Brand image management in sport on the example of Kolejarz Opole

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Abstract: Sport is today no longer only a form of entertainment. Each professional club has to function as a normal corporation. The brand plays an important tole in economic success as well as successes in sport. The strength of the brand of a sport club depends on the image of this brand. The aim of this article is to apply theories usually applied to production and service companies to a sport organization. Focus is in particular od the management of the image of a sport brand and the importance for the sport organization on the example of the speedway club Kolejarz Opole (Opole, Poland).

1. Introduction

Nick Davidson and Saun Hunt (2009, 6) begin their polemic about current football with the statement that while the ball is still round and there are goals, nothing is what is used to be. These words do not only apply to football, but in fact to all branches professional sport. Sport is not only a form of entertainment, but a serious market has developed where a sport club has to function like a normal corporation, when it wants to stay on the market. For this reason, it is useful to apply theories of business organization to the functioning of sport clubs. In this article, the importance of the management of the image of the brand of sport organizations, and its influence on the economic results as well as the sportive results will be discussed. First of all, the

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importance of the brand as such, brand image management, and the process of sports image management will be discussed. Then, these theories will be applied to the influence of the brand image on organizational success of the speedway club Kolejarz Opole in the city of Opole (Poland).

2. The importance of brand in sport

Due to still growing competition on the market, sport organisations have to compete for limited resources (Bühler and Schunk, 2013, 129]. On the one hand, for financial success it is important to win more fans as the main target group of the sport offer. However, as fans are more demanding today than in the past, the offer for them should be complex and broaden its scope not only the sport competition but also all accompanying events. The offer should be constructed in such a way that a fan would not only want to enjoy it during the competition day, but also on other week days. More fans means more chances for the sponsorship. Sponsors are the second key stakeholder in a sport organization. Other things equal, the more popular a sport club among the fans, and the stronger the fans identify with the club, the higher the marketing potential of the sport organization. For this reason, the brand increases in importance in sport. The more attractive the brand, the more likely the sport organization it is the sport organization will be economically successful (Elter, 2013, 433).

Reality shows that the economical results have a high influence on the results in sports. Although this is not the rule, the higher financial potential creates opportunities for the sports development, for instance through more money for transfers and opportunity for the development of the training infrastructure. In addition, the stronger brand makes negotiations with the best players easier, because they take into consideration not only the financial conditions but also the sports level and potential of a sport club. Not only the strength of the brand influences the sports result. A good example comes from the Austrian league (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1 Results of the vote for the footballer of the year in Austria (left) and the ranking of the Austrian Bundesliga after the first round of the season 2013/2014 (right)

source: http://sport.oe24.at/fussball/Fussballer-Wahl-Rapid-nur-knapp-vor-Austria/127584076 [23.02.2014]

The results of the vote for the best team in Austria in 2013 by the fans, the two clubs from the capital (Austria Wien and Rapid Wien) were most popular. They received a similar number of votes (32 231 and 33 510 respectively). Therefore, the both clubs achieved above two times more votes than the third in this classification - Red Bull Salzburg (14 268 votes).[1] The table of the Austrian Bundesliga (right) displays, however, a totally reversed situation. In the league Salzburg lead with 20 point more than Rapid Wien and 23 point than Austria Wien. Although the club from Salzburg was the best team in the country, it did not have such a good brand name as both clubs from Vienna This fact shows that good sport results are not the only factor by building of a strong brand.

3. Brand image and its components

One of the key components of a sport brand is its image. Therefore, an increase in its value will be directly affected by the image among fans, but also people who have an average or no interest in sports. The image should be understood a set of believes, ideas and experiences of a subject about an object. It consists of material components, which can be easilyy measured, as well as immaterial components, expressed by feelings and attitudes (Tkaczyk 2002: 23). In context of the sport market, the image expresses all emotions and attitudes of fans, local community and other interested people about the sport organization. Regarding the target group, being the goal of creating the image, the following distinction can be made (Pluta 2001: 43):

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[1] http://sport.oe24.at/fussball/Fussballer-Wahl-Rapid-nur-knapp-vor-Austria/127584076 [23.02.2014]

a) internal image – involving considered and planned communication with employees. It has an influence on the creating of community feeling and increases the motivation to work,

b) external image – describes communication outside, and is related to the request for information by particular groups. Its goal is the creation of sympathy for the organization.

It is very important that the internal image is coherent with the external image (Pluta 2001: 43). This means that values and the philosophy of the organization which are promoted to external stakeholders, reflect the real situation within the organization.. In case of a dissonance, the external image may be seriously damaged. In order to present the process of image management, five components creating the image of a company should be considered. These components are presented in Figure 2.
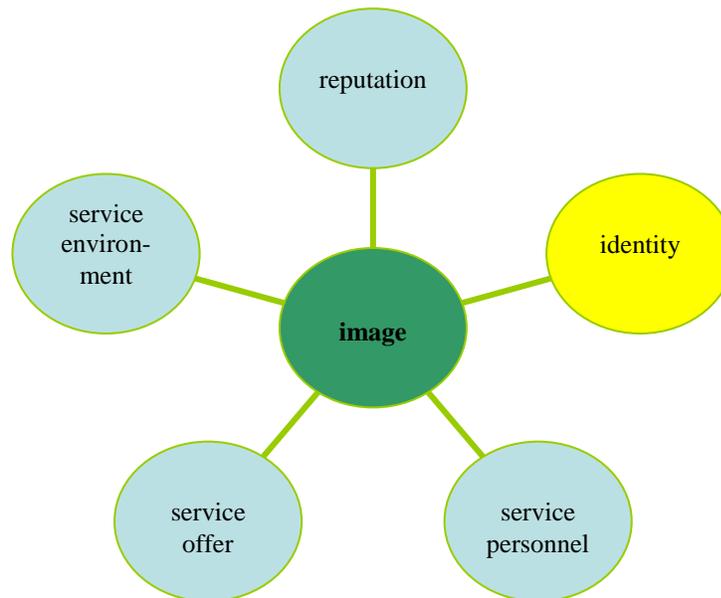

Figure 1 Factors creating the image of an organization
Source: Tkaczek (2002: 241).

Identity is a fundamental component of image. The relation between identity and image shows, what image an organization wants to achieve, and what image it will really achieve through its activities. Identity can be interpreted as the vision of the creators of the organization about itself. Thus, without a clear vision, the ability to influence the brand image becomes weaker.

The material base of a brand identity are its name and logo (Urbanek 2002: 99). Using these symbols enables a quicker association of a company with some words and graphics. Names of sport organizations are often associated with characteristic regional features (e.g., Bayern Monachium, Wisła Kraków) or they contain the sponsor name (e.g., Lech Poznań, Bayer Leverkusen). However, whatever strategy of visual specification of brand form will be chosen, it should be easily associated with the sport organization. A good example is the German football team 1. FC Nürnberg, which is called „club" (der Klub). Although the word is universal and could be used for each sport organization, among German football fans the word "club" is directly associated with the Bavarian team.

The third factor influencing the image is reputation. Reputation is based on the assessment of the organization compared to organizations functioning in the same area or market. Furthermore, organizations may be compared with an ideal model. Based on this assessment, an opinion will be created about the organization. Therefore, reputation is an immaterial value for the organization, which is created through its employees and partners (suppliers, customers, accountants, investors, etc.). The creation of a reputation is a long-term process, which can bring many benefits and contribute to the competitive position of the organization (Adamus-Matuszyńska, b.d.).

The service environment is the environment, in which the services are produced and consumed. It has an impact both on the external and internal image. A good atmosphere in the service place supports positive thinking about the organization, and is also a source of motivation for employees. The service environment includes in addition to the atmosphere also material components like: interior design, lighting, architecture and parking (Tkaczyk 2002: 241-242). They have a twofold impact. On the one hand the service environment influences the perception of the service by a customer. On the other hand it influences the working conditions, and in turn the opinion of employees about their work place.

The service environment of a sport organization includes the sport area as well as all services around the basic service. For instance, the national stadium in Warsaw is not only a football area, but also has others functions. It offers conference and training places, a restaurant, office space, fitness center, business park and city park (http://www.stadionnarodowy.org.pl/nasze-miejsce). The created service environment offers opportunity to use this stadium not only during sport events, but also for other activities (e.g.,

business, leisure). The diverse service offer tends to become more and more important as a source of revenue and seems to increasingly influence the activities in the sport service environment.

The service offer alone is one of the key factors for the creating of the image. A sport product are very specific, and difficult to be measured with some standards. It should in particular be emphassized, that sport organization offer two types of products: material products (club gadgets like t-shirts, scarves) and services. From the viewpoint of a sport company, the service activity is the most important. The basic service offered by sport organization are sport events. But, the not only the revenue, but also customer satisfaction and attractiveness of the sport event are influenced by the service environment, consists of additional services and their availability. In addition to the basic service, T&H Systems (Ticketing and Hospitality) also play important role today. They match ticket service with additional services (gastronomy, stands with club gadgets, VIP places, etc.).[2] They are not only a source of direct financial income, but particularly a key component for building of the club image.

Another important component of creating an image is appearance, behavior and competence of the service personal (Tkaczyk 2002: 241). This factor is often underestimated, although in most cases the customer has contact with the organization only through its front office employees. Based on this contacts the customer builds his opinion about the whole company. For a sport organization the front office employees include: ushers, security, porters, sellers, call center employees and area directors. The level of services delivered by such employees may reflects particularly the internal image of the company.

4. The process of image management

The factors of image management discussed above show that a multifaceted approach to the creation of the image may be required. Image management is in particular related to the concept of identity and means a programmatic management of all the component of identity at the same time. It is a conscious creation and integrated communication of the components of this

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[2] Amy Kemp, CEO in Kempster, during the 8th Sport Marketing Days in Warsaw, 5 November 2009

identity to the external environment (Pluta 2001: 43]. In the light of this concept, the creation of an image can be considered as a process (Fig. 3).
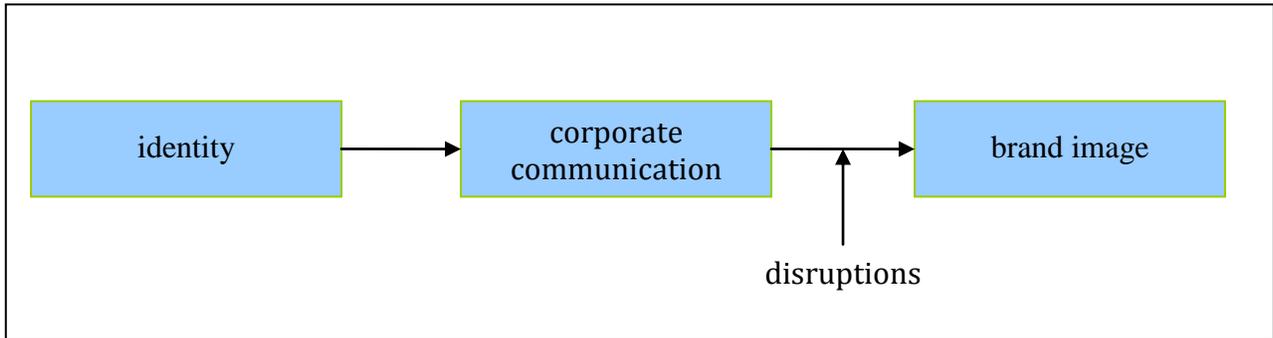

Figure 2 The image creating process
Source: Dębski (2009: 102)

The essence of this process is the connection between identity and image, which is created by the communication process (transmitted signals). During the corporate communication the identity is interpreted and transformed into the image, by means of methods, which will be used by the organization to present itself to its environment (Pluta 2001: 43).

The basis for creating an image is a well prepared plan for creating an identity. The image creation process can be divided into the following steps (Chłodnicki, Wnuk 2008: 35]:

a) analysis of the current image from the viewpoint of organization's external environment – by use of different measurement methods, which will be presented below, the current brand image in the viewpoint of each target group is identified,

b) elaboration of a new image – this means formulating of a the image aimed at, which is based on features of an ideal image,

c) comparison of the current image with the image aimed at – identifying the difference between the actual image and the image aimed at,

d) use of values of the actual image – the creation of a new image should not begin from scratch, but should be based on already developed values of the current image,

e) development of new values system – the beneficial values of the actual image will be supplemented by new values,

f) differentiation – finally, the situation should be achieved that the developed image makes customers over others brands on the market.

The signals an organization send are rarely identical with the image of the organization among consumers. In reality different disruptions occur, which hinder the transformation of

identity into image. Two groups of disruptions can be distinguished, depending on the subject causing the disruption A classification of these disruptions is presented in the Table 1.

disruptions caused by the sender	disruptions caused by the recipient
desire to imitate others, which makes the company stand out	disruption resulting from the activities of competitors
aiming at meeting any social expectations rather than focus on the key factors of success of the organization	differences in the perception of the brand by customers
treatment of the brand as the organization wants to see it, and not as it actually looks (excessive subjectivity in the assessment)	individual perception of the objective world and diverse system of values

Table 1 Classification of disturbances in shaping the image
Source: Dębski (2009: 102).

As described above, the starting point for the management of the image is the identification of the initial state. Methods of image research can be divided into quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methods of image research includes (Budzyński 2010: 45):

a) method of perception maps – this map is a coordinate system, which axes correspond to definite attributes of company, like service quality and attractiveness of the offer (Altkorn 2010: 199). This method allows for assessment only in terms of two characteristics,

b) method of semantic differential – means the creation of many bipolar measuring scales, which are described by opposite states (e.g., attendance at the match: low – high).

A qualitative method, which is used for the measurement of image is the focus method (Altkorn 2010: 199, 201). This method relies on the collection of an intentionally chosen target group in one place (normally about 10 peoples) and interviewing the people in this group together. This interview has the form of a free conversation, in which the role of the moderator is only to facilitate the discussion. The advantage of this method is the bidirectional flow of information. Each participant can listen to the comments of the others participants and can immediately react (Budzyński 1998: 45). This method is a good complement to quantitative research and allows for getting a better picture of the organization's image.

5. Brand image of Kolejarz Opole

In the example bellow, the first step of image management will be considered, namely to define the initial image of the brand Kolejarz Opole. For this goal the quantitative method presented above will be used, based on a survey carried out among 100 people living in the Opole region. In the target group are both people living permanently in the region and people who live there temporarily (due to their study or job). Results were analyzed for sex, age and interest in sport. The sample size allows for an initial assessment of the image of the club.

Kolejarz Opole is a speedway club, which was founded in 1957. It is the only club in this sport art in the Opole region. Its biggest achievement is the bronze medal in the Polish Championship for Teams in 1969. The most important personality in the club story is considered Jerzy Szczakiel, who in 1973 achieved as the first Pole the title of the World Champion (http://www.kolejarzopole.pl/index.php?p=historiaklubu). In the last years the club starts in the second league, the lowest speedway league in Poland. The club has also a lot of financial, sports and infrastructural problems. So, it may be necessary to change the image of the club to help to improve the situation.

In the first step, the ,most important components of the sport organization should be identified, i.e., those which have the highest impact on its image. The importance of different factors reported by the focus group are presented in Figure 4.

From the illustration above becomes apparent, that the factors with the highest importance for creating the sport organization's brand image are: sport level, players, safety and place of the event. It is remarkable that these factors are directly relate to sport aspects. They are related to the results of the club and to the attractiveness of sport events. Thus, this provides support for the creation of a new image using these four components. They are relevant for the first contact with image recipients. Only in the second step the next factors should then be considered, as they establish the brand image in the awareness of fans.
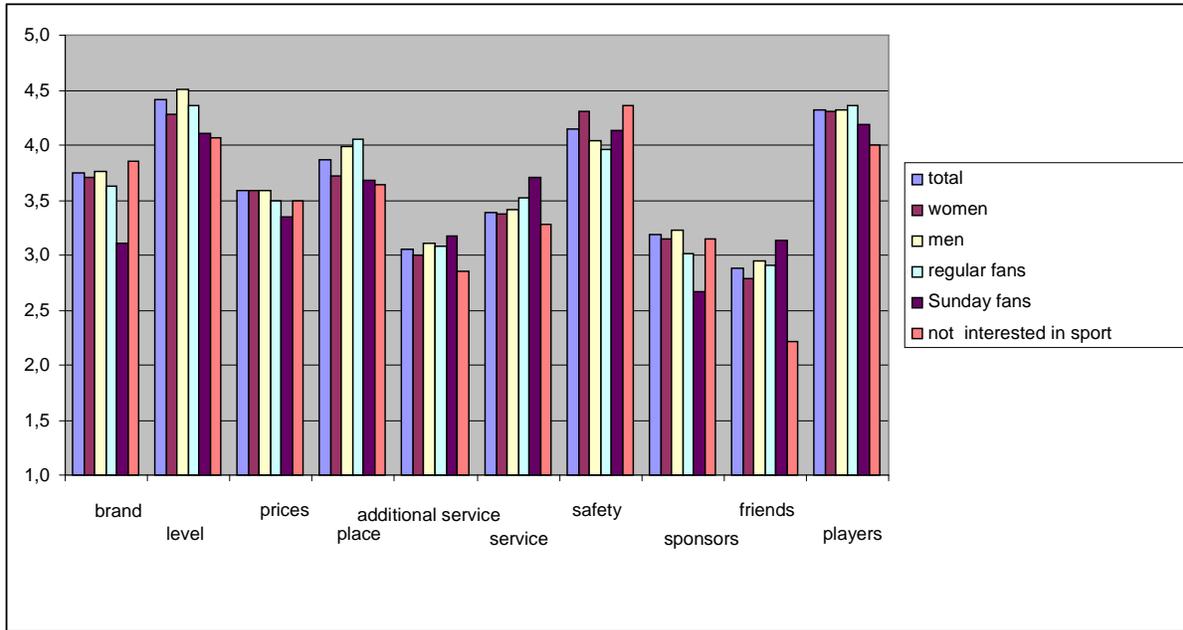
Figure 4 The meaning of particul factors for the brand image iof Kolejarz Opole
Source: author's own elaboration

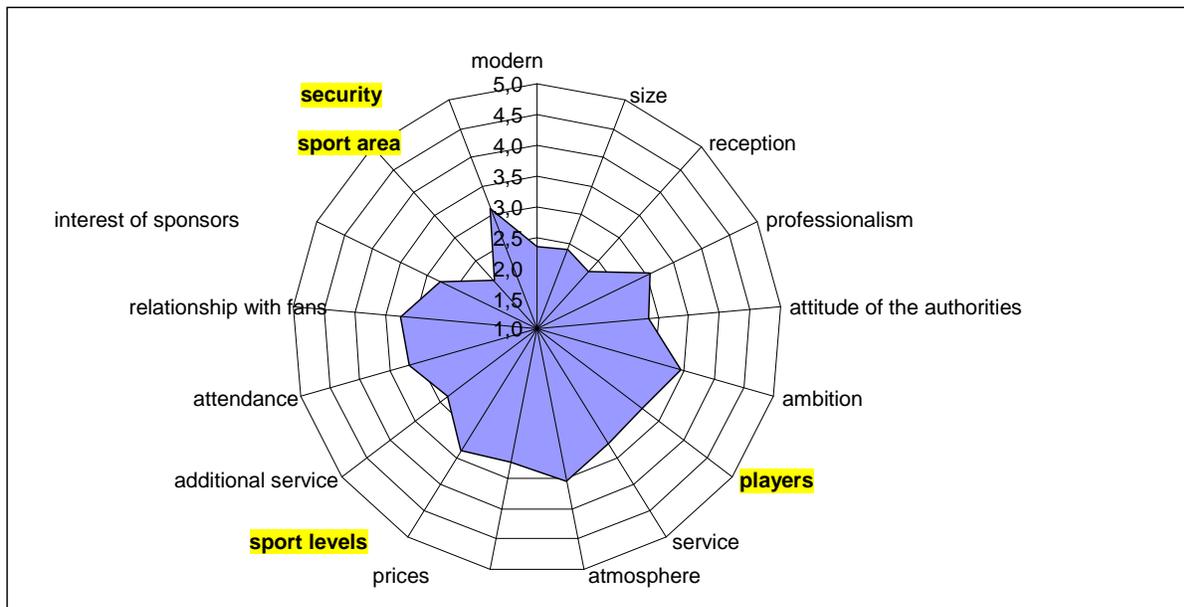All factors of the image were measured on a five-point-scale (Fig. 5).

Figure 5 Assessment of components, which have an impact on the image of Kolejarz Opole
Source: author's own elaboration

As can be seen I the figure, most of the key factors are assessed between 3.0 and 3.5, which can be interpreted as neutral (neither positive, nor negative). From the sport perspective,

this seems to be a good starting position for creating a strong brand. From the viewpoint of brand attractiveness this situation is not necessarily positive due to missing elements compared to other brands on the market. Based on analysis of all factors it can be argued that Kolejarz Opole has a low brand, but a stabile image. It should be emphasized that the lowest note is given for the stadium, which belongs to the group of key image factors. The sport area is the visit card of a sport organization and a service place, and it determines the first impression of a fan. To achieve a note of about 2.0 (low) may imply that in order to improve the image of Kolejarz, the stadium has to be improved first.

Important for the strength of a sport brand is its recognition. In the focus group, the recognition of the brand Kolejarz Opole was 78%, of which 29% are people interesting in Kolejarz's activities. This provides an indication that the brand recognition on the local scale is high. More men than women recognize Opole's Speedway club (86%). Men are also more active fans than women. The fate of Kolejarz is regularly observed by about 47% of men. This is an optimistic result, when we take into consideration, that speedway is called a niche sport. Although the so-called "black sport" is mostly of interest to men, it should be said, that the club brand is also recognized by women. On average, two out of three women in the focus group know the brand of Kolejarz Opole, although they are not active fans.

In the next step the type of brand Kolejarz Opole will be classified. For this purpose the sport brands classification by Bühler and Schunk will be used. They specify the following brand classification and related (Bühler, Schunk 2013: 132):

a) master brands – sport and economical domination, bipolar impact (extremely positive or negative attitude to the club),

b) traditional brands – sport successes in the past, but still a good reputation,

c) cult brands – a high recognition by the broad group of fans,

d) unnatural created brands – brands without a long tradition, they were created by high and short-term investments,

e) local brands (local hero) – a high recognition in the region, but a low visibility outside the region.

Analysis shows that Kolejarz Opole is likely to belong to the last group it has a local image. The focused group perceives Kolejarz as a small, traditional club with a local reach. On a scale from 1 to 5, where "1" means a local reach and "5" an international reach, Kolejarz obtains

2.3. This is omportant for creating a sponsoring strategy. The brand of Kolejarz will be more attractive for potential sponsors, who want to achieve a stronger competitive position in the Opole region.

The biggest advantage of the image of Kolejarz is, according to the studied group, the atmosphere during a sport event. Kolejarz Opole is perceived as a club which events are attractive for the whole family.

6. Concluding remarks

In the current situation on the sport market, about commercial and professional success or defeat decide details. A tool in creating an advantage over the competition is image management.

Koleajrz Opole was identified as a local brand, with a close relation to its region. Although being of local importance, it has the image of an average brand, which does not really distinguish itself from other brands on the sport market. On the one hand this image enables a better identification of fans with the brand, but on the other hand is it an unattractive brand for potential sponsors.

In the process of creation of a new brand for a sport organization, it is important to create an optimal connection between the traditional club values and creating of new values. Breaking with traditions may be a tool to attract new customers. However, for continuity it is important to keep traditional fans, as they create the basis for o=permanent revenues. This may bring a marketing advantage on the sport market and therefore may enable the achievement of both sport and economic success.

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ZARZĄDZANIE WIZERUNKIEM MARKI W SPORCIE NA PRZYKŁADZIE KOLEJARZA OPOLE

Streszczenie

Współczesny sport nie jest już tylko formą rozrywki. Każdy profesjonalny klub musi funkcjonować jak normalne przedsiębiorstwo. Marka odgrywa znaczącą rolę zarówno w osiągnięciu sukcesu ekonomicznego, jak i sportowego. Siła marki danego klubu sportowego zależy od wizerunku tej marki. Celem tego artykułu jest zastosowanie teorii, odnoszących się zazwyczaj do przedsiębiorstw produkcyjnych i usługowych, w organizacji sportowej. Głównym punktem uwagi będzie w szczególności zarządzanie wizerunkiem marki w sporcie oraz jej istotność dla organizacji sportowej na przykładzie klubu żużlowego Kolejarz Opole (Opole, Polska).

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie wizerunkiem, marka sportowa, organizacja sportowa, Polska

JEL: M11