

Sports partnerships with not-for-profits show lackluster results, study finds

July 30 2024, by Will Wright



Dr Daniel Rayne. Credit: RMIT University

Partnerships between professional sports teams and not-for-profit organizations (NPOs) are often weakened by power imbalances, informality and a lack of strategic intent, according to new research led by RMIT University.

The study also provided some cause for optimism, finding NPOs viewed these partnerships as essential to engaging with [sports fans](#) to raise awareness and increase donations, and highly effective when approached strategically rather than in an ad-hoc manner.

The study, which RMIT conducted with Swinburne University of Technology and [published](#) in the *Journal of Marketing Management*, involved a survey of more than 4,000 sports fans and in-depth interviews with 11 NPO managers.

Lead researcher Dr. Daniel Rayne said the research focused on how partnerships between professional sports teams and NPOs had formed and evolved, and how this had influenced fan behavior.

"Our [survey results](#) showed the vast majority of fans viewed these partnerships favorably, and had an intent to donate, volunteer and support charitable groups affiliated with their clubs," said Rayne, from the School of Economics, Finance and Marketing.

"However, most of these partnerships were not able to effectively capitalize on this positive fan sentiment."

Rayne said the [sports clubs](#) were the "dominant force," while charitable organizations often suffered a "gratefulness syndrome."

"The not-for-profit is just so happy to be partnering with the sports team that it's kind of the situation where the sports team says 'jump' and the not-for-profit will say, 'how high?'" he said.

"This means it's generally the not-for-profit that is doing most of the work for outreach activities under the banner of a [partnership](#)."

Formality waned even in those first stages of the partnership, Rayne

said.

"Only one partnership had progressed well following the MoU stage to a more strategic arrangement, consisting of much stronger processes compared to the other NPOs interviewed," he said.

"Nine of the 11 partnerships analyzed quickly deteriorated into ad hoc, poorly executed activities.

"We want to use our findings to help both professional sports organizations and not-for-profits to maximize outcomes from these partnerships, including donations, the recruitment of volunteers and awareness raising through favorable word-of-mouth."

Evidence suggested that most sports organizations are in these partnerships beyond self-interest, Rayne said.

"Sports teams are community organizations—so I would argue that they don't do it just to get more memberships, they do it because their entire existence is about involving themselves in their communities," he said.

"A partnership that works well, for example, is between the Richmond Football Club and the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, which has been developed over a long period of time and really comes across as genuine.

"Carlton and Geelong are examples of clubs which have taken a more deliberate approach to their partnerships with not-for-profits in recent years too."

Rayne said [sports teams](#) that had too many partnerships ran the risk of leading to poor outcomes.

"In some sports, there are professional clubs that have up to 12 charitable partners. That's where it can become a bit convoluted, as fans often get confused by these partnerships," he said.

"Sports teams and not-for-profits overseas could benefit from the findings of this research, where a more strategic approach is advocated."

As a follow up to this study, Rayne and his colleagues at RMIT are investigating sports fans' confusion with social-cause messaging in the English Premier League.

More information: Daniel Rayne et al, Understanding approaches to social partnerships - investigating target audience reactions and non-profit managers' business practice: a mixed-methods study, *Journal of Marketing Management* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2023.2247418](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2023.2247418)

Provided by RMIT University

Citation: Sports partnerships with not-for-profits show lackluster results, study finds (2024, July 30) retrieved 30 July 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2024-07-sports-partnerships-profits-lackluster-results.html>

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