



BRAND AND CORPORATE IMAGE OF A SPORT ORGANIZATION AS A FACTOR OF BUILDING LOYALTY

**Agnieszka Rak, Strategic Management Department, Faculty of Economics,
Wroclaw University of Economics, Poland,
agnieszka.rak@ue.wroc.pl, rak.agnieszka@gmail.com, +48 501 793 391**

ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of focusing on customer loyalty on example of Polish sport organisations which neglect this area in their marketing strategies. For members of sport organisations who provide a balanced healthy lifestyle or fans and supporters who are a part of a TV or stadium audience sport means strong emotions, love for the game, competition and values they share. Sport organisations give their customers opportunities to practise their beliefs and engage in rituals that develop and strengthen connectivity to their ideologies and the brand, too (Head et al., 2012, p. 209). It is also proofed that corporate reputation may effect satisfaction and loyalty of consumers (Chun, 2005, p. 91). Strong brand and the good reputation have become an important beneficial attribute of an organisation nowadays (Davies et al., 2010, p. 530). When, on the other hand, poor performance of the organisation (or an athlete or a whole team in case of sport industry) may destroy its reputation and cause poor self-esteem not only of employees or members but most importantly of customers (fans and supporters) (Arnett et al., 2003, p.92). Fans can be also a public relations mechanism who spread the word through word-of-mouth (Hopwood, 2010, p. 140). That is why sport organisations should consider their fans as customers for whom brand and organisational image are factors strenghtening loyalty that also play important part of their lives.*

Design/methodology/approach: *Customers (also fans of Polish football teams) were sampled (N=150), with qualitative and quantitative results suggesting that there are many factors influencing reputation of Polish football teams what builds (often a negative) an image of the whole discipline in Poland.*

Findings: *The research revealed that even though football is the most popular sport among Polish fans, even those loyal fans do not share only positive opinions of their favourite teams (also in case of management). In their opinion football clubs do not focus as much as they should on customer satisfaction, which does not attract potential customers.*

Originality/value: *Most of researches focus on business performance, financial stability of sport organisations, and effectiveness of sponsoring or media attention in Poland. There is almost none attention paid on fans and supporters as consumers. The study shows an importance of implementing business strategies in polish sport organisations that focus more on customer, building loyalty and attracting customers. Managers of those organisations should concentrate on customers as much as they focus on sport results. They should consider the game and a team as a product (or service) that has to be presented on the market properly.*

Keywords: image, brand, reputation, sport, organisation, loyalty

INTRODUCTION

Football is the most popular sport discipline in Poland. According to results of a research in run annually by ARC Rynek i Opinia (2013, p. 6) almost 60% of people in Poland are football fans (38% are volleyball fans, 38% ski jumping fans and 29 are boxing fans). Football has a strong influence on Poles (brings values of fair play, desire for physical activity and becoming a sportsman, brings people together) also in case of purchase decisions (buying sponsors products or product offered by the club or team, watching and attending games, etc.). Strong emotional bonds between fans and their favourite discipline, team or a sportsman is what distinguishes sport on the market of all other goods and services. The mechanism of creating those relationships is very important for sport organisations. Fans identify themselves with an organisation (its values, qualities, interests, origins, tradition, etc.) and became ambassadors of its brand (Hopwood, 2010, p. 140). The importance of creating bonds between company and consumers is emphasised nowadays. The desired partnership between an organisation and its stakeholders leads to mutual trust and loyalty, that strengthen its position on a market (Morrison and Wilhelm, 2004, p. 1690). It is said that one of best and most successful marketing strategy is the one focused on maintaining and increasing level of involvement and loyalty of fans and participants (Kontogianni *et al.*, 2011, p. 15). Those relationships are created through displaying and promoting the brand of a product (team, sports man, stadium, event) or the entire organization constantly and consistently, and it often leads to loyalty. Strong brand is a very important asset of an organisation because is a carrier of values and ideas desired by consumers for enriching their lives. People, fans too, surround themselves with brands that became a fulfilment their lives or even personality.

The aim of this paper is to present how both brand and corporate image are important in a process of creating loyalty between sport organisations and their customers (fans). Power and Hauge (2008, p. 125) suggest “our tastes in brands are seen as social tools and indicators that work alongside a host of other symbols, objects, and activities as weapons and reflections of our identities and aspirations”.

Brand in sport

Brand is defined by American Marketing Association as the name, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's product or service as distinct from those of other sellers (AMA Dictionary). It is a tool of identification of the company and its offer on the market, and in the minds of clients it becomes a subjective image, which is called brand image. Brand image is described as “the perception of a brand in the minds of persons and is a mirror reflection (though perhaps inaccurate) of the brand personality or product being” (AMA Dictionary). It stands for what people believe, their thoughts, feelings and expectations towards a brand.

Both brand and its image make an offer real and enable to distinguish from the competition by proofing a quality and source. A positive brand image is important factor in consumer choices in purchasing process, because it makes those decisions easier to make. From the point of view of the company it contributes to acquiring new clients, caring about present ones, which determines the acquisition or maintenance of a strong market position. The brand is an integral part of the organization that constitutes a promise concerning the offered

features, functions and value of a given product or service (Mruk and Chłodnicki, 2008, p. 13). A strong brand is characterized by its familiarity and recognition by consumers, perceived quality, loyalty, as well as its visibility on the market. Brands functioning on the market become a kind of social glue that attracts and concentrate customers around them. Consumers search for brands that complement their lives with values, emotions, giving the status of consumption, which affects their lifestyle.

A special case of the brand is the one related to sports. It can be a brand of sports team (club), organisation, event, coach, product, professional league, equipment, facility or television programme, etc. This means that the concept of "brand in sport" is a broad definition and may identify commercial and social (non-profit) entities that offer services and products that satisfy needs in the scope of sport and recreation. What distinguishes the brand in the business of sport is the strength of its impact and ability to influence on emotions, as well as passion and commitment that unite fans/consumers by creating strong ties between them (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009, p. 722).

A strong brand can be characterised with five main attributes, which are: brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, consumer loyalty and other brand assets (Witek-Hajduk, 2011, p. 40). Therefore, a strong brand is characterized by its familiarity and recognition by consumers, perceived quality, loyalty, as well as its visibility on the market. It constantly is influenced by changes taking place on the market and in the socio-economic environment of consumers and organisation itself. This means that to maintain a strong brand, an organisation has to manage and support relationships between the brand and consumers (loyalty) and take care about elements like image, quality and awareness, which are all related to performance of the organisation. Different aspects are important for consumers in purchase decision process. They may consider (Kuś, 2011, p. 161):

- the external appearance of people and place providing services and their image (hairstyles, clothing, interests, lifestyles, successes, products used and opinions of sportsmen as well as design, appearance, history, comfort, safety of a stadium, gym or court),
- the opinions of other consumers (ideologies, believes, customs of other fans, supporters or members),
- feelings as to direct contact with the company (experienced through meeting sportsmen, attending the game, contacting sport organisation, ticket or product purchase),
- promotional activities of the company (advertisements, memberships, merchandising, hospitality).

The convergence of those elements, therefore, also associations connected with the brand, determines its cohesion, which affects the unique brand image. Brands that have unchangeable external attributes over time (logo, colour, slogans, etc.) have a chance to permanently take root in consumers' awareness. This means that the consistency and durability of an image reinforces the familiarity of a brand and its strength (Gwinner and Bennett, 2008, p. 413). Fans become extremely attached to team symbols, colours and arms (they often brand themselves with "team" tattoo) so they do not accept any changes.

When a brand is recognised, known and accepted even by those, who despite not using it are aware of it, it is perceived as a market leader that achieves success, offering products or services of high quality. In such a situation the brand becomes something expected through its image and creates demand. Today, the consumption of goods, and mainly the values,

which they provide through its brand, is what connects people. Numerous examples of "consumer communities" can be identified that are integrated around the brands of specific goods and services, where buyers establish ties among each other through common interests, preferences and exchange of opinions and experience. A particularly active place of consumers jointly celebrating a brand is social networking services and events organized by companies for their customers (so-called "brandfests") (Avery, 2012, p. 149). The development of social networks depends on the activity of consumers and the need for exchanging information between them. While the organization of events by companies is a tool for building trust and loyalty of clients towards a brand.

Image and reputation of sport organisation

Image may be described as outsider's (fan, participant, client, partner, competitor etc.) perceptions of the organisation (Lahdesmaki and Siltaoja, 2010, p. 209). American Marketing Association Dictionary (AMA Dictionary) defines image as "consumer perception of a product, institution, brand, business, or person that may or may not correspond with reality or actuality". The concept of reputation is wider because it is a synthesis of the opinions, perceptions and attitudes of an organisation's stakeholders including employees, customers, suppliers and investors and community (Chun, 2005, p. 93). As Corley *et al.* (2000, p. 59) suggest, the reputation is a strategic concept which is centered on long-term impressions of the organization that are created corporate images (that exist as actions, media stories, advertisements, annual statements, events, games, publications) that may be intentionally or unintentionally shared by an organisation. Organisation can manage how others perceive it. Managers and academics believe that the image of an organisation (whether or not a company is seen as reputable) affects market performance (Davies *et al.*, 2010, p. 530). It means that having a good image and reputation becomes one of the most competitive advantages nowadays and sport organisations in Poland become more focused on managing it. Poor performance of an organization or in case of sport a team or a player can lead to poor self-esteem of fans, customers, even employees and sportsmen what may influence a corporate image and reputation (Arnett *et al.*, 2003, p.92).

According to Brown, *et al.* (2006, p. 101) there are four main perspectives of how an organisation may be perceived by internal and external stakeholders, which are:

1. Identity: members' and insiders' perception of an organisation. It is an answer to a question: Who we are as an organisation?
2. Intended image: elements and images that organisation desires to be associated with. It is an answer to a question: What does an organisations want others to think about the organisation?
3. Constructed image: values and images that an organisation believes it is associated with in minds of stakeholders. It is answer to a question: "How does an organisation believe it is perceived and associated with?"
4. Corporate image or reputation: associations and reputation representing how is an organisation perceived by stakeholders. It is answer to a question: How is the organisation actually perceived by others?

Both image and reputation are influenced, to a certain extent, by the message the organization sends through its actions (the intended organizational image), it also depends on other outside sources (their opinions and attitudes), such as competitors, industry analysts, consumer

activists, the media etc. (Boros, 2009, p. 646). Corporate reputation affects behaviour of stakeholders who are very important for an organisation such as employees (influences retention), customers (their satisfaction and loyalty) (Chun, 2005, p. 91). In a model of customer based corporate reputation presented by Walsh *et al.*, (2009, p. 191-192) there are four factors to be analysed: customer satisfaction and trust which are predictions of a reputation, and loyalty with word of mouth behaviour that are consequences of corporate reputation. That means that organisations have to focus on customer orientation aspects and quality of offered services and products to maintain customer satisfaction and trustworthiness what may lead to loyalty.

Loyalty of sport fans

Loyalty towards a brand is the degree to which consumers maintain a positive attitude in relation to a given brand or organization, they are faithful and willing to buy its products or services, regardless of the changing economic factors, therefore, in a situation where it would be rational to benefit from a competitive offer (Witek-Hajduk, 2011, p. 184). This attitude is the subjective feeling of a given customer and is related to attachment to a given brand. Consumer loyalty towards a brand is defined also as extended trust. Loyal fans are those who hold favourable attitudes toward a sport organisation, recommend it and promote among other people and exhibit repurchase behaviour (Javadein, et al., 2008 , p.4).

Trust is a key value building loyalty of two sides, but maintaining the principle "concentrating activities on customers based on a set of values that place buyers on a pedestal and in the centre of attention" (Gulati, 2008, p. 87). The strength of loyalty towards a brand may arise from (Patkowski, 2010, p. 110):

- the consumer's assimilation of the feeling that a given brand best meets his/her needs and gives him/her unique benefits desired,
- creating an emotional tie between the consumer and the brand being the result of the brand having an impact on the consumer,
- matching the brand image to the personality and expectations of the consumer.

This means that at the moment the consumer makes purchase decisions, he/she subconsciously compares two systems of values - his/her own and that represented by the brand.

Enthusiasm, identification and passion for sports bonds fans (supporters) with sport organisations, teams, players and also other fans by building strong interpersonal relationships through experiencing different but strong emotions together (Hunt *et al.*, 1999, p. 440). Sport organisations give their fans opportunities to practise their beliefs (about a game, rules, fair play, strategy) and engage them in rituals (rooting, chanting, wearing teams' colours, watching game together) that develop and strengthen connectivity to their ideologies (Head *et al.*, 2012, p. 209). Passion and most importantly loyalty towards brands in sport can have an irrational basis because buyers are mainly guided by emotions and acquire products and services related to the brand (team, player, sport discipline, etc.) regardless of their prices, costs incurred or quality offered (Bühler and Nufer, 2010, p. 65). The typical fan will not change a club or player he/she supports over time due to momentary failure or decrease in form (Hopwood *et al.*, 2010, p. 144). The change of preferences, which may happen, is usually condemned by the surroundings and badly seen, and can result from low attachment

and submitting to a fashion for a given discipline, where successes are achieved at a given moment. The more a fan identifies with a team or sports organization, the more it is likely that over time the strong relationship between him/her and the organization or brand will turn into loyalty (Masteralexis *et al.*, 2012, p. 56).

Sport fans spontaneously make purchase decisions based on. Their behaviour on the market may appear irrational as they result from passion, the assessment of their own identity and the brand. From the point of view of behaviour of consumers on the market, fans are unique, because long-term loyalty is something that can be very difficult to achieve on other markets. Furthermore, fans make sure to constantly publicly emphasize their membership and preferences towards a club. Their statements, i.e. (Greenhalgh *et al.*, 2011, p.45): "I often watch, listen to, read about a given sport", "I have been a fan of this sport for a long time", "I know the rules of the game in this discipline" or "I'm interested in this sport". There are three main consumption behaviours typical for sport fans (Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012, p. 276):

- usage – in-person and media-based attendance (attending games, organised events, meetings of fans, rooting, meetings with team or sportsman, watching a game on TV or online)
- responsiveness to product merchandising (purchase of clothing and gadgets with team logo, name or colours, collecting team gadgets, media releases, autographs),
- word-of-mouth communication – fan talking about the team (with other fans, friends and family, encouraging other people to attending games).

However, in order for people to be loyal and willing to represent and promote the brand of a product (team or a sport organisation) it is necessary to awaken their passions through trust towards the brand, and is what the company is responsible for (Lobby, 2012, p. 19). Sport supporters may be divided into two main groups: television audience and spectators in a stadium or arena (Bühler and Nufer, 2010, p. 68). Fans that attend games may be oriented on consumption (they are not loyal to a certain team, because they only want to be entertained, spend their spare time and have fun), discipline (those are loyal and passionate fans, tracking results of their favourite team, analysing tactics and technical aspects) or an event (those are ground hoppers, ultras and hooligans who don't care about the match itself). Sport organisations should know and understand desires of their fans to be able to fulfil them and to build trust and loyalty. They also should decide on which fans they should focus are which are important for them. Fans considered as “ultras” always show support for their favourite team (not only at a stadium), but on the other hand they often discourage those people who are on consumption (with their attitude, vandalism acts and aggression towards competing team) and want to spend their time with friends and family in a friendly and safe place (they also consumers who are willing to buy gadgets, beverages food, and to pay for extra services).

Polish sport organisations are more aware nowadays and start to care more about their fans and members. Some of them focus more on inviting families to the games, condemning acts of aggression. They understand that loyalty of fans of important for them (it brings profits, attracts sponsors, and promotes teams by fans by word-of-mouth marketing). Football teams try to attract their fans and potential customers by offering loyalty programmes. Fans are able to get club cards that let them get discounts and buy tickets for games. The truth is that those initiatives do not build trust and loyalty but rather destroy the brand and lower brand equity. They encourage fans to profit from discounts only (Muller, 2012, p. 13).

Sport is often considered as powerful tool for community building (Warner *et al.*, 2012, p. 1000). It may also yield images of healthy lifestyle that may be distributed among community members. Sport organisations are aware of it and often decide to encourage social responsibility of supporters and participants through activities that involve supporting community or charitable societies (Ratten, 2011, p. 766). That involvement brings benefits and positive effects for both sport organisation (better organisational image, loyalty and stronger relationship with community and fans) and the community (integration, support, awareness, health, patronage intentions of sport consumers, emotional relationship with the sport organisation) (Walker and Kent, 2009, 759).

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Presented study has a preliminary character. It highlights which factors influence perception of brands of Polish football teams as well as what does loyalty mean for fans. During quantitative research fans of sport organisations (football clubs) were sampled (N=120). Men and women between 20 and 32 years old were surveyed. Those young people represent generation of conscious and independent consumers, for whom sport plays an important element of life.

Almost half (42%) of surveyed fans support specific team usually because it is from the same region or city they live (Take in Figure 1.). Smaller group of people admitted that they are fans because the team succeeds and has excellent sport results (20%) or it is open for cooperation with fans (13%). It is possible that people more often are loyal to local sport teams who they can relate to (they have the same origins, traditions, history, values, relatives used to be members or players, or parents are or used to be fans of). At the same time they show support to a different or even foreign team whose successes, team members, coaches, tactics and skills are outstanding and are in some way a role model. Fans express their loyalty towards a team with strong emotions (with acts of loyalty like: wearing teams colours, having team gadgets at home, in a car in a place visible to others, tattooing their body with team logo, writing posts about the team online, joining supporters organisations) and sometimes it becomes similar to religion (believing that the team is the best one, singing songs with other supporters, joining rituals, fighting for a team). Nevertheless, they admit that they understand that football clubs focus on financial profits the most, and this main goal is followed by entertaining the society, sport education, development of sport and serving society as the least important. According to the findings of presented research, actions taken by football clubs and sport organisations toward communities (also socially responsible activities) are usually local. Even sport organisations run nationwide events, customers (fans) note, take part in and remind those local ones. It is possible that football clubs in Poland focus more on getting involved in local rather than nationwide initiatives because they understand importance and impressiveness of the bonds with local communities or it is due to limited budgets they manage. It is understandable that as members of local communities they focus on solving local problems. In opinion of respondents of the research, focusing on local initiatives is a good direction for sport organisations in Poland. This way football teams may show their respect and build loyalty and strong bonds with fans on values like trust, origin, history and tradition, and that is why they support them locally. The survey revealed that fans believe that social activism of football clubs is a great opportunity for them to improve image among those who are not fans and supporters.

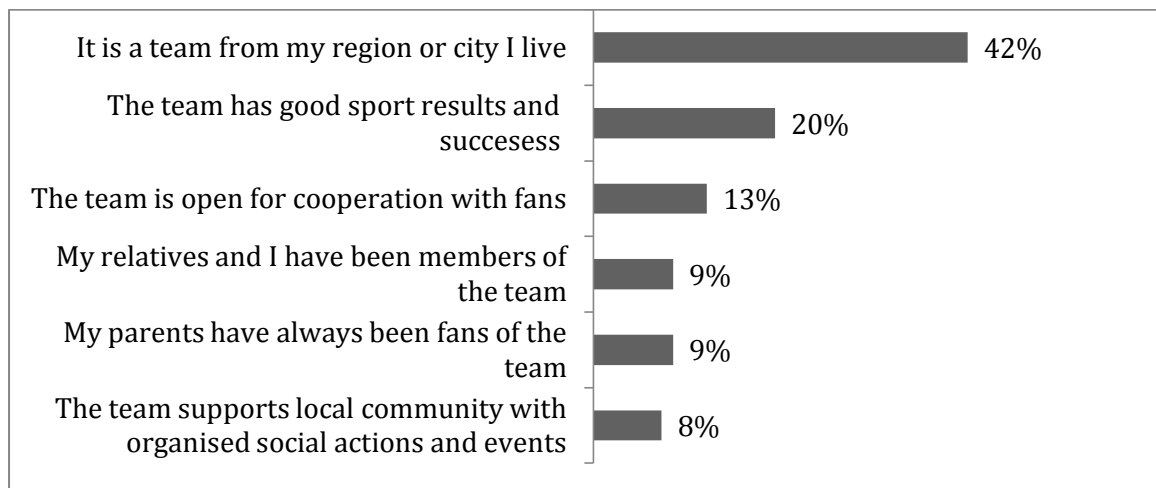


Figure 1. Reasons for supporting specific Polish team

Respondents were also asked about ways they support their favourite football team and were choosing the most suitable statement for them (the statements were representing attitudes of a fans) (compare Figure 2.). Most of interviewed fans support not only Polish teams but also foreign ones. They more often watch games at a stadium than transmissions of games on TV. Study show that in is important for fans to watch and attend games to be able to show their support, integrate with other fans, and to track sport results and meet with the team. Very little group of respondents admitted that supporting the team means for them buying gadgets with team logo and colours. It is surprising because when attending games at the stadium almost all the fans. When analysing what fans attending games wear, it is visible that almost every one of tem wears something with team colours (neckerchief, shirt or a cap). Probably, for Polish fans, having gadgets means not a way of supporting a team but rather a way of showing their affiliation, preferences and origin (people are very often fans of a team from an area where they have grown up).

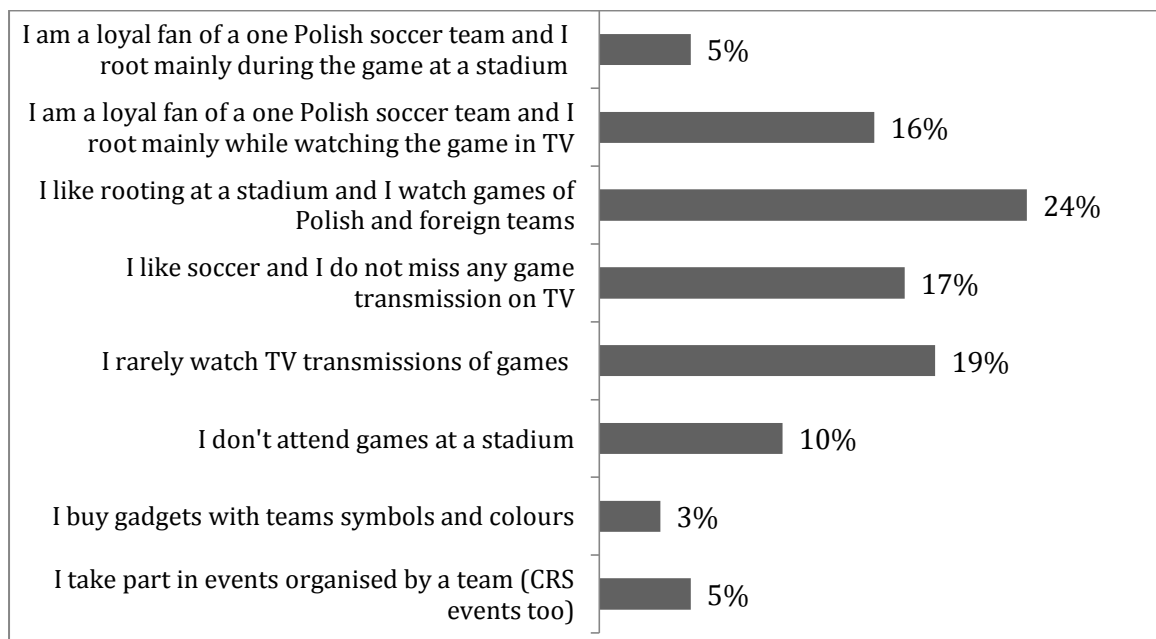


Figure 2. Ways of supporting a favourite team in Poland



CONCLUSIONS

Reputation of organisation influences minds of both consumers (their satisfaction) and members or employees (willing to stay and support it or leave and change an organisation) (Chun, 2005, p. 91). Customer satisfaction even in sports is very important. The loyalty between a person and an organisation in sport business is not based on sport results but mostly emotions. For sport fans sport results have secondary significance. For them history, origin and personality of a team is more important.

The preliminary research revealed that young Polish people (age 20-32) are willing to express their support for their favourite football team by cheering and watching the game on a stadium. They also watch TV transmissions of teams representing both Polish and foreign football leagues. Supporters are loyal to those teams that have the same origin with a sport organisation they are loyal to. Those fans are emotionally attached to teams not only because of the local character but also because their friends or relatives are fans or used to be members or players of the team. Even though, there is a very strong and unique bond between them and a team, they are aware that those sport teams have commercial character. It may be a proof for an assumption that sport organisations should focus more on their loyal supporters (understand them, meet their needs, maintain loyalty and positive associations which are foundations of those bonds).

Managers of sport organisations should find a balance to focus less on gaining new customers (new fans, also oriented only on consumption during an event) and concentrate more on cooperation and maintain loyalty of present supporters. Achieving business goals with succeeding in sports (achieving good sport results) is crucial for sport organisations but it is impossible to do so without long-term customer satisfaction. Fans, supporters and members of sport organisations should truly feel that activities taken by sport organisations are honest and designed for supporting and cooperating with them leaving business goals behind as secondary. Polish football teams should begin to work on their prosocial attitudes, openness to fans' desires and needs and to dialogue. All football fans in Poland are often wrongfully treated as hooligans who represent a small group, which acts of vandalism, are often showed and condemned in media. That small group of fans builds a very negative image of all other fans that are focused on spending time in an atmosphere of tolerance, friendliness, safety and fun. Polish football clubs should focus on showing their respect and gratitude to them to gain their loyalty and trust. That change should be a trigger for a new strategy of a whole sport organisation, its personality, and as a result corporate image and reputation. Building a brand of an organisation and its corporate image rich in positive values (trust, friendship, fair play, safety, fun, brotherhood, tradition, respect) will bring more and more fans who will show their support and loyalty. Those social bonds will bring both financial and immaterial profits. With that strategy a football team is able to become a responsible member of society, and community members will share reputation of the organisation, support for their actions which will make an organisation and its activities (also sport ones) more permanent and visible on the market. It is also said that organisations should focus more on customer orientation and product and service quality in case of reputation to satisfy customers (fans, supporters, local community) to succeed (Walsh *et al.*, 2009, p. 198). That approach limits costs of searching and building trust with potential customers, while maintaining loyalty and satisfaction of present ones is much cheaper.

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