unique experience to individuals who attend their events (Turnali, 2013). However, the other elements were all rated at least as moderately important and should be emphasized as well in a well-rounded marketing effort.

In addition to the descriptive data, the research also examined the differences in importance of key marketing areas when focusing on the conference affiliation of respondents. While individuals within the different conferences seemed to have varying priorities in the area of promotions, overall it seemed that the athletic departments seemed to have similar feelings towards the importance of key marketing areas. Thus, it would seem that conference affiliation had little influence on priorities. This could have to do with the fact that college athletics is a small, connected field and the departments seem to model each other.

Building on the key central areas included in the survey, the respondents also provided other effective marketing strategies in an open-ended dialogue. As illustrated in the results section, staff members felt that Grassroots Initiatives (e.g., youth clinics and team interaction to enhance ticket sales and perception in the community) were the most effective way to build interest among potential consumers. Not surprisingly, Sales Strategies (e.g., outbound ticket sales) were the second most mentioned category by staff members. Given the popularity of these two responses, it seems likely that these will continue to be areas of emphasis moving forward for NCAA Division I athletic departments to build interest and brand loyalty with consumers.

Trends in Visionary Departments

The bulk of the study focused on the identification of athletic departments that were seen as visionary in key marketing areas by their conference peers. In addition, the potentially larger impact lies in the reasons why staff members felt that these institutions were visionary because it provides an opportunity to improve in future branding initiatives. When focusing on the In-Game Experience element, there were 11 different athletic departments mentioned in the six conferences, with no department mentioned more than once. This could point to the fact that few athletic departments are doing this extremely well or that there are a wide range of athletic departments that are extremely competitive in this area. Regardless, there were trends that emerged as important indicators of why these athletic departments were mentioned. The three most mentioned elements were customer service (30.7%), engaged fan base (23.1%), and entertaining environment (23.1%). One of the most intriguing areas mentioned was an athletic departments proactive approach to constantly make sure fans had something unique going on at all times during the game. This is reinforced by the fact that several athletic departments have invested in improved Wi-Fi connectivity at games to supplement the entertainment being offered. Thus, when attempting to build loyalty among consumers, these are clearly areas that are seen as important and should be emphasized to reap the unique benefits that come from fostering engaged fans (Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007; Robinson & Miller, 2003; Ross, 2007). In addition, athletic departments should focus on developing an entrepreneurial mindset that brings unique innovation in these areas (Lee et al., 2008).

In the area of promotions, Notre Dame was mentioned three different times by peer institutions as being visionary in their approach. Interestingly, they were mentioned for both their effective approach to promotions in both their “bigger sports” (men’s basketball/football) and their Olympic sports. One of the primary reasons (for them and other mentioned institutions) was their creative approach to ensure that fans were having fun while attending events. One specific comment mentioned that they constantly have “fun, creative contests” during competition that engage fans. The second element mentioned for success in the area of promotions for visionary departments was a professional approach. One related comment here mentioned “doing a lot in a nonobtrusive way” and another touched on “making sure that contests come off in a professional manner.” Each of these areas (concept and implementation) are critical for successful promotions (Mullin et al., 2007).

When focusing on social media presence, there were three FBS athletic departments that were mentioned as visionary by their peers: Miami, Ohio State, and Oregon. In addition to demonstrating a unique, creative approach, these athletic departments were applauded for their consistent visibility on social media and their innovative interactive strategies to engage followers. The specific comments on these athletic departments mentioned their large follower bases and their ability to consistently think outside the box. One primary example is the University of Oregon's Quack Cave and their unique approach to social media management. It is this approach that leads to a unique interaction that builds loyalty with followers.

The final element was website presence and the University of Oklahoma was the one athletic department that was mentioned more than one time by peers as being visionary in this area. When focusing on the open-ended justifications, two of the respondents mentioned the quality of their content and their unique video presence on their website. The other athletic departments mentioned were most commonly cited as having a strong visual appeal and ease of navigation. Interestingly, this was the one area where the comments fit into three specific categories.

From an overall perspective, there were a variety of athletic departments that were mentioned as being visionary from a more broad perspective. However, the reasons for success were most commonly mentioned within the following four categories: (1) departmental resources, (2) differentiated approach, (3) innovative, risk takers, and (4) quality video production. So, in addition to having the money necessary to implement promotions, staff placed a value on athletic departments that did things that were not considered status quo. This certainly fits within the mold of having an entrepreneurial mindset that is necessary to build a visionary brand (Lee et al., 2008). And with this ability comes all the benefits (e.g., enhanced loyalty, increased revenue, stronger loyalty) that come with building a brand that is unique in nature (Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007; Robinson & Miller, 2003; Ross, 2007).

Conclusion and Future Studies

Interestingly, when combining all of the different areas in the study, it seems that a constant trend in visionary marketing is the ability to develop a unique differentiated approach in marketing areas. From a visionary standpoint, athletic department personnel seem to associate visionary with risk taking and the ability to think outside the box. This is something that top athletic departments are embracing in their marketing and they are clearly being rewarded for their efforts to connect with consumers. It is this unique approach that is helping these athletic departments with fan engagement and is a primary reason why some of the athletic departments mentioned are seen as having strong brands. For athletic departments to enhance their branding efforts, they need to continue to identify creative strategies to build loyalty with their consumers. It is clear from this research that the most visionary athletic departments in marketing are ones that are passionate about setting trends through their actions.

One of the limitations of the current study is it focuses solely on the perception of athletic department personnel in the area of marketing. It does not focus on the perceptions of fans and this is something that should be addressed moving forward. In addition, while the study touches on broad reasons why athletic departments are seen as visionary, it does not specifically go in depth in these key areas to determine what makes some departments unique. For example, it does not specifically state the promotions (and planning) that Notre Dame implements to make such a positive impression on peers. This is something that could be done via case study methodology moving forward. It would be highly useful to focus on top athletic departments in key areas to gain a strong understanding of what makes their approach so successful. In addition, to expand on the study, it would be useful to conduct future research on the 10 transaction areas presented by Turnali (2013) to improve the fan experience in the future.

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