

**Canadian National Sport Organisations' use of the Web for relationship marketing  
in promoting sport participation**

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**Abstract**

Sport participation development requires a systematic process which involves knowledge creation, dissemination and interactions between National Sport Organisations, participants, clubs and associations as well as other agencies. Using a relationship marketing approach (Grönroos, 1997, Gummesson, 2002, Olkkonen, 1999), this paper<sup>1</sup> addressed the question 'How do Canadian NSOs use the Web, in terms of functionality and services offered, to create and maintain relationships with sport participants and their sport delivery partners?' Ten Canadian NSOs' websites were examined: functionality was analysed using Burgess and Cooper's (2000) eMICA model, while NSOs' utilisation of the Internet to establish and maintain relationships with sport participants was analysed using Wang, Head and Archer's (2000) relationship-building process model for the Web. It was found that Canadian NSOs were receptive to the use of the Web, but their information-gathering and dissemination activities, which make-up the relationship-building process, appear sparse, and in some cases are lagging behind the voluntary sector in the country.

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents work which is part of a programme of research investigating the link between the culture of Canadian National Sport Organisations (NSOs) and participation in sport. An essential part of the culture of NSOs is how they perceive and construct and then promote the values of sport participation to various target groups. As voluntary and not-for-profit bodies, the main concern of NSOs is to serve their members' needs and develop sport from grass-roots to an elite level. This entails knowing, communicating and delivering sport participation through a variety of media, including the Internet. This paper employs a relationship marketing approach (Grönroos, 1997, Olkkonen, 1999) to examine the use of the World Wide Web (Web) by selected Canadian NSOs to promote sport participation. More specifically, it addresses two interrelated questions: a) How are NSOs' websites constructed in terms of their content and design? and b) How do Canadian NSOs use the Web, in terms of functionality and services offered, to create and maintain relationships with sport participants and their sport delivery partners? The paper first offers an understanding of sport participation in the context of current Canadian sport policy and develops an argument for its interpretation as a relationship between NSOs, participants and the organizations' various delivery partners. This is followed by a discussion on relationship marketing (RM) and the place of the Web in NSOs' promotional approach to their various constituencies. The paper then presents the methodology of the study and concludes with a discussion of the results.

## **Understanding sport participation**

The value of participation in sport for individuals and society has long been established. Notwithstanding decades of concerted efforts by governments, as well as voluntary and private agencies, the physical inactivity of the general population remains a major concern for educators, sport managers and politicians. As Harvey (2002) observed "despite more than 20 years of promotional campaigns on the importance of exercise, Canadians have become less active" (p. 161). Two recent authoritative international studies on leisure and sport participation (Cushman, Veal & Zuzanek, 2005; Van

Bottenburg, Rijnen & Van Sterkenburg, 2005) largely confirmed this trend for many Western societies, including Canada.

Furthermore, sport participation has increasingly been framed as a part of the social and economic welfare of society (Coalter, 2007; Harvey, 2002; Nicholson, 2008). The Canadian Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2002) represents a similar combination of individual and social welfare objectives. The Policy sets a vision that by 2012 “a significant higher proportion of Canadians from all segments of society are involved in quality sport activities at all levels and in all forms of participation” (Sport Canada, 2002, p. 16). This goal and one of its main instruments, the Sport Participation Development Programme (SPDP), is inherently an attempt to produce a cultural change in the delivery of and participation in sport. This poses a number of challenges to the NSOs' relationship with their members and participants. In particular, it challenges the organisational culture of NSOs because it involves the creation of shared systems of meaning that are accepted, internalised, and acted upon at every level of an organization and across the sport participation continuum.

People's participation in sport is a multifaceted phenomenon which cannot be attributed to a single factor, such as the availability of free time, funding or facilities. Sport participation has been defined from a number of perspectives including psychological, behavioural, social, organizational and ecological (Cole & Harris, 2006; COMPASS, 1999; Foster, Hillsdon, Cavill, Allender, & Cowburn, 2005; Plotnikoff, Prodaniuk, Fein, & Milton, 2005) and there is no agreement between academics and policy makers on how to best define and measure this construct. This research considers an approach to defining participation, which builds on Becker's (1963) insightful analysis of the cultural context of drug users. It proposes that people's participation in sport is marked by an interaction between personal interest and cultural context, provided in part by NSOs. It is akin to a process of acculturation where people have to cross three critical hurdles before they become sport participants. These are: (a) learning the correct way of doing sport; (b) learning to perceive and identify the benefits of sport; and (c) learning to define the effects of sport as positive or pleasurable. Defined that way, sport participation implies

that NSOs, among other roles, should be seen as cultural agents. Hence, they would be expected to: (a) develop appropriate dispositions and skills necessary for practicing sport (affective and behavioural aspects); (b) provide education about the health, social and cultural benefits of sport (cognitive aspect); and (c) develop a culture of appreciation of sport and the skills to transfer its benefits across other aspects of people's lives (affective and behavioural aspects). The SPDP has been designed to encourage the development of those affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects of sport participation and offers participating NSOs the opportunity to choose key target groups and the most effective forms of intervention.

The SPDP also requires NSOs to adopt a multi-agency and multi-level intervention approach to participation which involves a range of partners and tackles change at individual and organizational levels. Ecological approaches to physical activity promotion emphasize the need to intervene on multiple levels (individual, organisational and policy or societal) if sustainable behavioural change is to be achieved (Cole & Harris, 2006; Plotnikoff et al, 2005). Table 1 shows the sport participation projects run by the ten NSOs subject to examination. From a delivery of participation point of view, NSOs have to interact with a range of constituencies including children, their parents, schools, community centres, clubs, provincial associations and coaches. Increasingly, an essential part of these interactions have been utilising the Web as a cost-effective means of communication. The above considerations suggest that sport participation development requires a systematic process which involves knowledge creation, dissemination and interactions between NSOs, participants, member clubs and associations as well as other agencies. These also imply developing holistic and long-term relationships with participants and delivery agencies (e.g., Provincial Sport Organizations (PSO), clubs, youth centres or local authorities) so the values of sport participation are accepted, internalised and acted upon by all parties. Unlike the typical business customer who purchases a product for its utilitarian or symbolic value, a sport participant does not only buy into an activity, but may well take on a whole range of different voluntary roles: as a club official, coach, referee, driver, fund-raiser, and in the case of elite athletes as a role-

model and an ambassador. This entails that a single participant can have a number of different relations with a NSO at the same time.

*[Table 1 about here]*

### **The Web and a relationship marketing approach to sport participation**

As with sport participation there is no consensus in the literature about what constitutes RM. Aijo (1996) suggested that this is a “suitable name for the new marketing concept in a very holistic sense” (p. 15). Gummesson’s (2002) detailed treatment of the topic proposed 30 specific relationships organised in four categories including classic, special, mega and nano relationships. Harker (1999) offered a useful review of definitions and proposed seven common conceptual categories of RM including creation, development, maintenance, interactive, long-term, emotional content and output. Similarly, Bruhn’s (2002) comprehensive analysis of RM proposed the following central viewpoints: co-operative and trusting relationships with customers and stakeholders; collaboration within the company instead of independent specialised departments; collaboration with business partners and focus on resources; core competences and all value-adding activities in a relationship. The purpose of these viewpoints is to create, maintain and enhance relationships between a company and its customers and other relevant stakeholders. These categories and viewpoints are consistent with the view of RM adopted by this study. It builds on Olkkonen’s (1999) interpretation that “relationship marketing should be perceived as a philosophy or a holistic pattern of thought, which lay emphasis on inter- and intra-organisational, interactive stakeholders relationships” (p. 65). This view of RM implies that NSOs will be expected to build relationships with external partners (e.g., ‘mega’ relationships with media, sponsors, local authorities), members SPDP delivery agencies (e.g., PSOs, clubs) and internal departments (e.g., ‘nano’ relationships), and establish two-way interactions with sport participants. It is also consistent with the conceptualisation of sport participation as a relationship between people and their environment. However, it has to be recognized that the relationships between a NSO and sport participants (e.g., special relationship) is a mediated one and in most cases does not include face-to-face interactions.

The study further draws on Grönroos (1997) who questioned the practical usefulness of the classical marketing mix of the four Ps and proposed relationship building as a cornerstone of marketing. He defined it as “a process including several parties or actors, the objectives of which have to be met. This is done by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises, a fact that makes trust an important aspect of marketing” (Grönroos, 1997, p. 332). In particular, he identified promise and trust as the two key integral concepts of RM. The underlying premise of the former is that if a NSO's promises are not kept, the evolving relationship with participants and other stakeholders cannot be maintained and enhanced. Related to this is the concept of trust, suggesting that NSOs have to constantly reaffirm their credibility stemming from their expertise, reliability and intentionality, in order to enhance participants' willingness to rely on them as an exchange partner. This can be achieved by using the resources of NSOs – staff, technology, know-how, networks and material resources – in such a manner that participants' trust in the NSO or other delivery partners is maintained and strengthened.

The central tenets of RM include an exchange between different parties involved. Further, these are based on promises and trust underpinned by core competencies, resources and additional support designed to create and maintain the relationship. The exchange process itself involves various communications and interactions between the parties. Increasingly, the Web has been used by the non-profit sector in Canada as an important tool for assisting these communications and interactions (Cukier & Middleton, 2003; LEVERUS, 2004). According to Pargmegiani and Sachdeva (2000), the Canadian voluntary sector is considered to be “one of the most connected in the world” (p. 104). This is to a large extent because of the growing realisation that “the Internet is not only a technology but an engine of social change, one that has modified work habits, education, social relations generally, and, maybe most important, our hopes and dreams” (Jones, 1999, p. 2). Moreover, the Internet is in itself a relationship, it is “at heart an inter-networking of networks, and, consequently, it creates relationships between a variety of technologies, techniques, and ways of communicating” (Jones, 1999, p. 22).

The use of the Internet for RM is a recent conceptual and applied development (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston, 2009, Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Sexton, 2000; Schibrowsky, Peltier, & Nill, 2007). The advantages of the Internet for public and voluntary sector organisations are well established. Voluntary organisations, including those in sport, use the capabilities of the Web for eight main different activities and services including: (a) provision of information; (b) organisation promotion; (c) fundraising; (d) advocacy support; (e) member support; (f) media support; (g) community development; and, (h) volunteer recruitment (Boeder, 2002; Cukier & Middleton, 2003; Zamaria, Caron & Fletcher, 2005). All these activities play an important role in enabling new mechanisms for creating and maintaining relationships between NSOs and sport participants. Moreover, NSOs, as mission-driven organisations, are concerned with promoting both sport participation and excellence by providing services to the public and athletes. In practice, NSOs' missions are translated into a number of typical promises that offer to make people fitter, healthier and the best in the world at their respective sport. NSOs are therefore, engaged in an exchange relationship with sport participants, athletes and other stakeholders based on the promise to help them become something they are not or to gain something they do not have. In return, NSOs receive legitimation and support from participants, commercial partners and government agencies. However, the exchange relationship in the non-profit sector is very different from that in the commercial sector. The four classic marketing activities of customer relationship management include customer selection, acquisition, retention and extension where a company's focus is on customers who contribute the most profit (Chaffey et al, 2009). In contrast, sport participation is a basic human right recognised by law, and a NSO in receipt of public funding has a duty to be inclusive and to cherish all roles performed by sport participants.

The exchange between NSOs and participants represents a learning relationship, which is a key concept inherent in RM. As Boeder (2002) observed, "with every interaction, something new can be learned about the person or organization involved in the transaction in terms of their needs, preferences or customs" (p. 22). The essence of this relationship, both as a promise and a learning relation, was further reinforced by a systematic review of literature on sport participation conducted by Sport England. This

macro analysis made a number of recommendations for sport policy and suggested that “the focus should be on increasing expectancy values (the extent to which people believe becoming more active will benefit them) building confidence for physical activity, increasing opportunities and reducing obstacles” (Foster et al., 2005, p. 38). In summary, the relationship between a NSO and sport participants can be described as learning, mediated and inclusive, and based on promise, trust and voluntary exchange. This view is consistent with the interpretation of sport participation employed by the present study. It emphasizes the interplay between participation's cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects centered on learning: (a) the correct way of doing sport; (b) to perceive and identify the benefits of sport; and, (c) to define the effects of sport as positive or pleasurable. The Web offers an effective platform for communicating those promises through information-gathering activities central to creating and maintaining relationships with sport participants and delivery partners. In particular, the Web expands the traditional NSO-participants' relationship usually channeled through elected representatives and collective forums such as general assemblies. It provides the opportunity for instant interactions between the parties and for a cost-effective sharing of best practices, advocacy support and other services. This study, therefore, examines the initial stage of relationship building, focusing on NSOs' use of their websites for communicating with, and providing services to sport participants and delivery agencies.

## **Method**

The SPDP (2007-2008) projects funded by Sport Canada provided an excellent opportunity to analyze the use of the Web by Canadian NSOs to promote participation in sport amongst various target groups in a variety of contexts. Ten NSOs, recipients of earmarked funding, formed the focus of the study. A purposive sampling procedure was used to determine the suitability of the selected NSOs consistent with the aim of the procedure, which is to intentionally seek organizations and people that meet some criteria for inclusion in the study (Palys, 1997). Four such criteria were employed: diversity, continuation, geographical proximity and alignment between the conceptualisation of RM as a holistic system and a learning relationship, and Sport Canada's requirements for strategic partnership in delivering activities and developing instructional materials.



Included were all seven NSOs that took part in the first edition of the SPDP (2002-03) and who were currently participating in the programme. In this way a continuing organization-wide commitment to the values of sport participation could be observed. In addition, three other NSOs (two Olympic and one recreational sport) were identified. The geographical location of the NSOs' head quarters and the human and financial cost associated with the study were another consideration in our purposive sampling procedure. Collectively, these NSOs represent sports with different histories, constituencies and structures, and varying degrees of commercial viability and professionalization (Table 2). As a result, the NSOs of Alpine Skiing (ACA), Athletics (AC), Badminton (BC-new), Bowling (Canadian Tenpin Bowling Federation, CTF-new), Cycling (CCA), Gymnastics (GC-new), Hockey (HC), Rowing (RC), Swimming (Swimming National Canada SNC) and Volleyball (VC) have been selected. The researchers sought and obtained the cooperation of Sport Canada for this project.

#### *Data collection*

A protocol for the evaluation of NSOs' websites was developed which consisted of two interrelated parts. The first part was concerned with developing an assessment tool for examining each NSO's web design, content and traffic. Cukier and Middleton's (2003) and LEVERUS' (2004) studies of Canadian voluntary sector organizations presence on the Internet and Beck's (1997) evaluation criteria were employed to identify the key components of the assessment tool. Each NSO's web design was evaluated by looking at specific components such as authority, accuracy, objectives, currency and coverage. Each of those components was further examined by a series of specific "yes" or "no" questions (Table 3). The NSOs' website content was evaluated by studying the information, interaction, presentation and service provided. A four-point Likert scale (strongly agree-strongly disagree) was used for each component. One of the key issues with website evaluation is to determine the user (Shneiderman, 2000). Four main categories of users typically catered for by NSOs were identified including individual participants (I), clubs (C), provincial associations (A) and corporate users (B). Background statistics about the NSOs websites in terms of speed, page views, traffic and standings were obtained

through an online service provided by a leading web site information company ([www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com)).

The second part of the protocol evaluated the specific service offered by the website for each of the four categories of users. Following the conceptualization of sport participation as a learning process, involving creating and maintaining relationships between participants and the NSO, the study specifically examined NSOs' information-gathering activities pertinent to sport participation and the services offered with regard to membership, media, advocacy and general support, and volunteer recruitment and management. These were analysed in relation to the four key categories of users of the sport participation network. Each service category was further divided into a set of specific "yes" or "no" questions for each of the users. The ten NSO websites were monitored between September and November 2007. Three evaluation reports were produced at the end of each month, plus a summary of the findings. The protocol established by this study is consistent with Ho's (1997) framework for evaluation of commercial websites from a customer point of view, including three categories of promotion of product and services, provision of data and information, and processing of business transactions.

#### *Data analysis*

Data analysis was performed by grouping the results into tables (see Tables 1 through 6). Each aspect of the NSOs' service provided over the Internet was analysed in relation to the accuracy and authority (e.g., an editor, official or an athlete-role model) of the website and to its contribution to promoting sport participation as a learning relationship process. Two models for data analysis pertinent to the objectives and key constructs of the study were employed. This was necessary because to the best of our knowledge no such single model exists. The level of functionality of NSOs' websites in relation to sport participation was analysed using Burgess and Cooper's (2000) extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA; a modification of Ho's [1997] framework), which includes three stages of *promotion* (inception), *provision* of information and services (consolidation) and *transaction* processing (maturity). To understand the extent to which

NSOs have been utilising the Internet to establish and maintain relationships with sport participants, Wang, et al.'s (2000) relationship-building process model for the Web was employed. It complements the eMICA model, and similarly includes three interrelated stages of initial investigation, full-range communications and relationship network creation.

## **Results and Discussion**

The Canadian NSOs discussed in this study established their presence on the Web between 1995 and 2001 and have since generated considerable experience in using the Internet as a communication and management tool. The speed of most websites is very fast with the CCA being the fastest (94% of Alexa monitored 200,000 websites are slower) and HC being the slowest (53% of the websites are faster). The page views per visitor per day, however, are rather low with an average number of 3.8 pages across all ten NSOs (see Table 2). Furthermore, over the past three years the page views for all NSOs have been steadily declining (Alexa, 2008).

*[Table 2 about here]*

### *NSOs Web design and information provision*

The focus of NSOs' website design analysis (e.g., authority, accuracy, objectives, currency and coverage of the information provided) was on both generic features, such as authorship and reliability of the information as well as on its relevance for three categories of individual users – recreational, amateur and elite. Table 3 presents a summary of the findings. Five NSOs (BC, CCT, CCA, HC and SNC) clearly underestimated the importance of the authority of the information published. Just because something is published on a sport governing body's website does not automatically make it trustworthy and reliable. Conversely, associating a message with an authority makes it both more personal and representative. In this respect, Canadian NSOs do not compare favourably with the rest of the voluntary sector where the authority and quality of the information communicated by 64% of 184 monitored websites was found to be good and excellent (Cukier & Middleton, 2003). In terms of accuracy of the information most

NSOs scored well with the exception of CTF, CCA and HC. NSOs were also good at providing reliable, error-and bias-free information, which in most cases was not designed to sway opinion.

*[Table 3 about here]*

A study objective was the coverage of the information provided, and those messages and pages which specifically related to sport participation. Only four NSOs (ACA, BC, CCA and GC) provided information which was pertinent to the three categories of sport participants- recreational, amateur and elite. The rest of the NSOs offered virtually no relevant communications with inherent value to participants. This finding bears important implications for establishing relations with participants. For instance, NSOs do not seem to encourage users to visit their websites for information on the benefits of participation, evidence that sport can really help achieve positive results in tackling obesity, exclusion or anti-social behaviour, as well as on opportunities for involvement in sport. O'Beirne and Stoney (2004) echoed this concern by noting that many sport organizations are failing to integrate online and offline strategies to maximize community involvement in sport. The Internet can help NSOs gather important information about different users by asking background details during registration. NSOs can then track the access, use and length of time viewing particular web pages. For example, McCarthy (1999) observed the growing use of 'cookies' by sport clubs in the USA as part of the process of developing participant databases. The important point here is that different sport participants are not static entities. Rather their status is often age and role-related and tends to change from recreational to amateur, to elite and back. NSOs do not have to subscribe to the typical commercial model of 'the ladder of loyalty' (Tapp, 2004), where different groups of supporters are valued according to how much they spend with the club, and where the purpose is to move them up the ladder so they can spend more. However, NSOs still have to facilitate this process of transition between participation statuses by providing relevant services with the ultimate goal to keep those participants involved.

#### *Visions, goals and focus*

As established, RM emphasizes the importance of trust and promises between an organization and its customers. Those two concepts, underpinned by NSOs' core

competencies, resources and support, are responsible for maintaining relationships with sport participants and delivery partners. The strategic objectives of nine NSOs display a clear organizational focus concerned with the growth of sport and the achievement of specific rankings and medals. In contrast, one NSO did not use the Web to communicate its goals and visions. Only RC, HC, and GC made specific reference to the intrinsic value of sport and pledged to promote a positive experience for all participants (Table 4). None of the NSO websites provided any information about the SPDP initiatives, even though many of these are multi-year projects, supported in some cases with over \$100,000 (CDN) from Sport Canada and are delivered across several provinces. Gummesson (2002) argued that from a RM point of view attending to nano relationships (e.g., organizational structure, systems and processes) provides the basis for building mega relationships. This is particularly true for NSOs as most of their delivery partners are independent agencies (e.g., local authorities, sponsors, youth centres). It is critical to build good relationships with them to ensure success of the programmes.

*[Table 4 about here]*

#### *NSOs Web functionality*

The development of NSOs' websites follows a pattern similar to that of commercial sector organisations. The process begins with simple and static presentation of information and evolves over time through the addition of more functionality and complexity, as NSOs gain experience with technology and resources needed to maintain their web presence. Table 5 presents a summary of NSOs stages of functionality. All NSOs have passed the stage of promotion (inception) where the main focus had been to communicate who they are and what they do. However, there are variations in terms of 'rich information.' For example, not all NSOs make their annual reports or plans available on the Web. Differences in NSOs start to appear at the stage of provision of information and services. Three clusters were identified according to the level of interactivity offered by each website. The website belonging to BC was classed in the low level as it did not provide any interactive features for members and appeared somewhat static. The NSOs of AC, CTF, GC, and VC were considered as providing medium-level interactivity, which included mainly online shopping and mobile phone alerts. Five organizations, ACA, CCA, HC, RC and SNC, were put in the category of high-level

interactivity because they offered extra features such as polls, multimedia, newsletters and updates by E-mail and mobile phones, fund-raising and advertising opportunities. Finally, only the websites of three sport governing bodies (CCA, RC and SNC) were considered to be in a mature (processing) stage. They provided not only opportunities for on-line shopping and order tracking, but also member and event registration, all of which require full transaction processing. A high level of interactivity of a NSO's web site thus is essential for establishing relationships with participants. As Day (1997) observed, the purpose of a web site is not to have "one-time-only" interaction with customers, but to build a long-term relationship.

*[Table 5 about here]*

The level of website functionality is important for understanding how NSOs create and maintain relationships with sport participants and partner organisations. Equally important is the content of the information presented as it directly influences current and potential sport participants. While most NSOs do not directly deliver sport participation programmes, they nonetheless have an obligation to support individual members, clubs and small delivery partners, as those do not have the capacity and resources to utilise the benefits of the Web. For example, Boyce (2000) noted that it takes approximately \$10,000 (CDN) per month to achieve 500,000 page views each month. A LEVERUS (2004) Internet Survey largely confirms the supporting role of NSOs in relation to their constituencies. It found that 50% of Canadian non-profit organisations spend less than \$5,000 (CDN), and only 9% more than \$75,000 (CDN) per year on web design and architecture. What emerged from the analysis, however, is a chequered picture suggesting that with the exception of BC and CTF, the rest of the NSOs' websites are promoting essentially a passive consumer behaviour. Web-based sport experiences were designed to be consumed mainly as a form of entertainment including live or archived results, rankings, merchandise and advertising space purchase, and donating. Only two NSOs' websites (CCA and CTF) directly appeal to viewers to 'get involved' in sport and offer information on various opportunities available.

*The sport participation relationship network: information gathering and service provision through the Web*

Sport participation is not confined to the dyadic relationship between a NSO and various individuals and groups. It involves a range of providers which form a network of organisations and relations including those among the participants themselves. Network forms of organisations, as Podolny and Page (1999) noted, are characterized by a distinct ethic or value-orientation on the part of the exchange partners. A key function of networks is learning facilitation. Moreover, the interactive structure of the Internet makes the traditional passive role of individuals as receivers of communications about the benefits of sport redundant. The Internet enables interactive access to sport participation opportunities, comparisons of services and better-informed decision making. The Internet has the real potential to reach vast audiences in a very cost-effective way. The Canada Online study (Zamaria et al., 2005) suggested that 75% of Canadians have at least one computer at home with 66% having high-speed Internet access. Significantly, users valued the Internet much more as a source of information than entertainment. They report to have used it for a substantial range of activities, but mostly for services with 52% reporting having made an online purchase. Young people are particularly technology savvy, as 99% of Canadian youth report that they have used the Internet at some point, and almost 8 in 10 (79%) have Internet access at home (MAN, 2001). Unlike many commercial transactions, sport participation is a life-long activity where the critical issue is not so much getting people involved in sport but retaining them. Without exception, all SPDP projects target young people from various backgrounds which offer the advantage of developing long-term relationships with them.

Effective RM is premised on the collection and analysis of information about participants and delivery partners which form the sport participation network. Indeed, as Buttle (1996) observed, marketing problems are by nature information handling problems. The definition of sport participation adopted by the present study urges NSOs to both provide and collect information about how individuals learn the correct way of doing sport, to perceive and identify its benefits and to define its effects as positive or pleasurable. To this end, Sport Canada requires NSOs to produce an annual evaluative report about the SPDP for which they are responsible. This report provides aggregate quantitative data which informs sport managers about the participation network but virtually nothing about individual participants. It is therefore important to understand what information NSOs

collect and provide to their members and participants as a foundation on which long-term relations can be built. Relationship marketing, however, poses a conceptual and practical challenge to all NSOs. They have to reconcile the two conflicting objectives of getting to know their participants better in order to develop trusting relationships, while at the same time increasing the number of people in the SPDP programmes. This conflict makes analysing and personalising their relationships with sport participants and delivery partners very difficult.

Table 6 shows NSOs' website information-gathering activity about, and service provision for the network. It highlights the process of relationship-building through the Internet (Wang et al., 2000) with reference to its first and third stage (initial investigation and relationship network creation), as no sufficient data are available yet in relation to the second stage of the process (full-range communications). During the first stage, the relationship between a NSO and its delivery partners and participants does not exist. The parties lack adequate knowledge about each-other and the dominant activity is information gathering. At the second stage participants and deliverers of sport services come in direct contact and engage in full-range interactions by experiencing the activity being offered. Finally, a relationship network develops including the NSO, its delivery partners such as clubs, community development officers and physical education teachers, and participants. In this case the experiences with and perceptions of the sport programme are of greater importance than the number of participants and sessions held. McCormack and Chalip (1988) also argued that it is not sport *per se* that is responsible for particular outcomes; it is the ways that sport is implemented. Put succinctly, it is the specific socializing experiences that particular sport settings provide (or do not provide) that result in particular outcomes. Coalter (2007) goes even further arguing that we need to understand "which sports and sports *processes* produce which *outcomes* for which participants in which *circumstances*" (p. 34) (emphasis in original).

[Table 6 about here]

With the exception of VC, SNC and AC, the NSOs offer downloadable forms for event and membership registration which provide a rich source of information about participants' socio-demographic characteristics and level of participation. It was beyond



the scope of this study, however, to investigate the role of NSO management information systems and to what extent they were following up on the original registration with further information on activities, products and support. Another effective form of personal relationship building with participants is the interactions occurring in the process of providing recruitment/management services for volunteers, coaches and referees. Six NSOs (VC, AC, CCA, CTF, HC and RC) offered coaching courses which enable the establishment of long-term relations with participants. Since most coaching and refereeing qualifications have a hierarchical structure entailing regular training, testing, and officiating, this allows NSOs to develop close personal contact, and to provide follow up services through the Web to a great number of potential and current volunteers over sustained periods of time. Apart from the ACA and CCA, the opportunities which the Web provides for recruitment and development of volunteers through personalized interactions were grossly underused by the remainder of the NSOs. This finding is consistent with Canadian non-profit sector organizations in general, where only 1% of NGOs were making use of the Web for volunteer recruitment and management (Cukier & Middleton, 2003). Canadian sport depends heavily on volunteers. Doherty (2005) estimated that there are 1.17 million sport volunteers (18% of all Canadian volunteers). This shows both the scale of the task, if NSOs were to personalize their relations with volunteers, and the potential to enhance sport participation across all sports. The capacity of the Web in affecting sport volunteering and participation is very promising, as evidenced by the success of the Canadian Volunteer Opportunity Exchange (VOE). The VOE reports 20 organisations and 200 volunteers registering weekly across the country (VOE, 2001). These findings are also in keeping with LEVERUS' (2004) conclusion that 30% of voluntary organizations use their websites for education and training opportunities. They also show that NSOs are falling behind the rest of the voluntary sector where 50% of NGOs were making the most of interactive features such as web forms compared to 20% in our sample.

NSOs are particularly well-positioned to develop and maintain relationships with members of the sport participation network through the use of advocacy activities. Sport participation is often contingent on the availability of space, facilities and services which

are determined by local or central government decisions. This gives the NSOs the opportunity to mobilize public support for lobbying in favour of particular community developments, which would impact positively on sport participation including improving transport links, building new infrastructure or closing down environmentally-unfriendly businesses. In this regard, the use of the NSOs' websites is a powerful tool both in terms of establishing links with public, non-profit and private providers, and individuals in showcasing what has been done to promote participation by voicing concerns to elected officials which are beyond the control of sport governing bodies. The potential of the Web is magnified by the fact that the Canadian public sector is a model user of the Internet with 95% access (Statistics Canada, 2000). Advocacy building was evaluated by two criteria – on-line petitions on sport-related issues and links to government sources and other websites where members can find relevant information. While all NSOs offered such links (from 34 on AC to 333 on HC websites, see Table 2), no evidence was found for the use of on-line petitions or any other forms of advocacy activities such as information regarding advocacy issues, direct email links to politicians, or sample letters. All NSOs aspire to make their sports available to as many people as possible which is a pledge containing clear advocacy components such as equal opportunities and fair distribution of benefits. In this regard, NSOs are failing to appreciate the potential of the Web for relationship building particularly with their local club network and are lagging behind the rest of the non-profit sector where almost 40% of the organizations have facilities to provide advocacy support (Cukier & Middleton, 2003). As Spenser (2002) noted, government organizations now commonly accept public comment via email and forms submitted through websites. Only the two most commercially viable NSOs (AC and HC) use the Web for polling visitors on ranking athletes and performances.

The new digital age which is central to most NSOs' communication and economic strategy, urges sport managers to transcend the traditional notion of 'intellectual property' with its emphasis on creating and selling associations with sporting insignia and to consider the idea of 'intellectual value' (Dyson, 1995). A similar approach suggests that in the new economy of ideas dominated by the Internet, what really matters is not the content (information and images as a property) but the process and the relationship which

this content generates through follow-up services and other activities. This is supported by Gummesson (2004, 2006), who maintained that the focus of marketing studies has been shifting from the things being exchanged to the process of exchange. Gummesson further pointed out that the three key variables of marketing theory are relations, networks and interactions. These are also central for NSOs in promoting sport participation.

Canadian NSOs, as those in other countries, are concerned with three central tasks: carrying out their mission with limited resources; communicating the issues of sport participation to members of the network, governmental and media organisations; and, raising the funds needed to accomplish their mission. The use of the Web for RM provides NSOs a number of opportunities to successfully tackle these three tasks. This research supports the conclusions of other studies on the voluntary sector and shows that Canadian NSOs' websites do not offer much in the way of an ongoing engagement with sport participants and delivery partners. Relationship-building, as Klassen (2002) noted, begins at the home page. This analysis demonstrated that NSOs still do not appreciate the potential of the Web for promoting sport by developing and maintaining relationships with participants and members of the sport participation network. The highlighted rows in Table 6 clearly indicate that NSOs collect no information about, and provide no support to individual and group members (clubs and associations) essential for initiating and sustaining participation. This is akin to a 'reactive' level of relationship marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 1996) where NSOs are encouraging web viewers to experience sport through browsing, spectating or participating but do not initiate any further contact with them. This is far from the 'partnership level' characterised by continuous interactions between a NSO and the sport participation network. It echoes Cukier and Middleton's (2003) conclusion about Canadian voluntary sector organizations' use of the Web, that "less than half allow for any sort of personalization by the user" ( p. 118).

## **Conclusion**

Canadian NSOs' information-gathering and dissemination activities through the Web, which make-up the relationship-building process, appear sparse, allowing limited

opportunities for developing a marketing database critical for establishing relationships with sport participants. The issue is not purely technological or one of resource availability, as Caskey and Delpy (1999) demonstrated for commercial sport websites, which despite a general lack of human resources could operate profitably and successfully. It is equally about recognizing, understanding and using the Internet as an engine of social change and a mechanism for relationship building. A similar interpretation is supported by a rare study on knowledge management in Canadian NSOs suggesting a tendency “to maintain knowledge at an implicit and individual level, even when knowledge could be codified and shared within the network” (O’Reilly & Knight, 2007, p. 276). Moreover, sport participation implies developing a learning relationship among a NSO, participants and other delivery partners that form the sport participation network. The Internet technology empowers not only the NSO but also sport participants to become active market players. Canadian NSOs have been receptive to the use of the Web for promoting sport participation with all ten organisations studied having reached the provision and processing stages of functionality (Burgess & Cooper, 2000). However, they are still failing to utilise the opportunities offered by the interactive technology to effectively communicate their objectives and to develop relationships with members, and in some cases are lagging behind the voluntary sector in the country.

This study conceptualised sport participation as a learning, mediated and inclusive process and demonstrated the potential of NSOs’ relationship marketing through the Web for promoting it. While no technology can substitute for human contact and experience, NSOs’ managers would benefit from a more strategic look into the role of the Web in this process by investing in better designs, functionality and communications with their constituencies. Further research is needed in devising Web-based relationship strategies for initiating and sustaining participation in sport. The academia can make a significant contribution to the work of NSOs in this regard, as it possesses a great resource: technologically savvy and sport-active students, who could be encouraged to apply their skills to help NSOs improve sport participation.

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