

Chapter 3.1

Creating a National Federation brand

Benefits of this chapter

Developing a successful brand is the key to the commercial success of your National aquatics Federation. But what is a “brand?” The term is used a lot in business and sport, but it is important to know exactly what the concept and purpose of your brand are so your federation can maximise its branding initiatives.

This chapter is an introduction to branding. It offers a clear definition of the terms and describes useful branding techniques that can promote your federation, strengthen the image of aquatics in your country and increase development opportunities.

Introduction

Branding is the creation of a symbol that represents your federation. The purpose of the symbol is much more than a clever drawing – it should reflect the values of your federation and connect directly with the hearts and minds of your target audiences.

Consider the Olympic rings. The image of the five interconnected rings is immediately identifiable around the world. One look at the Olympic brand and you instantly think of the values of the Olympic Movement – excellence, friendship and respect. Developing the Olympic brand did not happen overnight. Rather, it took careful planning and strategic implementation to create and promote a successful brand image. The same is possible for your federation.

This chapter will cover the basics of branding to provide your federation with a baseline from which to build better branding initiatives. Topics covered include:

- What is a brand?
- What are the advantages of branding for an aquatics federation?
- How can an aquatics federation manage a successful brand?

The most successful sports federations have created strong brands that promote and reinforce the fundamental values of the sport and connect directly with consumers. These effective branding strategies have led to greater commercial success. Simply put, your commercial success is directly related to the strength of your brand identity as an aquatics federation.

What is a brand?

Knowing the basics of branding – what a brand is, what its advantages are, etc. – can help elevate your federation from a simple sports organisation to a recognisable brand that stands out within the aquatics community and across all sports in your country.

First, it is important to know exactly what a brand is. A brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol that identifies particular goods or services and differentiates those goods or services from competitors in the market.

Brands develop the image consumers have about an organisation, and that image can significantly influence consumers' perception of the organisation, including everything the consumer knows, thinks and would tell others about the organisation. In other words, the brand makes an important, lasting impression on consumers and potential consumers.

In the case of a National aquatics federation, a brand should identify your standing as the leader in aquatics in your country. The symbol used should be designed in a way that generates emotions in your target audience. For example, FINA's brand shows a map of the world to demonstrate its standing as the international governing body for aquatics sport, and the use of stars across the map reflects an emphasis on developing high-performing successful aquatics athletes around the world.

Sports federations that have been most successful in developing their brands have created what is commonly called a “brand religion” – a brand identity that is so strong that athletes, clubs and fans have become “followers” of the sport. The loyalty that strong brands can generate strengthens your commercial position and gives you a stronger base from which to grow aquatics sports across your country.

What are the advantages of branding for an aquatics federation?

While not every federation will achieve the same level of branding success, it is important to understand the advantages that branding can have for your federation. “Brand religion” may be an ambitious goal, but branding can lead to incremental increases in loyalty and interest in aquatics sports that can lead to long-term commercial gains.

The following are some of the key advantages that a National aquatics federation can gain from successful branding:

1/ Packaging your sport to be as attractive as possible to potential sponsors.

By definition, branding is designed to strengthen an organisation’s commercial and financial viability. For an aquatics federation, a strong brand demonstrates values and a reputation that potential sponsors will want to be part of. Developing a strong brand image will help your National Federation attract and approach potential sponsors with a more convincing case as to why they should sponsor aquatics sports activities and events in your country.

2/ Distinguishing yourself from competitors in the market.

Even in the world of sport, the number of offerings that consumers have to choose from is continually growing. A strong brand can clearly separate your federation (its products, services and values) from other organisations competing for a share of the market. In the case of aquatics sports, a successful brand can attract young athletes to swimming, diving or water polo instead of other sports. A strong brand can also inspire commercial sponsors to want to be a part of your federation instead of other National Federations competing for sponsorship money.

3/ Transferring the brand to new products.

National sports federations can use a strong brand to offer new services and products without having to rely on the athletic level of consumers. In aquatics, this means being able to introduce new services – age group development programmes, training for officials, etc. – based on the strength of the brand. In other words, the brand is so popular or well-known that consumers want to be a part of it independent of their specific ability level.

4/ Protecting the federation from crisis and the impact of competitors.

Strong brands generate loyal customers. For a National aquatics federation, this means athletes who want to be identified with their

sport, coaches who are committed to the values and fundamentals of the sport and fans and sponsors that want to follow and be associated with the sport regardless of who wins or loses in competition. Customer loyalty is key to protecting a National sports federation during times of crisis (e.g. doping scandals, controversy over equipment and uniforms, etc.). For example, FINA's brand image has been strong enough to survive and even grow during the controversy of high-tech full-body swimsuits in swimming. Even though some athletes, fans and sponsors were concerned about the "legitimacy" of world record times, these customers have stayed loyal to the sport and FINA continues to be financially secure during challenging economic times.

5/ Creating trust and confidence.

Athletes, fans and sponsors want to trust those governing a particular sport, and that trust leads to confidence that their patronage of the sport has real value. A strong brand for an aquatics federation should demonstrate competence in how the sport is managed and reflect transparency so that consumers believe that they are part of an organisation that has integrity.

How can an aquatics federation create and manage a successful brand?

The most successful brands – in sport and in business at-large – were not created overnight. Creating and managing a successful brand requires careful planning and patience.

The following steps outline the branding process, and the chapters to follow will describe how to promote and build your brand.

1/ Analyse your federation's current assets.

What are your strengths and weaknesses relative to your competitors – services, organisational strength, size of staff, financial strength, etc.?

2/ Determine what you want to brand and how you want to position that brand.

For a National aquatics federation, you most likely want to brand the federation itself because that is the key to growing your sports in the long-term. Using branding strategies for specific events and activities can also be useful to generate greater awareness of the sport and the involved federation.

3/ Determine what your market is and who your competitors are in that market.

Are you competing in a regional, National or international market? For a National aquatics federation, your market is likely both national and international. Within the national market, you are competing against other national sports federations for athletes, sponsorship money, etc. In the international market, you are competing against other national aquatics federations for sponsorship money, events and prestige.

4/ Determine where your competitors are positioned in the market and where your customers would ideally position you. Understanding where your federation is positioned relative to your competitors should inform the brand image you develop. For example, if your federation is weaker in terms of levels of participation relative to other national sports federation, then your brand image may want to feature indications of growing participation.

Building a successful brand involves incorporating your brand into every aspect of your organisation. As a national aquatics federation, you will want to make your brand a fundamental part of every department and activity within the federation.

The following non exhaustive list includes some of the key ways through which you can your brand identifiable at every level of your federation:

- Leadership style
- Logo
- Advertisements
- Official letterhead
- Dress code
- Phone manner
- Website
- Events
- Office culture

Becoming a sports brand – and not just another sports organisation – takes time and patience. Taking these first steps can be helpful as you begin that journey from “rookie federation” to “leading sports brand.”