Community-based Management: Developing the Fan Base of Professional Baseball Teams

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The purpose of this study is to examine the concept of community-based management (CBM) and to elucidate the influential factors formulating the strategies for developing the fan base of professional baseball teams. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among staff members of four Pacific League teams on having regional team names and adopting “community-based management” or “regional outreach activities” in their team philosophy. Influenced by the re-organization of the Nippon Professional Baseball organization, the Pacific League teams have focused on a specific community or region, rather than the entire nation, for better management. Teams are concentrating on garnering customer loyalty from avid fan club members and repeat customers, and then trying to retain and attract customers while expanding the customer target area in their community. The community-based approach implies developing a bond between local residents and teams. Through this study, CBM is defined as “developing consumers’ attachment to and building their bond with a team through various local promotional or outreach activities within their specific area.” There are two significant factors emerged that influence formulating the strategies for developing the fan base: (1) agreements between teams and stadium proprietors, and (2) relationships with local promotional vehicles such as local media companies and a railway company.

Keywords: community-based management, professional baseball teams, developing the fan base, attachment, bond

1. Background

The Japan Professional Football League (J-League)—that was established in 1993 and according to its slogan, advocates, “nurturing a new sporting culture rooted in community-based sports clubs (J-League, “100 year vision”) (J-League, n.d.)”—brought the Japanese sports industry the new concept of “contributions to the community.” J-League clubs are required to have the geographic name of their hometown within their club name (J-League, 2015, Chapter 3, Article 27, Clause 1), and consequently, most clubs have been successful in gaining support from their respective hometowns.

Baseball is one of the most popular sports played at a professional level in Japan. The Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) has 12 teams in two leagues, the Central League and the Pacific League. NPB teams were established and developed by parent companies such as newspaper and railroad companies, and the names of all these teams except one include the name of their parent company. Each team played the role of advertising their parent company without being rooted in their local community for long time, and some teams have faced difficulties in garnering support from their local communities. For example, while teams in the Central League have been popular and are able to raise enough revenue from ticket income and broadcasting rights, the Pacific League teams suffer from a chronic deficit, as they no longer carry out the role of advertising their parent companies, and their popularity has been flagging. Since 2004, professional baseball teams, especially the Pacific League teams, have started the process of integrating into their communities, in what is generally called “community-based manage-
A series of changes called “the reorganization of the NPB” occurred from 2004, such as “relocation of the hometown to another city,” “merger of teams,” “entry of a new parent company in to the NPB,” and “establishment of a new team.” In the 2004 off-season, the merger of the Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes and the Orix BlueWave to form the Orix Buffaloes triggered the reorganization of the NPB, and gave the Pacific League teams a chance to reevaluate their management. Due to this, five of the six teams in Pacific leagues changed their team names between the 2004 and 2008 season (Table 1).

In the 2004 season, the Nippon-Ham Fighters changed its hometown from Tokyo, central Japan, to Hokkaido, far north of Tokyo, and was renamed as the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters. In the 2004

**Table 1** The change of team names in the Pacific League from 2004

| Previous name       | Current name                  | Year                  | Trigger                                           |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Nippon-Ham Fighters | Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters  | From the 2004 season  | Relocation of the hometown                        |
| Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes | Orix Buffaloes              | From the 2005 season  | Merger of teams                                   |
| Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles | Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks       | From the 2005 season  | Entry of a new parent company and establishment of a new team |
| Fukuoka Daiei Hawks | Saitama Seibu Lions          | From the 2008 season  | Insertion of a regional name                      |

Five teams out of six in the Pacific League have a vision or mission that declares coexistence with and contribution to the community. The Pacific League

**Figure 1** Distribution of the Pacific League teams in the 2015 season (region names are underlined)
established a co-parent company, Pacific League Marketing Corp. (PLM), in 2007. PLM advocates “community-based management of each Pacific League team” (PLM, company profile, para. 1) as its corporate philosophy. Consequently, in comparison with the Central League, the Pacific League and its teams are supposed to emphasize CBM.

As the success of sport teams is influenced by “the frequency of fan attendance” (Murrell and Dietz, 1992, p.1), attracting and retaining customers is surely indispensable to these teams. CBM of sport teams requires a perspective of providing benefits to the community and its local residents. This creates the possibility of securing stable revenue regardless of game results as business is developed by turning local residents into customers. Researchers have focused on the relationships between professional sport teams and local residents (Ohnishi and Hara-da, 2008; Walker and Kent, 2009; Inoue and Kent, 2012). There are few studies on the sport teams’ strategies for CBM, with the exception of a study examining the potential importance of the local community strategy of Japanese professional soccer clubs (Matsuhashi and Kaneko, 2007). In terms of the NPB teams, the studies for the professional baseball teams’ management are also quite few, and these studies focus on the history and process of forming teams (Fukuda, 2011; Yokai, 2012). The definition of CBM and the factors that influence the professional baseball teams’ decision making for developing the fan base have not been explained academically or practically. The purpose of this study is to examine the concept of CBM in professional sports and to clarify the influential factors formulating the strategies for developing the fan base of professional baseball teams.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research studies concerning “community-based”

Literature with the keyword “community-based” includes “community-based research” or “community-based participatory research (CPBR),” “community-based rehabilitation (CBR),” and “community-based tourism.” Community-based research and CBPR are methods used in public health research in which researchers involve communities by including local residents or some public facilities throughout the research process (Israel et al., 1998, 2001). CBR is a strategy that the World Health Organization (WHO) suggested in 1978 “to improve access to rehabilitation services for people with disabilities in low-income and middle-income countries, by making optimum use of local resources” (WHO, 2010, p. 1). Previous studies examined the impact of CBR (Chappell and Johannsmeier, 2009) or explored some implications for a non-governmental organization CBR program (Dawad and Jobson, 2011). Community-based tourism is a means of reducing poverty and enhancing employment opportunities, skills, and industry by using the local natural and cultural heritage as well as local resources effectively in developing countries (Kibicho, 2008; Lukhele and Mearns, 2013). Community-based tourism implies the participation of the rural community and its residents (Stone and Stone, 2011). This approach gives authority to the community and has the possibility of reducing the environmental pollution and negative impact caused by mass tourism (Kibicho, 2008; Lukhele and Mearns, 2013). None of these studies defines the term, community-based, however, from these perspectives, we can infer that “community-based” might intend support for or a relation with the community and its residents, and include strategies that influence the economic and social positive impacts in the specific rural or developing areas not covered by mass marketing.

2.2. “Community-based” in a sport management context

In the context of sport management, literature with the keyword “community-based” includes understanding the meaning and community impact of preteen boys playing sports in the community (Bowers and Green, 2013) and focusing on “the non-profit sport organization providing sporting, social, and recreational opportunities to people experiencing social disadvantages” (Mynard et al., 2009, p. 267). Although these studies did not define “community-based” either, it can be inferred from these studies that this term might imply that sport organizations are located in a particular area. Further, it might also indicate that the sport programs are provided to local residents by organizations in a specific community. Therefore, we need to review the literature concerning the association between professional
sport teams and communities or their local residents.

The literature focusing on the relationship between professional sport teams and communities included the effects and contents of professional sport teams’ corporate social responsibility activities (Walker and Kent, 2009; Inoue and Kent, 2012). In terms of Japanese literature, studies included the effects of community outreach activities and how they influenced team identification with the intention for future game attendance (Ohnishi and Harada, 2008), the economic impact of professional sport teams in communities (Ishizaka and Mano, 2010), and the relationship between a fan’s attachment to a team and to a hometown (Ninomiya, 2010). While Japanese literature has focused on the relationship between professional sport teams and communities, the concept of CBM that professional sport teams advocate and the influential factors formulating the strategies for developing the fan have not been explored.

The meaning of the term CBM that Japanese sport teams use may contain not only the meaning of “community-based” but also “close attachment.” Consumers’ attachment to the specific brand is called brand attachment and is defined as “the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self” (Park et al., 2010, p. 2). In the sport marketing context, attachment is described as “the point at which the individual has formed a meaningful psychological connection that is supported by various attitude properties” (Funk and James, 2006, p. 191). Consumers’ attachment to a specific team is developed by various factors such as team success, quality of players and coaches, and that the community is represented by the team (Trail et al., 2003; Robinson and Trail, 2005; Gencer et al., 2011; Dwyer, 2013), and is supposed to promote consumers’ sustainable long-term engagement (James et al., 2002; Mahony et al., 2000; Park et al., 2010; Yoshida et al., 2014). Consumers’ attachment is important from a team’s financial standpoint and consumers’ motives for spectating (Trail et al., 2003; Robinson and Trail, 2005; Drayer et al., 2010). In adopting a regional name and advocating CBM, professional baseball teams are supposed to aim at not only contributing to the community but also developing the mid- and long-term team strategy in the specific area. As professional baseball teams advocate CBM and have seemed to challenge various promotional and outreach activities in recent years, this study would contribute useful insights toward sustainable team management by examining the concepts of CBM to develop the fan base of professional baseball teams.

2.3. The concept of strategy

The concept of strategy must be examined for clarifying the influential factors formulating strategies for developing the fan base. Hofer and Schendel (1978) define strategy as “the fundamental patterns of present and planned resource deployments and environmental interactions that indicate how the organization will achieve its objectives” (p. 25), and describe four strategy components: (1) scope, (2) resource deployments, (3) competitive advantages, and (4) synergy. Strategies have a pivotal role for achieving organization’s objectives. Ansoff (1987) suggests that “strategy is one of several sets of decision-making rules for guidance of organizational behavior” (p. 103), and describes “strategic decisions are primarily concerned with external, rather than internal, problems of the firm and specifically with selection of the product-mix which the firm will produce and the markets to which it will sell” (p. 24). As Ansoff (1987) mentions, determining the product and its market may be the one of the vital strategies for the firms in a narrow sense.

Ansoff (1987) indicates “the portfolio strategy is the modern version of the ‘business we are in’” (p. 108), and four components of the portfolio strategy: (1) the geographical growth vector, (2) the competitive advantage, (3) the synergies, and (4) strategic flexibility. Kotler (2003) also mentions that “companies have a unique strategy when (1) they have defined a clear target market and need, (2) developed a distinctive and winning value proposition for that market, and (3) arranged a distinctive supply network to deliver the value proposition to the target market” (p. 172). One of the most important objectives and the business for professional baseball teams are the developing the fan base for securing stable revenue regardless of game results. Therefore, in this study, “strategy” is define in a narrow sense as professional baseball team’s decision making influencing how the teams develop the fan base for securing stable revenue regardless of game results.

For developing fan base, the stadium management procedures for ensuring attendee satisfaction is
one of the important issues for the teams (Kaneko, 2013), and the relationship with local governments is also an essential aspect for community-based team management (Fujii, 2011). As the teams’ external environments, the relationships with the stadium proprietors and local governments may be influential factors for the promotional or outreach activities. In addition, as Mullin et al. (2007) describes, “the most sophisticated campaigns target both existing and potential consumers” (p. 271), a team may be required to assign priority to the retention and/or to attraction of customers in order to develop the fan base. Therefore, we need to clarify the influential factors formulating the strategies (1) teams’ target area, (2) main revenues, (3) the relationships in which organizations or facilities cooperate with the teams, (4) main product and rival industries, and (5) the priority of retaining and/or attracting consumers for developing a fan base.

3. Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among staff members of four Pacific League teams that have regional names in their team names and adopt “community-based” or “regional contribution” in their team philosophy. We explained the purpose of this study and requested that the interviews would be conducted with the staff in charge of formulating the strategies for developing the fan base such as departments of marketing, sales, and community relations. Qualitative data were collected from one such member of each team who was responsible for business operations, including the departments of marketing, sales, and community relations. All interviews lasted approximately two hours and were conducted from May to July 2014.

The qualitative data collected included details on (1) target area; (2) main revenues; (3) the relationships with stadium proprietors, local governments, and organizations or facilities that teams seek to cooperate with; (4) the main product and rival industries; (5) the priority of retaining and/or attracting consumers for developing a fan base; and (6) future outlook.

4. Results

4.1. General information, target area and main revenue sources of the four teams

Table 2 presents general information, target area and main revenue sources of the four teams. Except 1 team, which was established in 2005, 3 teams have a history of about 60 years. All four teams began to use regional names—two consequent to relocation, one owing to new participation, and the other one added a regional name because of change of marketing strategy. The hometowns of two of these teams are located in provincial cities with a population of over one million people each and the other two teams are located in the suburbs of Tokyo. The target market of two of these teams is hometown and within an hour distance of the home stadium; for one team, it is six prefectures surrounding hometown; and the one remaining team, which owned by a private railway company, sets its hometown and the areas encompassed by its railway network. The most pivotal revenue for all teams is corporate and individual ticket income, followed by sponsorship revenue. While two teams located in the provincial cities can expect fees from broadcasting

Table 2  General information, target area and main revenue sources of the four teams

|                | Team A          | Team B          | Team C          | Team D          |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Establishment  | 1946            | 2005            | 1950            | 1950            |
| Present team name | From 2004 by relocation | From 2005 by new participation | From 2008 by the addition of a regional name | From 1992 by relocation |
| Hometown       | Provincial city | Provincial city | Suburbs of Tokyo | Suburbs of Tokyo |
| Target area    | Hometown and within an hour distance of the home stadium | Hometown and six prefectures surrounding hometown | Hometown and the areas encompassed by its railway network. | Hometown and within an hour distance of the home stadium |
| Main revenues  | Tickets, Sponsors, Broadcasting rights | Tickets, Sponsors, Broadcasting rights | Tickets, Sponsors | Tickets, Sponsors |
rights, teams located in the suburbs of Tokyo cannot because these teams have a weak relationship with the media.

4.2. Relationship with the home stadium

Table 3 shows information on the operation of the home stadium. The home stadiums of three teams, except team C, are the public facilities. Team B and Team D are the stadium administrators under the City Park Law and a designated administrator system. The home stadium of Team C is owned by the railway company, and Team C is the stadium administrator. Teams B, C, and D are stadium administrators themselves, and due to this, they can hold down the rent and extend or reconstruct the stadium with the stadium proprietor’s permission. They can also earn profits from the sale of sponsors’ advertising displays, food and beverages, and merchandise at the stadium. On the other hand, a non-stadium administrator cannot extend or reconstruct the stadium. Therefore, Team A has to pay the stadium rent and a part of its profits at the home stadium from its sales. Furthermore, as one of the interviewees said, “As the home stadium has many steps, I wonder whether aged and handicapped people might feel inconvenienced at the stadium, which makes their attendance less frequent.” Even though the stadium may be new, clean, and has an excellent design, teams still need to handle these concerns appropriately in order to retain customers. For formulating strategies for developing the fan base, stadium management is supposed to be one of the essential factors for teams.

4.3. Relationship with the local government

One of the interviewees said that the team management urge public officers to wear the team uniform to increase the chances of local residents seeing it. Every team makes an effort to blend into the community and to develop favorable relations with public institutions, including city halls and educational boards, and elicit cooperation from them in an active manner. Teams tend to consult with governmental agencies for the implementation of their community outreach activities such as holding baseball clinics, distributing free tickets, and visiting kindergartens, schools, and hospitals. While such activities have the aspect of contributing to the community, the teams also intend to develop good relations with the local residents.

4.4. Team products and competitors

When it came to the teams’ core product and competitors, each team could not define what these were clearly. However, two aspects of the product mainly emerged from the answers. One of them was “the products may be not only games but also the entertainment service.” This thought accords with scientific opinions that not only the game that is a core product but also the product extensions are important (Mullin et al, 2014). The other one was “some activities that team can build a bond with local residents.” The concrete ideas were “the promotional and outreach activities over which individuals can build a bond with the team,” or “something that makes local residents feel a sense of ownership with the team.” As the research studies for brand equity of sport teams mentioned (Gladden and Funk, 2001; Bauer et al., 2008), teams might recog-
nize local residents’ identification or loyalty to team is imperative for developing a stable fan base as well as core product such as team performance or players.

The teams had two different viewpoints regarding business competitors. Three of the four teams replied that their competitors were other entertainment businesses, rather than other baseball teams or J-League clubs. “Entertainment business” implies fee-based events or free events such as families spending time together in the park. The other viewpoint, contrary to the first, was that other sport teams or clubs were competitors and entertainment businesses were not. As one of the interviewees stated, “The number of junior high school students in this prefecture has not been decreasing but the number of players in junior high school baseball teams has. Considering this, the promotion of baseball may have been insufficient these last 10 years. From this viewpoint, the competitors may be J-League clubs because the number of football fans and players has been increasing.” Another reason given was, “Even though the stadium is located on one’s commuter line, one may want to go straight back home and not drop in at the stadium after work. We cannot necessarily say that the competitors are other entertainment businesses.”

4.5. Retaining and attracting customers

All four teams have tried to retain their loyal customers and repeat attendees, and then to target new customers. Specific answers were, “After changing of marketing strategy, we focused on garnering repeaters, and we are trying to attract new customers while expanding our market area for now” or “At first we tried to retain loyal customers and fan club members.” Teams try to grasp the needs of existing fans or repeat attendees to retain customers while providing customer satisfaction in and out of the stadium by incorporating elements such as supplying food and drinks, holding performances between innings, and implementing community outreach activities. Teams cannot accurately measure customer attributes of attendees other than fan club members, who constitute approximately 30 percent of all attendees. Teams have difficulty retaining customers who only attend games around three to four times per season. Specific answers were, “Although we have tried to retain casual customers who may become loyal ones, we cannot do so for various reasons such as their job relocation or preparation for their children’s entrance examinations” or “We cannot find out the reasons for not being able to retain casual fans.”

To attract new customers, teams distributed free tickets to children and other residents and held team activities and baseball clinics conducted by the players, team staff members, and official team mascots. The purpose of these activities is not only to promote baseball or organize outreach activities but also to increase points of contact between teams and consumers. Specific remarks were, “The profit from outside the stadium is small, but establishing contact with the community is very important.”

Four teams have experienced being League champion after the reorganization of the NPB. Two of the interviewees mentioned, “We try to retain the fans that began to follow our team when we were in line for the championship” and “we have been supported by steady fans since our golden era.” Although team success and team history are uncontrollable factors, both of them may be important for retaining and attracting customers. As for controllable factors, local vehicles are recognized as very important promotional tools for teams. As one of the interviewees stated, “I think we have a good relationship with the local media.” Local mass media such as local TV stations and newspapers cover not only games but also various topics pertaining to teams every day in the provincial cities. By contrast, for the teams in the suburbs of Tokyo, as the media market is nationwide, the games and team topics are supposed to be recognized as low-viewership programs and not good media content. From this point of view, these teams do not expect any broadcasting rights revenue. Teams located in the suburbs of Tokyo with no local promotional vehicles but with many business competitors could be in a more serious situation than teams located in the provincial cities. One of the interviewees of a team located in the suburbs of Tokyo, whose owner is the railway company, responded, “Media exposure is quite difficult for our team, but our strength is we have a railroad network instead of media.” That means this team can provide precise information to the community in the train or at the station. The team tries to compensate for its lack of involvement with the media by utilizing its parent company’s railroad stations and network.
5. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of CBM and to elucidate the influential factors formulating the strategies for developing the fan base of professional baseball teams. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among staff members of four Pacific League teams on having regional team names and adopting “community-based management” or “regional outreach activities” in their team philosophy.

Influenced by the reorganization of the NPB, the Pacific League teams have focused on a specific community or region, rather than the entire nation, for better management, which is meant to be the first step of CBM. The first phase of this community-based approach by teams has been to garner customer loyalty from avid fan club members and repeat customers. The second phase has been to retain casual fans (i.e., those who attend three to four games per season) and to target new customers while expanding the customer target area within a community.

Ensuring customer loyalty and satisfaction is essential as it would influence their ticket repurchase decisions (Oliver, 1999; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Tsuji et al., 2007; Taylor and Shanka, 2008). Stadium design and services also directly influence attendees’ desire to stay (Wakefeld and Sloan, 1995). From these perspectives, it is critical for teams to manage customer attendee satisfaction/dissatisfaction levels at the stadium. How much team can manage the stadium is supposed be an essential issue to retain customers. As for retaining and attracting customers, local media are recognized as important promotional tools. Each team has been blending into the local communities and promoting itself locally for customer acquisition. The teams located in the suburbs of Tokyo cannot receive local coverage from the media owing to media companies choosing to broadcast nationwide instead. Therefore, in order to resolve these issues, teams need to cooperate with the local railroad and lifeline companies. From these perspectives, there are two significant factors emerged that influence formulating the strategies for developing the fan base: (1) agreements between teams and stadium proprietors, and (2) relationships with local promotional vehicles such as local media companies and a railway company (Table 4).

The community-based approach implies developing a bond between the local residents and a team. An effective way to develop it is by increasing points of contact between a team and the local residents. Even though teams may not satisfy all residents’ needs, they still need to make a concerted effort to be a part of the local community, especially to blend into residents’ daily lives. Regarding CBM, one of the interviewees stated, “The number of attendees increases when the team maintains high performance; however, the number of attendees does not decrease when the team’s performance is poor. It may show the benefit of this community-based approach.” From this comment, local residents appeared to be interested in team games regardless of team success, and professional baseball teams might be in the process of becoming a part of the community.

Through this study, CBM can be defined as “developing consumers’ attachment to and building their bond with a team through various local promotional or outreach activities within their specific area.” For implementing this management approach, teams must develop favorable relationships with essential local facilities such as home stadium proprietors, local governmental agencies, and promotional vehicles within the community.

6. Limitations and Further research

This study might have several limitations. First, we focused only on four of the six teams in the Pacific League. Of the two teams that were not included, one of them does not have a regional name in the team name and the other does not advocate “community-based management” or “regional contribution” in its team philosophy. However, these two teams might have already started implementing
community-based team management. As there are 12 teams in the NPB, we need to collect details from more teams at this point.

Second, the qualitative data of each team was collected from one staff member of each team. We were able to conduct the interview with the appropriate person by explaining our purpose before the interview. However, more than two staff interviewees per team may be favorable for obtaining data that is more objective.

Third, even though teams suggested that ticket income from individuals and corporations was important, we only focused on individual consumers. The characteristics of corporations as ticket consumers should be examined as part of CBM.

Finally, for future research, to examine the effectiveness of CBM in further detail, more research would be required such as measuring the effects of teams’ promotional or outreach activities on local residents. What is more, nowadays, as every team is continually proposing new promotional ideas, we need to observe professional baseball teams on a regular basis.

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