Branding in the lower level sport club setting
The case of Swedish division 1 ice hockey teams

Master thesis within Business Administration
Author: Henrik Klouman & David Beljulji
Tutor: Desalegn Abraha
Jönköping May, 2012
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Henrik Klouman & David Beljulji

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Abstract

Background
Keller (2009) states that brand equity and the crucial intangible value a brand brings to organizations is perhaps one of the most important marketing topics discussed in recent years. As the competitive market and branding environment for companies are fierce, the sport industry has gradually become more competitive and professional in many aspects of their operations as well. Researchers have gone to the extent of claiming that a brand is the most important asset of a sports team and that the brand provides direction and meaning for sports associations as well as for their followers. Still, market studies have indicated that sport associations often lack appropriate branding strategies and particularly for teams below the professional level, research have been limited in these areas.

Purpose
The purpose of this thesis is to examine what strategies and actions lower level Swedish ice hockey teams use in order to create and strengthen their brand.

Method
A hermeneutic view and inductive approach have been applied for this thesis. The purpose and research questions of this thesis have been answered with the help of seven qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with lower level sport club managers.

Frame of reference
Theory is based on two approaches to how teams can build and leverage their brand. While a model by Richelieu (2003) illustrates a strategic construction of the sports brand, the Spectator based brand equity model by Ross (2006) is more concerned with how controllable and uncontrollable factors contributes to the two main components of spectator based brand equity, namely brand awareness and brand associations.

Conclusions
The conclusion withholds the answer to the four research questions and purpose designed for this thesis. The findings indicate that teams are starting to realize the importance of a strong brand, particular to meet increased customer expectations for the game experience are considered important to create positive brand associations. An important finding have been the lack of communication and interaction teams seem to have with their customers in order to establish a clear brand identity and position in the market. The findings also indicate some characteristics particular to the lower level setting e.g. the dependence on volunteer workers and how the lack of long-term financial responsibility have impacted the management and development of a strong brand.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Brands today can be seen everywhere – and companies build brands to grow their businesses and increase profitability (Kapferer, 2008). Firms are trying to encourage and persuade consumers into buying their product or services by differentiating themselves from competitors and by convincing customers that their product offers a higher value in order to become a familiar and trusted brand in the minds of its customers (Cova & Cova, 2002).

A familiar brand assures the consumer of a certain level of quality and offers an opportunity for marketers and managers to distinguish their brand, intentionally attracting and capturing loyal customers at the same time (Keller & Lehman, 2006). A brand is a company asset, most often in form of a name, a word, a symbol, a drawing or a combination of these elements, which intention is to communicate and identify the meaning that differentiates the products and/or services of a company from competitors (Fredrick & Patil, 2010; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Through companies branding efforts, firms create and manage customers’ expectations thereby making brand quality and brand image highly intertwined in creating successful brands (Richelieu, 2003). Further, a successful brand is according to De Chernatony (2001) able to quickly establish a strong emotional and personal relationship with customers thereby enabling the possibility for customer loyalty towards the brand. Brand equity exists when the consumer is familiar with the brand and perceives an added value buying a particular product or service (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). With high brand equity, meaning that customer perceive this added value, comes several advantages for a firm. Favorable brand equity can increase the probability of brand choice, customer retention, higher profit margins and willingness to pay premium price etc. (Aaker, 1991, Keller, 1993).

Brooks (1994) defines the sport product as any form of physical activity that puts one actors talent against an opponents. In team sport the product is the actual game between two teams and can be consumed personally being at the arena or stadium or through various types of media (television, radio and internet) but also after the event itself, through newspapers or watching highlights of the game (Gladden & Funk, 2002). As the competitive market and branding environment for companies is fierce, the sport industry is also becoming increasingly commercialized, and sport entities have become more professional in many aspects of their operations over the years (Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt, 2006). Still, market studies have indicated that sport associations often lack appropriate branding strategies (Schilhanek, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002), but that there is also evidence pointing towards the economic importance of club branding where studies have shown that the club brand has significant influence on a club’s economic success (Gladden & Milne, 1999; Schilhanek, 2008). Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt (2005) even goes to the extent of claiming that a brand is the most important asset of a sports team and that a sport clubs brand identity provides direction and meaning for sports associations in their constant competition with other sports teams and with other leisure offers and activities (Bauer et al. 2006). As the sporting industry is becoming increasingly commercialized the need for viewing sport clubs on a more professional level in terms of organizational activities, management and marketing is evident (Couvelaere, & Richelieu, 2005). The importance of determining how brand equity develops relevant to sport then becomes a crucial task for sport teams and managers to solve. Ross (2006) specifically points to that the service offered to customers (the game) is experiential and emotional but that the performance of the team can vary from game to game. Because managers are not able to control the outcome of the event, managers need to find other areas of the sport experience to leverage and manage their brand (Ross, 2006).
Even though sports teams differ from traditional companies in many ways, they do have an advantage regular firms most often do not possess; sports teams generate an emotional response from their fans (customers) that is greater than in any other industry (Underwood, Bond & Baer, 2001). Burton and Howard (1999) and Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) claims that with a strong brand a team can potentially progress and cherish loyal fans, which again helps to generate higher revenues through sales of variety of related goods and services.

1.2 Field of study: Ice hockey in Sweden

This thesis will explore branding in sports and specifically branding of ice hockey teams below the professional level in Sweden. To clarify the particular area of research for this thesis, the "lower level sport club setting", and why this setting is interesting to explore in terms branding some background information about ice hockey in Sweden will be provided.

The authors have decided to focus on division 1 (third level) ice hockey teams in Sweden. There are several reasons for choosing this field of research. Sweden has 62 003 registered ice hockey players ranking Sweden with the 6th most registered players of all countries in the world and on third place worldwide with 0,65 % of the total population of Sweden registered as hockey players (www.iihf.com). Ice hockey in Sweden is considered a national sport that has from the early 1920s grown to be one of the most popular sports in Sweden with the growth of teams, ice hockey rinks and players all adding to the popularity of the sport (Stark, 2010). Teams at the top two levels (Elitserien & Allsvenskan) are regarded to be the “professional levels” in Sweden. These teams have a considerable income from league sponsors where all clubs share a certain amount of sponsorship funds as well as income from selling TV rights where they receive a considerable amount of money as a yearly external funding (www.hockeyallsvenskan.se, 2009). Further, teams at this level have most of their employed players playing ice hockey as their full time job. These factors all contribute to put them in the “professional level” category. This lies as the foundation for focusing upon the teams playing in Division 1, the third level in Sweden. Teams below these two top divisions have no such external income from league sponsors, TV rights or exposure and solely have to rely on the income they themselves are able to generate. Also very few teams at this level have players playing ice hockey fulltime. What is particularly interesting in connection to this thesis is the growth and expansion of lower division teams also building new arenas and having sell out crowds during their season games (Stark, 2010). Even though the chosen teams for this area of research are playing at the third level in Sweden, some teams have an annual turnover up to 20 million SEK (www.zport.se, 2012). Teams are building new spectacular arenas to find room for more spectators and still teams have a higher demand for tickets (www.dn.se, 2004). With this increased interest in many smaller clubs playing lower in the division system one would believe that an increased demand for professionalism is called for also for these teams?

1.3 Problem discussion

While companies in the regular sense are dependent on brand loyalty for a stable and increasing customer base and make customers less vulnerable to competitors offerings, sport management theory suggests very much the same within the sport industry (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). While companies’ work to achieve loyal customers, to retrieve repeat usage and having a favorable image in the minds of its customers it is suggested that sports teams should do the same (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This would enable them to keep loyal fans, translating into a higher number of paying spectators identifying themselves with the club brand (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005).
Previously conducted research has, to a large extent, evolved around brand management for professional teams (Schilhaneck 2008; Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005; Ross, 2006; Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt, 2005, Gladden & Funk, 2002) but teams operating in lower levels have received very little attention. One exception is a study by Gladden, Milne and Sutton (1998) who proposed a conceptual framework for assessing brand equity in division 1 college athletics but still there are numerous characteristics separating American college league sports from lower level sports teams around the world. This leads us to the specific field of research for this thesis being to assess the gap in existing research towards branding for teams operating in a lower level setting and how they work in order to create and strengthen their brand. To be able to consider the question of brand management and how teams work to establish and strengthen their brands Richelieu (2003) insists upon a strategic construction of the brand. The strategic construction of the brand all starts with brand identity, which means the establishment of a unique set of brand associations or core values that represents the brand, and for the brand to be recognized for by customers (Aaker, 1991). In order to achieve a strong brand, teams also have to position their brands meaning the creation of an offering that is clear and distinctive relative to competing offerings in the minds of customers (Kotler, 2008). Building and managing brands is a challenging tasks and managers need to understand the obstacles that can harm and weaken the brand in order to overcome and strengthen the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2009). It is when these factors have been clarified and accounted for the implementation of a branding strategy and marketing actions can be applied and make sense (Richelieu, 2003).

The lack of research in this area and the signs pointing to that in terms of turnover, spectators as well as arenas and facilities the lower level teams in many cases seem to have characteristics, even though on a much smaller scale, similar to teams at the professional level. The authors wish to explore this particular field towards brand management in the lower level sport club setting. Interestingly for the purpose of this thesis Couvelaere & Richelieu (2005) claims that every sports team has the potential of creating some brand equity, even with limited resources by adapting their strategy to their niche in the market. Based on the background and problem discussion the authors have designed a purpose and research questions presented below to explore brand management in this particular setting.

1.4 Purpose
The authors wish to explore the proposed gap in sport branding literature concerning the branding process of teams in a lower level sport club setting. The following purpose have been constructed for this thesis:

The purpose of this thesis is to examine what strategies and actions lower level Swedish hockey teams use in order to create and strengthen their brand.

1.5 Research questions
Based on the problem discussion above there are some key aspects to the building a strong brand. To help guide the structure and the exploration of the proposed gap in branding literature, the authors have developed four research questions relevant to the creation and strengthening of brands in the sport club setting. The research questions are as follows:

1. How does lower level sport teams create and manage their brand identity?
2. How does lower level sport teams work to position their brand in the market?
3. What are the main challenges encountered in the establishment of a team as a brand?
4. What are the main factors lower level sports teams exploit in order to become and strengthen their brand?

1.6 Delimitations

This thesis will only disclose the reality of division 1 ice hockey teams in Sweden. As interviews with 7 ice hockey associations have been conducted the generalizability of the findings are limited. However the authors would claim that the findings could still be useful for teams in similar settings. Furthermore the findings only focus on management’s perspective of their team brand. No research has been conducted in order to discover fans perception of the brand. Additionally since most of the research conducted and theories available concerns branding for professional teams the theoretical framework, and particularly the models applied in this thesis is also designed for that setting. This has led the authors to exclude some of the aspects in the models that are found to be irrelevant for the research at hand, e.g. TV rights and exposure, merger of entertainment companies etc. The particular topics will be mentioned in the text in order to for the reader to judge our justification of removing the topics.

1.7 Disposition

**Introduction**

• In chapter 1 the background of the research area is presented, followed by an extensive problem discussion. The chapter concludes with a description of the purpose and research question as well as delimitations of the thesis.

**Frame of reference**

• Chapter 2 will take the reader through existing research about the problem area constituting the frame of reference.

**Method**

• Chapter 3 discusses the method of the thesis and motivation for the choices made towards the research philosophy, approach and design as well as sampling, research quality and data analysis.

**Empirical data**

• In chapter 4 the empirical findings from the 7 interviews are presented following the order of our research questions.

**Analysis**

• Chapter 5 is concerned with the analysis of the data collected. It concerns the interpretations and the connection between the empirical findings, theory and research questions.

**Conclusions**

• Chapter 6 summarizes the findings connected to the research questions and purpose of the thesis.
2 Frame of reference

This chapter provides an overview of relevant theories applied in this thesis in order to later analyze the empirical findings. It is structured in the way that brands and brand equity is described in general before going deeper into branding in sports. The frame of reference is concluded with a table overview of the most important concepts connected to each of the four research questions.

2.1 Brands

A brand is a company asset, most often in form of a name, a word, a symbol, a drawing or a combination of these elements, which intention is to communicate and identify the meaning that differentiates the products and/or services of a company and distinguishes them from competitors (Fredrick & Patil, 2010; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Further Schilhaneck (2008) states that a brand is a picture of a product or service anchored in the minds of the consumer resulting from both direct (purchase, usage,) and indirect (advertising, promotion) experiences with the brand. Finally Ind (1997) makes the distinction between a product and a brand saying that a product is something that is produced in a factory but a brand is what the customer buys and further that a product can be copied while a brand is unique. Through its brand, a firm creates and manages customer expectations (Aaker, 1991). This means that a brand can be what makes a customer choose one product or service over the other. Further Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) claim that successful brands have the ability to create strong relationships with customers on both a personal and emotional level. It is the result of these relationships that turn into value for companies as customers develop trust in the brand and ideally become loyal customers (De Chernatony, 2001). Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) explain how a brand becomes a promise a company makes to its customers, and this promise is built on the consistency of the brands message and performance of its product or services.

2.2 Brand equity

Keller (2009) states that brand equity and the crucial intangible value a brand brings to organizations is perhaps one of the most important marketing topics discussed in recent years. The concept of brand equity has been argued for both by accounting and marketing perspectives but commonly both disciplines highlight the importance of having a long-term focus within brand management (Kotler, 2008). From the financial perspective, brand equity has been defined as the incremental cash flow resulting from a product with a brand name versus the cash flow of the product without the brand name (Ross, Russell & Bang, 2008). From a marketing perspective brand equity has been described as the associations and beliefs a consumer has about a brand, also referred to as “consumer brand equity” (Feldwick, 1996). It is the “consumer brand equity” perspective that will be applied in this thesis. Aaker (1996) defines brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities that add or subtract value from the value provided by a company’s product or services. Aaker (1996) group these assets and liabilities into four categories that Aaker (1996) claims to be what brand equity consist of. These categories are brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness and brand associations and will be discussed further shortly. Keller (1993) presented somewhat a similar definition claiming that brand equity exists when the consumer is familiar with the brand and perceives an added (or subtracted) value towards certain brands. With high brand equity, meaning that customer perceive this “added value” of buying a certain brand, comes several advantages for a firm. Favorable brand equity can increase the probability of brand choice, customer retention, profit margin, willingness to pay premium price, marketing effectiveness, positive word of mouth and brand extensions (Aaker, 1991; Aaker 1996; Keller, 1993). Furthermore high brand equity can strengthen the firm against com-
petitors and generally enhance customer loyalty (Aaker, 1996). Even though the benefits and concept of brand equity are generally accepted to be important for firms, the approach to how it is created is often disputed (Ross, 2006).

2.3 Managing brand equity

Previously discussed where how Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as the assets or liabilities linked to a brands name or symbol that add or subtract value from the product or service. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2001) illustrated this approach to brand equity (Figure 1) with four components as displayed below. These four categorizes have been generally accepted and used by numerous researchers (Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2008; De Chernatony, 2001) in their approach and in relation to brand equity.

![Brand Equity Diagram](image)

Figure 1 - Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2001)

Aaker (1996) did not suggest a specific measure for brand equity but instead argued that the four components directly could create brand equity. The four components are described as follows:

**Brand awareness:** describes consumers’ capability to under different conditions identify a brand (Schilhaneck, 2008). Brand awareness are claimed to affect both perception and taste because consumers prefer what is known to them and tend to assign numerous positive attitudes to these familiar items (Aaker, 1991).

**Perceived Quality:** is more product related and Aaker (1996) states that perceived quality is a consumers judgment of products overall functionality and superiority relative to its intentional purpose. The perceived quality component will in this thesis not be emphasized as much as the other three components. Since sport is considered more of a service (Ross, 2006; Schilhaneck, 2008) than a product, and as customers perceived service quality is to a much greater extent subjective depending on different individual expectations and prior experience this component is much harder to assess and determine for services than for products (Grönroos, 1990). The service characteristics of sports will be discussed later.

**Brand associations:** are anything linked in consumers memory to a brand (Ross, 2006). Included are all those thoughts and mental pictures that come to the consumers mind when he/she recalls a brand (Ross, 2006; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2001).

**Brand Loyalty:** is achieved when consumers have a positive attitude towards a brand and repeatedly purchase and demand it (Schilhaneck, 2008, Aaker, 1991, Amine, 1998). Amine (1998) however recommends companies not only to settle by repeat purchase customers but also consider the motives behind the loyalty in order to be prepared and aware of what makes the brand strong/weak and how to always be able to improve.

This general model is explained to give an overview of how consumer brand equity can be explained and will be applied for further use and explanation of the development of a strong brand in sport later in the thesis. As mentioned, particularly the three components of brand awareness, brand associations and brand loyalty will be of further use, and the product related component of perceived quality will not be included to the same extent.
2.4 Branding in sports
We have now introduced some of the key concepts in branding and brand building for companies. However in order to discuss branding within sports the theoretical concepts also have to be adapted to this setting. In the following the challenges of branding in sports and characteristics of sports will be provided. Finally two models for how to create and manage brands in sports will be discussed.

2.5 Branding challenges in the sport club setting
As mentioned earlier brands very much exist in the minds of the customers, making the management of brands challenging (Schilhaneck, 2008). To make this even more difficult, the sport club setting is characterized by a number of challenges particular to this field.

2.5.1 Heterogeneous customer groups
There are a number of heterogeneous customer groups with different backgrounds and preferences that sport teams have to take into account (Gladden, Milne & Sutton, 1998; Schilhaneck, 2008). A crucial challenge for sports teams can be the spectator base being very complex consisting of men, women and children with different backgrounds and ideas of what they want to see and experience during a sporting event (Schilhaneck, 2008). However sport teams also have other key audience groups a part from the direct fans (regular spectators). Sponsors/VIPs, media and the municipality can be such groups, all with potentially different interests that the club have to have in mind when trying to shape the image of their brand (Schilhaneck, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002).

2.5.2 Service quality & characteristics
The sporting event is characterized by a number of unique service characteristics being short lived, intangible, the outcome hard to control and also subjective in the eyes of the fans. Different customer groups have different expectations and this is a particular challenge for sport services (Grönroos, 2007). All these factors contribute to the complexity of branding in the sport club setting (Gladden, Milne & Sutton, 1998; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). The sporting event itself (the game) is produced and consumed at the same time, customers are not left with anything other than the experience of watching the game (Schilhaneck, 2008) and the game becomes a significant part of the service delivery process (Ross, 2006). In branding of products, customers are left with a tangible product that represents the brand (Aaker, 1991). Consequently, when sports being more like a service, substitute methods of branding have to be identified to overcome these discussed challenges. A consistent level of quality is said to be a condition for a successful brand (Grönroos, 1990). Problems arise for all service firms in maintaining a consistent level of quality in their services due to the interaction and involvement of the customer in the service process, the unpredictability and diverse customer expectations and the reliance on employees to maintain a consistent level of quality throughout each service encounter (Grönroos, 2007).

2.5.3 On-field performance
People like to associate themselves with a winning team and to have a high performance team with a winning record can certainly help sport organizations to leverage their brand. This is especially true if teams do not yet have a winning history to look back on and is in the beginning of creating both a strong team and brand (Richelieu, 2003). However Schilhaneck (2008) points to team performance also as a particular challenge in the branding process for sport clubs and that the quality of the product (team production) and the uncontrollable factor of the opposing team can make team performance an obstacle to building a strong brand. Couvelaere & Richelieu
lieu (2005) underlines that a minimum of team success actually is a prerequisite for sports teams to maintain in order for them to expect fans to associate themselves with the team and brand. Further, for teams to expect that fans will help promote the club and moreover for the club to have the foundation to build a successful brand a certain winning record is required (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). Field performance is an underlying dimension in sports and to capture loyal fans to a losing team is a difficult task (Ross, 2006). People are less likely to associate themselves, get social approval and self-esteem by identifying themselves with a poor performance team. Still the success of a sport club does not mean that teams have to win every game to reach a high level of emotional and loyal commitment from fans, but should parallel to the quest for success on the field attempt to establish external values in the minds of customers (Richelieu, 2003). In times of struggle, regarding field performance, external values will help to keep fans loyal and committed (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). These types of external values will be thoroughly discussed when approaches for how sports teams can build brands will be discussed later.

2.5.4 Finances and management

Financial stability is one of the keys to be able to properly adopt a brand strategy that teams wish to implement (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). Without a stable economy teams often have more than enough working out financial issues and this draws attention away from developing the brand, as much as it obstructs the actual possibilities to allocate resources to brand and marketing efforts (Richelieu, 2003). Further Schilhaneck (2008) mentions the competence of management as a potential challenge to for example gaining contact and achieving sponsorship. Sponsorship is one crucial activity for sports teams as it can add significantly to the revenues of sports organizations (Speed & Thompson, 2000). According to Speed and Thompson (2000) companies willing to involve themselves in sponsorship often look for status of the sponsored event/team or often events/teams they have a personal liking to. In order for teams to gain sponsorship they should therefore look for companies with a personal interest in the sport or team and try to create an experience that attracts companies. Schilhaneck (2008) adds to the discussion by saying that the reputation and network of skilled and experienced managers can help overcome insecurity for companies to involve themselves in sponsorship. On the other hand inexperienced managers could increase the uncertainty and the perceived risk for potential sponsors. Of course the skills of management is important also for a number of different reasons. To handle financial management, marketing, strategic decision-making etc. are all important aspects that requires a certain amount of skill and experience amongst managers (Schilhaneck, 2008).

2.5.5 Word of mouth and publicity

Word of mouth and publicity can be both challenges and positives for team sport organizations. However this is a big part of the Market induced antecedents later to be examined in the model by Ross (2006) Spectators based brand equity and will be thoroughly discussed there.

2.6 Sport teams & brand equity

In the context of sport club branding all internal and external points of contact has to be considered as a branding opportunity (Gladden & Funk, 1998). As Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as the added value a brand or logo contributes to a product or service Gladden and Milne (1999) has in line with this definition claimed that brand equity for sports teams is the added meaning sport consumers add to the name and logo of their favorite sports team. Sports teams have the ability to generate an emotional response from their fans (customers) that is greater than in any other industry (Underwood, Bond & Baer, 2001). This is one of the main reasons
for sports teams to work hard to improve their fans brand image and associations to capitalize on this emotional attachment in order to create trust and a loyal fan base (Holt, 1995). In the team sport setting there are also a number of aspects that has to be taken into consideration as particular alternative branding measures for the sport club setting in order to create and strengthen the sports brand and create brand equity. These measures will be taken into account in the models that will be presented.

The two models discussed in the following are two approaches to how teams can meet the challenges discussed and further how to build and strengthen the team brand. The authors have chosen to present two models to reach a more holistic understanding of how teams can create strong brands and brand equity. Instead of listing and discussing certain aspects and topics in sport branding a more complete illustration of two models is presented. The idea is that the authors will gain a deeper understanding of the branding process and eventually explore how teams in the lower level sport club setting work with their brands. The different perspectives from the models will hopefully offer a broad understanding and an open mind to the how teams can construct and strengthen the team brand. At the end of the theoretical framework a table is presented with the most important aspects of each model to further guide the interviews and research process.

2.7 Building sport teams brand equity – a framework

The first model that will be introduced is a conceptual model that has been developed by Richelieu (2003) and been used for several studies to explore how teams manage their brand in order to create brand equity and strengthen team brands in sports (Richelieu, 2003; Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005, Richelieu, 2006; Richelieu, Pawlowski & Breuer, 2011). In this model there are three steps that lead to the development of brand equity in sports.

1. Defining the identity if the sports team
2. Positioning the sports team in the market
3. Developing the brand strategy
4. Brand equity

The identity refers to the foundations of the brand strategy and Richelieu (2003) claims that with a clear (1) identity and (2) strong positioning (3) the brand strategy become applicable and enables the ability to leverage (4) brand equity of a sports team (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). As explained earlier brand equity exists when the consumer is acquainted with the brand and holds some positive, strong and unique brand associations in their memory (Keller, 1993).

![Figure 2 - Richelieu (2003)](image-url)
2.8 Defining the identity of the sports team

Keller (2001) states that creating a strong brand identity relates specifically to brand awareness. It has been mentioned earlier that brand awareness is about customer’s ability to recall and recognize the brand (Ross, 2006). However Keller (2001) also emphasizes that a strong brand identity will enhance customer brand awareness in the sense that customers relate certain values the brand represents and therefore it is crucial for managers to consciously and carefully work to establish a meaningful identity. Disregarding the establishment and the communication of a clear and consistent identity, the likelihood of customer brand awareness and positive associations is decreased (Keller, 2001). Berry (2000) specifically looked into service companies and confirms the statements from Keller (2001) by saying that the company’s construction of its brand identity through e.g. advertising, its facilities and the appearance of the employees directly influence customers’ brand awareness. According to Richelieu (2003) the identity of the sports team consists of two central elements: the attributes of the team and the value the team represents to its fans. The attributes of the team refers to the core values of the team, meaning what does the team want to be associated with and recognized for (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). The intention is for sports organizations to identify key elements they want the team to represent (ambition, solidarity, fighting spirit, etc.) to send a message of meaning to the team and at the same time provide direction to the brand (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). The history of the team and its presence in the community are often used as assets in order to trigger an emotional response and a sense of belonging with its fans (Kapferer, 2001). Also the stadium or arena can withhold a great part of a clubs identity (memories of championships or dreadful defeats) and be something to help build and strengthen the identity of a sports team (Schilhaneck, 2008).

After establishing the values management intends the team to stand for and represent, it is crucial that these values can be either transferred or is already perceived to be the values of the team in the eyes of the fans (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). The values of the team should be translated into a value proposition (Kotler, 2008) that clearly states the benefits of the brand to its fans to support and trigger the buying decision (Richelieu, 2003) and create brand awareness (Keller, 2001). This external picture of the brand (fans perception of the brand) is the subjective associations customers holds towards the brand (Schilhaneck, 2008) and the idea is that the stronger and clearer the identity of the club brand, the stronger and more unique will the associations customer hold towards the brand be. Crucial in this step is therefore to ensure that managers’ belief in what the team and organization should stand for is understood and agreed upon also with the fans. A common characteristic of teams that have successfully built and strengthened their brands have in terms of identity often performed surveys throughout and after the season in order to measure and understand fans perception of the brand image (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Richelieu, 2003; Richelieu et al. 2011). Brand identity and the communications of these values are vital for new customers who have little or no experience with the companies’ services to form their impressions (Berry, 2000). The communication of the identity is crucial to gain new customers as it is the only evidence of what the company, or in this case the sports organization, stands for and must appeal to the customers in order to gain their attention (Berry, 2000). Finally sport organizations should carefully evaluate how the brand identity is communicated. When a clear identity is formulated this should be communicated with consistency and should reach as many potential customers as possible with a unifying message (Schilhaneck, 2008).

2.9 Positioning the sports team in the market

Positioning is about creating an offering that is clear and distinctive relative to competing offerings in the minds of customers (Kotler, 2008). Due to the discussed service characteristics of
sports (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Schilhaneck, 2008; Grönroos, 2007) Blankson and Kalafatis (1999) claims that for service brands, the establishment of a clear and differentiated identity is vital to be able to position the brand in the market and be able to promote the values of the brand to customers. This may also be important for product brands, however due to the intangible nature of services, where the customer is not left with much more than an experience, the establishment how this experience should fulfill the expectations of customers and the key values the service provider attempts to represent becomes particularly central (Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999). To face these challenges Richelieu (2003) propose that teams divide positioning into two dimensions namely the (1) **selection of market segments and target market** and the (2) **differentiation of the brand in the market**. Through (1) market segmentation companies can divide a larger population into smaller segments that can be reached more efficiently with an offering (products/services) that match their unique needs (Kotler, 2008). This means that the team should identify the customers believed to be the most receptive to the value proposition developed in step 1. These potential customers would represent the target market for the future development of loyal fans and the long-term development of the brand (Richelieu, 2003).

Secondly comes the (2) differentiation of the brand on the market meaning that the sports association tries to differentiate themselves and their brand in a unique way to persuade customers as to why they should buy their brand instead of others (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). It is also crucial for companies/teams, to be able to differentiate from competitors, to have a clear market overview of direct and potential competitors (Kotler, 2008). It should also be mentioned that sports clubs are competing not only with other sport teams but also with numerous other offerings of consumer entertainment. In this context Burton & Howard (1999) and Schilhaneck, (2008) mentions leisure activities like cinema, traveling, festivals, restaurants, etc. To be able to compete with other offerings teams need to be innovative and competitive in how the club engages their fans in ensuring both involvement, affordability and accessibility in order to exceed fans expectations and retrieve new as well as keeping the “old” customers (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). Differentiation is about the company, or in this case the team, deciding upon how different customers can be reached and the communication of the value proposition, which means that teams should communicate the full mix of benefits that differentiate the brand from competitors and should be the answer to customer’s question “why should I buy your brand?”

2.10 Developing the brand strategy

In the previous discussion of branding challenges to sports teams, and the difficulty of controlling the outcome of the sporting event was discussed. Schilhaneck (2008) suggests that external branding areas has to be identified to be able to convey the value proposition unrelated to the performance of the team. Such measures will be discussed in detail in the following step; developing the brand and marketing strategy.

Richelieu (2003) claims that the identity and the positioning of the team are factors that should be in place and clarified before the sports organization can move forward with the brand strategy. While the main contributions from brand identity and positioning is brand awareness (Keller, 2001; Berry, 2000) the different experiences with the company and the brand is what constitutes and creates brand associations and hopefully brand loyalty (Berry, 2000). Richelieu (2003) have identified factors that either contribute to the brand building process and reinforce brand equity, or on the other hand, factors that can prevent this process (challenges). Factors that can help a sports association to leverage its brand are called **catalyst factors** and factors that can harm the brand building process are called **constraining factors** (Appendix 1). Catalyst factors can be divided into **internal** and **external** catalyst factors where internal catalyst factors are what the team can control and external are factors more or less outside of the teams’ control. As discussed in
the delimitations of the thesis the authors have chosen to consider the most relevant categories to the lower level sport team setting as some of these categories (catalyst factors/constraints) e.g. TV-rights and exposure, industrial changes etc. are only relevant to professional sport teams.

2.10.1 Internal catalyst factors: Marketing actions

This category discusses the controlled variables that can help sports organizations leverage and reinforce its brand and consists of elements that emphasize the experience the sports team provides with its fans and particular marketing actions sports teams can implement to strengthen the brand (Richelieu, 2003).

Fan involvement: The game experience

The entertainment experience (Underwood, Bond & Bear, 2001), and the physical facilities (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005) are all elements that can enhance the experience and help create a belonging to the team and contribute to the development of a sports team brand. Sports organizations can initiate certain rituals performed at each game by for instance playing the team song, shouting particular slogans etc. that also will make the audience interact more in the game experience (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). By turning the game into something more, entertaining the spectators not only by the game itself but by improving the overall service and elements involved (see examples by Schilhaneck, 2008 in organization induced antecedents) the organizations can build the brand on something more than team performance. The physical facilities can become an important factor; it can be a place to represent the club history and a “sacred” place where the unique atmosphere could help create an attachment to the fans (Underwood et al. 2001).

Merchandise

The sale of team merchandise from hats, jerseys and caps to coffee mugs, flags and stickers, are all part of leveraging the team brand and is a measure to have the brand transcend the arena itself by e.g. fans wearing the trademarks of the team also outside of the arena (Richelieu, 2003). Merchandising can further help teams to take advantage of their brand extending their offering from “just the game” into revenues from sales of team merchandise (Burton & Howard, 1999). However, Aaker (1994) and Keller (1993) warn for overextension that instead of strengthening and add value can weaken the brand. Richelieu (2003) points to an example over overextension by a French soccer team called Olympique Lyonnais that opened up barbershops, driving schools and a pizza shop overextending the brand to areas far outside their area of expertise. One common and important merchandise line is the playing jersey. They are the most exposed product of the team and could be used to catch potential customers attention. Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) claims that a lot of teams have re-designed their jerseys to catch the attention of new customers but also gone back to old uniforms in order to create a feeling of nostalgia from earlier days of success (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005).

Advertising

Advertising is an important force in creating brand equity through its influence on customer perception of the brand and brand image (Aaker, 1993). Advertising campaigns in different media are one way of promoting and communicate the core values of the team in order to increase brand awareness with customers and potential customers (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2002). Teams can also print their own flyers or magazines to show and promote the organization, the players and the values of the team. Furthermore giveaways, pricing campaigns and lotteries are examples of promotional campaigns sport associations can use to communicate the brand message (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Schilhaneck, 2008).
Teams can also involve themselves in commercial partnerships with different sports teams, distributors and retailers associations and how teams can help promote each other, sell each others merchandise in team stores, share information on training and health and/or borrow players (of course only if part of same sports) to create synergy effects and leverage the brand outside of the sports arena (Richelieu, 2003; Underwood et al. 2001). Customer relationship marketing programs (CRM) includes telemarketing, direct marketing, customer service etc. based on team’s collection of detailed information of fans demographics and psychographics (Walter, 2000). It should however be noted that CRM programs are very expensive and even for professional teams they are not common, so they will not be considered further in this thesis.

**Player management**

Another aspect of advertising and promotion particular to the sport club setting is how teams promote and manages the compilation of the team (Richelieu, 2003). Signing a star player to the team can enhance the interest from fans and draw attention to the club and brand (Richelieu, 2003). This could also account for local players that fans will recognize and feel a stronger connection to in order to draw support and build loyalty with the team (Underwood et al. 2001). Sport organization can also take use of another type of marketing actions in order to create a stronger belonging and positive brand associations towards the team.

### 2.10.2 External catalyst factors:

We move on to discuss the external catalyst factors which are surrounding elements that can influence the brand of sports teams and by this definition is harder to, or not under the control of the sports team (Richelieu, 2003).

**Technological advances**

Technological advances are the most considerable factor in this category and are somewhat part of the advertising and merchandising categories discussed above. Advances within for example communication and the emergence of the Internet and possibilities for online advertising and electronic commerce to sell merchandise online creates opportunities for substantial increase in revenues for sports teams (Richelieu, 2003). However it is also a challenge for teams keeping up with the latest trends and online developments (Gladden et al. 1998). A website can strengthen the bond between a team and its fans by posting videos and updates about the team as well as to create online communities where fans can share experiences and opinions about the team (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Schilhaneck, 2008). However, it is important to mention that a poorly developed website, with little updates and lack of involvement with the fans may develop into a liability instead of something profitable (Richelieu & Pons, 2006). With declining webpage “hits” from fans, advertisers will have no reason to pay for advertising there (Dunleavy, 2000). An interactive website where fans can interact with both the team and each other is claimed by Richelieu (2003) to be crucial for teams that wants to take advantage of the opportunities available through the Internet. **Market size** regards TV exposure and revenues and is not discussed in connection to lower level sport teams. Further **industry changes**, meaning mergers between sports teams and entertainment companies are most likely to happen between huge sport team brands and e.g. TV stations (e.g The Manchester United channel) and is not relevant for smaller and lower level teams.

### 2.10.3 Constraining factors

Constraining factors are obstacles teams can face that can stop or prevent a team for building and leveraging its brand (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). However as the thesis has gathered and discussed the challenges met by sports teams in chapter 2.5 it will not be further discussed here. Richelieu (2003) specifically argues that fashion, decline in loyalty (meaning players disre-
gard for club loyalty due to the impact of high salaries in professional sports) and life cycle of sport leagues are specifically applied for professional sport teams and are therefore not included nor regarded as relevant for the lower level sport club setting.

2.10.4 Moderating variables

These are variables that can assist and help sport organizations efforts to build and create brand equity as much as it can harm and restrain the teams brand if not taken and handled in a serious manner (Richelieu, 2003). These are called moderating variables due to the fact that are relatively hard to control. It includes finances, legal framework and on field performance. Finances have been accounted for in the possible challenges for sports teams. The only variable not accounted for is “legal framework which specifically discusses the rules for North-American franchises and not relevant here. However as on-field performance is previously discussed as a challenge, it must be mentioned that teams can partly overcome this obstacle also without having a consistent winning record (Schilhaneck, 2008). Waltner (2000) emphasizes that the style of play or the promotion of the team for instance as an underdog fighting for survival can trigger an attachment with fans towards the club and the brand. This can help the club in building a strong enough brand to protect the team from poor on field performance stretches, at least on a short-term basis (Waltner, 2000). However, if the team is promoted as a “fighting for survival” team it can send the message to the fans that managers do not believe in the team (Richelieu, 2003). Then it can become a challenging task to ask fans to associate and develop any emotional commitment and loyalty towards the brand (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005).

2.11 Brand equity

The fourth and final step in the model is brand equity and has also been discussed earlier. Still Richelieu (2003) and Underwood et al. (2001) emphasizes that sports have a unique capability of creating a stronger emotional commitment to its customers than any other industry and this model suggests that by exploiting this strong emotional commitment sports teams can create and strengthen brand equity to position themselves as strong brands in the market (Richelieu, 2003). In order to do so the model suggests the three-step framework now discussed with more or less practical steps as a path to a stronger brand and brand equity. The most comprehensive step in the model is the third and final step, the brand strategy. It includes catalyst factors team can exploit, while identifying a number of constraints and moderating variables that on the other hand can harm the branding process (Couvelare & Richelieu, 2005). Richelieu (2003) highlights that brand equity for team sport organizations is characterized by how fans can create and be part of a community brand, binding together customers that share the values of the team, live the brand and from there become loyal customers (Richelieu, 2003).

2.12 Spectator-based brand equity

The second model that will be introduced in the frame of reference is a model by Ross (2006). Despite the growing significance of services, branding research has been overly related with theory connected to physical goods (Aaker, 1991; Ross, 2006). The general model by Aaker (1996) discussed earlier is well known and accepted in branding literature however there are some disadvantages of the model in the context of the team-sport setting (Ross, 2006). First of all Aakers (1996) model is more supportive towards branding of physical goods and lack the particular adaption to the important characteristics of services (Ross, 2006). In the 2.5 the particular challenges were presented for sports teams in the brand building setting and one of the biggest issues is the characteristic of sports being more of a service than a product (Schilhaneck, 2008; Gladden et al. 1998). Ross (2006) provides a framework that instead of building on Aakers (1996) four consumer behavior variables takes into account the characteristics of ser-
services and intertwines particular elements of sports in order to create a model defined as “spectator-based brand equity” (Figure 3). The model consists of three dimensions called organization-induced, market-induced and experience induced antecedents that lead to the main components of spectator-based brand equity which is brand awareness and brand associations (Ross, 2006). Brand equity here can then lead to a set of consequences that can either negatively or positively affect a sports association (Ross, 2006). As in Aaker’s (1996) model brand awareness and brand associations still has a central role. An important aspect of the model by Ross (2006) is however that brand loyalty, referred to as team loyalty, is an outcome of brand equity instead of a component. The model will be further explained in more detail to illustrate how a strong brand and brand equity can be created in a team sport setting.

Figur 1 - Spectator based brand equity (Ross, 2006).

Organization induced antecedents:
Organization induced antecedents are illustrated as the elements produced and thereby controlled by management (Ross, 2006). The fact that it is almost impossible to control the core product of sport services, meaning the outcome of the games (Schilhaneck, 2008) makes the elements actually possible to control exceptionally important (Ross, 2006). In this dimension they are referred to as the service marketing mix, which adds to the traditional marketing mix four dimensions (product, price, promotion and place) with three additional elements being participants, physical evidence and the service process (Bitner & Zeithaml, 1988). The controlled elements of the service marketing mix are claimed by Ross (2006) to contribute directly to consumer brand awareness and brand associations. The outcome of the sporting event and the performance of the team is previously mentioned as one of the major challenges for sport teams as it is almost impossible to control. Ross (2006) and Schilhaneck (2008) suggests the following areas of branding external to team performance and for the adaption of the service marketing mix in sports to focus upon:

- Event marketing: includes cafeteria, catering.
- Personnel factors: trained and experienced personnel, regulations for customer contact, adequate stadium staff.
- Performance processes: handling of sponsors and VIPs, complaint management, time management, fixed waiting times for ticket purchases, entry arrangement, catering.
- Infrastructure in/around arena: adapted for children, VIP room, monitors, parking possibilities, public transportation, fan areas.

The possibility for standardization, performance and control over these elements are significantly higher than the ability to control team performance (Schilhaneck, 2008). The implementation and quality of these elements opens up for greater control over customers brand associations, values and eventually the development of loyalty. Sports organizations cannot take for granted the emotional commitment of fans, and this should be nurtured and looked after at all
times (Richelieu, 2003). The examples from Schilhaneck (2008) are concrete areas that can be integrated in the experience.

**Market-Induced Antecedents.** Market-induced antecedents are recognized as the sources of brand information that is not controlled or paid for by the sports association and the key components are word of mouth communication and publicity (Berry, 2002). Lindberg-Repo and Grönroos (1999) says that any person that has had an experience with a service provider is a possible source of word of mouth communication and furthermore that if there is any conflict between the word of mouth message and the controlled marketing mix measures by an organization, advertising will lose. This means that in any given situation where customers pass on negative experiences, these messages are considered more reliable than the controlled advertising from the company or organization. But then again if sports organizations can create positive experiences with its fans it can contribute to one of the most valuable marketing efforts they have (Lindberg-Repo & Grönroos, 1999). It is crucial for sport managers to realize that it is the perceptions of its fans that matters the most, as their opinions impacts more than any of their own marketing actions. According to Ross (2006) publicity could also affect brand awareness and associations. In this category it would mean being mentioned in TV programs, magazines or in local newspapers. While free publicity seemingly would be positive, the drawback is that the organization has no control over the content and could receive negative publicity (Ross, 2006). The impact of such negative attention should not be underestimated and organizations need to pay close attention to possible publicity that can harm their brand image (Ross, 2006).

**Experience-Induced Antecedents.** This category involves the service encounter itself, the actual sporting event, and has a critical impact of customers perceived quality of the service (Grönroos, 2007). As mentioned earlier this is the part of the service in sports (the game) that is most difficult if not impossible to control (Schilhaneck, 2008) being intangible, subjective and unpredictable in nature. Still the experience of the event will be a big part of the total perceived quality, satisfaction and long term loyalty of customers/spectators (Brogowiez, Delene, & Lyth, 1990). Ross (2006) suggests that the experience-induced antecedents have a direct impact on brand awareness because repeat exposure to the service itself will increase familiarity with the brand and therefore also increase the capacity of customers to recognize and recall the brand (Ross, 2006). It becomes crucial however that the service provider, being the sports association, to provide an experience besides the performance of the team, to make the service experience as pleasant as possible regardless of the outcome of the event (Couvaelre & Richelieu, 2005). The elements introduced in the organization induced antecedents, are examples of what can be included in order to improve the experience. The first step is about what, and this step is about how; how teams and organizations, to the best of their capabilities, implement the different controllable elements of the service experience to create customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ross, 2006). The organization-induced antecedents, becomes crucial for customers perception of service quality, as these are the steps that the sport organization is actually in control of in the service experience.

**Brand awareness**

Brand awareness is related to the strength of the brand in the memory of the consumer, reflected in the ability of consumers to remember the brand name under different conditions (Aaker, 1991). Brand awareness further consists of brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition means the ability consumers have to recognize the brand and remember previous exposure and use of that particular brand (Ross, 2006). Brand recall means to remember the specific brand when only exposed to the product category and retrieve that information from memory. Ross (2006) suggests that brand awareness is an important part of spectator-based brand equity.
because when fans would think about a product category (sports, football, ice hockey etc.) it is crucial that customers recall and identify the specific brand (Manchester United, New York Rangers etc.). Gladden & Funk (2002) states however that this problem is less important for regional clubs as the competition among local teams usually are less fierce.

Brand associations
While brand awareness is the first step in in recalling a brand name, brand associations are the first thoughts and associations that come to mind after the brand is recalled (Aaker, 1996). This information is a vital part of whether or not the purchase decision is made as these associations are the thoughts that come to mind when contemplating to make a purchase decision (Ross, 2006). This model suggests that brand awareness and brand association form the foundation for spectator-based brand equity. A particularly important factor in this model is the fact that brand associations might directly influence team loyalty. Aaker (1991) also agrees upon this notion saying that brand awareness and associations in the mind of the consumer is the foundation for the purchase decision and for brand loyalty. This means that brand awareness and associations in this model is what represents the basis for brand equity in sports.

Consequences
This model proposes several consequences of (spectator-based) brand equity, which are presented in the following sections. However since the purpose of this thesis is to explore how teams work to build and strengthen their brand and not to explore the consequences of strong brands these will not be the main focus for the later analysis of the results of the thesis. Nevertheless, the authors still think they are of some value in order to illustrate why a strong brand is important and will receive some reflection in the analysis to demonstrate how and why the brand is of great importance to the participant teams.

Team loyalty
Customer loyalty is claimed to be a crucial aspect of firm survival as repeat customers cost less to retain than new customers, they participate in positive word of mouth and they stand for a repeat and stable income for companies (Reichheld, 1996). Loyalty research in team sport has suggested that loyal fans have both strong, positive attitudes towards a certain team and practice repeat purchase behavior (Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000). Sport organizations should however always be on the lookout for consumers with negative perceptions about the provided services. These customers are likely to spend their discretionary income and time with competitive offerings but also participate in negative word of mouth that can make sport association’s also loose potential new customers (Grönroos, 2007).

Atmosphere
The atmosphere is suggested to both be a brand association and a consequence of spectator based brand equity. The reason for this is that the atmosphere dimension is considered to be the subjective excitement and level of entertainment delivered to the fans during the event (Brooks, 1994) but also a consequence of the measures performed by the sport association through the controlled antecedents of the model (Ross, 2006). Sports teams entertain both through the game itself but also largely through other happenings and promotional efforts before, during and after the game (Ross, 2006). The atmosphere therefore is an individual spectators perception of the combination of organizational and experience induced antecedents (Ross, 2006). Gladden et al. (1998) points to the importance of the atmosphere by saying that if the experience is all that the sport customer takes away from the sporting event, the atmosphere becomes an important brand associations for sports organization.
**Revenue Solicitation**

This component consists of several types of revenue streams, depending on the level of sport. Ross (2006) claims that smaller, regional clubs have their primary revenues from sponsorship, ticket revenues and the selling of team merchandise to fans. The huge financial income from TV deals and league sponsors are commonly not relevant for regional teams (lower level teams) as they most often compete on a more local level without common television exposure (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). What becomes crucial for sports organizations is to create positive associations for the brand in order to seek corporate sponsors that are willing to put money into their sport organizations and see a profit in being associated with the sports team (Ross, 2006). Given the expectations of the sponsors making use of the dual transfer of their own and the clubs image to their customers, the profitability of positive associations held by customers linked to a sport brand becomes evident (Ross, 2006). Without high brand awareness and positive brand associations linked to the sports brand, corporate sponsors will preferably not want to be affiliated with the sports organization (Ross, 2006).

**Extension Opportunities**

In this category the additional products and services offered by sports association is included. Team gear (clothes, hats, flags, etc.) and all other merchandise sold by the organization in order to support and represent the team brand are included in this category (Ross, 2006). Research also points to that teams with a strong brand promote these brand extensions on a more commonly and more extensive basis than weaker brands (Aaker, 1991) and have a greater chance of succeeding (Ross, Russel, Bang, 2008).

**2.13 Summary of theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework has addressed a number of issues connecting brands and brand equity from a general company based perspective (Aaker, 1996) to the particular area of branding in sports (Richelieu, 2003; Ross, 2006). The authors wish to illustrate the key points in the frame of reference in connection to the research question to visualize and clarify to the reader which concepts that will be addressed in the later analysis of the empirical data. Furthermore the table (appendix 2) illustrates which of the specific theoretical concepts that are related to the individual research question. The table also separates controllable and uncontrollable elements that can affect the brand, to distinguish the factors the teams actually can regulate themselves and what they should, according to theory, be aware of can affect the brand. The table overview (appendix 2) is also designed to help the authors in the design of the interview guide. By connecting the theory to the research questions the authors have been able to make sure that the most important topics from the literature is also covered in the interview guide. This will hopefully add to the credibility of the interview guide and eventually the empirical findings and analysis. Hopefully this table will help illustrate the consistency of this thesis having the research questions as a guide for the theoretical framework as well as for the later results and analysis of the empirical data.
3 Method
This part of the thesis includes the presentation of the author’s scientific view in order to increase the readers’ understanding for the methodological choices made. Following, the argumentations for, and the methods used when conducting and gathering the data for this study is described and argued for.

3.1 Research philosophy
When writing a thesis and conducting empirical research there are two main directions when approaching scientific ideologies, namely positivism and hermeneutics, which in separate ways, represents the worldview and approach to the research area (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Shaw (1999) states that the hermeneutic approach is based upon the researchers understanding and subjective interpretation of reality and further that when the researcher wants to achieve an understanding of a certain phenomenon the researcher cannot remain distant and uninvolved from the research area. Instead the researchers must adapt a role where the researcher becomes an instrument for the data collection and further can get involved enough to interpret and understand participant’s perspectives of reality. While on the other hand the scientific philosophy of positivism is based upon a highly structured methodology built on facts that have to correspond to reality and be explained and measured by quantifiable techniques like experiments or statistics (Saunders et al. 2009). Also since positivism is based upon the objectivity and independence of the researcher not affecting or being affected by the subject area of the research (Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998) this obviously do not fit with the purpose and aim of our research. The authors of this thesis instead claim to hold more of a hermeneutic view. In order to meet the aim and objectives of this thesis and develop an understanding of the branding process in lower level hockey teams the hermeneutic view fits well with the aim of this thesis. Additionally the hermeneutic view correspond more with our research approach since it allows for the researchers to have a pre-understanding of the research area. Due to one of the researchers having several years of experience within the ice hockey industry as a player and that a pre-understanding of the studied area is considered an advantage due to the hermeneutic idea that a part can only be understood in relation to the whole (Clarke & Dawson, 1999) this fits well with the authors approach to this thesis. Finally hermeneutics also emphasizes and open for that the researcher can influence the questions and answers collected due to this pre-understanding of the subject (Clarke & Dawson, 1999). The research process becomes a back and forth development between the specific research area and the whole. This fits naturally with the researchers purpose of gaining an understanding of how lower level hockey associations are building and exploiting their brand and the qualitative data collection methods chosen, that will be further explained, to explore this subject.

3.2 Research approach
Generally there are two main approaches to research, inductive and deductive. The deductive approach leans towards the positivistic view and a review of existing theory, guides the creation of hypotheses, which are later tested through the use of specific questions with a consistent language and logic (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The inductive approach on the other hand avoids this, arguing that it may prematurely limit the study from possible areas of useful research and further leans more towards the hermeneutic view (Bryman, 1988). Shaw (1999) explains that an inductive research approach allows researchers to “get close” to the participants, access their internal logic and get an understanding of their subjective perception of reality. Furthermore Malhotra & Birks (2007) states that the with an inductive approach broad themes are brought up for discussion through for instance in-depth interviews, participants are supported to explain the nature of the particular context they are in and the researchers try to develop a conceptual
understanding from their combined gathered knowledge. As the researchers aim to gain an understanding of how managers in lower level sports teams work with branding the need to gain a deeper knowledge is evident. For areas of limited previous research hypotheses testing and quantitative techniques are less useful and will not be applied in this thesis, thereby ruling out the application of deductive research approach. Because of the limited research present about branding among lower level ice hockey teams the need to be able to have participants elaborate and give detailed explanations for their view on the branding process in their particular context makes the inductive approach a natural choice for this thesis.

3.3 Research design

Malhotra and Birks (2007) argue that research design can be broadly classified as exploratory or conclusive. The main objective of exploratory research is to deliver insight and understanding to the research area and is applied when subject of study cannot be measured using quantitative techniques or when these techniques cannot realistically represent the qualities aimed to be presented in the study (Halman, 2002). Conclusive design on the other hand aims to test specific hypotheses and assess specific relationships and is more formal and structured than exploratory research. Furthermore it is based on large and representative samples with the collected data being analyzed using quantitative analysis (Wilson, 1996). Based on the characteristics of exploratory and conclusive research design the current thesis withholds a exploratory design due to the researchers aim of gaining an understanding of the branding phenomenon in the lower level sport club setting. Furthermore, since using in-depth interviews to collect qualitative data will be applied the exploratory research design is appropriate. Quantitative techniques for collecting and analyzing empirical data will not be used in this thesis thus ruling out the use of a conclusive research design.

3.4 Qualitative approach

In practice there are two types of methods for collecting empirical data, namely quantitative and qualitative (Jacobsen, 2002).

Qualitative research is characterized as more flexible than quantitative research and includes a number of methods that enables participants to reflect and express their inner thoughts and feelings and the researcher to observe and interpret their behavior in their natural context (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Quantitative methods are commonly characterized by data consisting of numbers and typically apply some form of statistical analysis (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Regular data collection methods for qualitative research are collecting non-numerical data like in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations that are more appropriate if the researchers are looking to access sensitive information, understand complex phenomenon’s, get a holistic picture of a certain context and explain underlying reasons for specific problems (Saunders et al. 2009).

Shaw (1999) specifically give the advice that if a deeper understanding of a specific research phenomenon is intended to be generated the qualitative approach is required. Taken our topic and the exploratory nature of our research problem into consideration the qualitative approach will help the authors to view the research problem in its entirety, get close to the participants, take part of their reality and interpret their perceptions of their brand building process. Research conducted within the qualitative paradigm is further characterized by its commitment to retrieving data form the context in which the research phenomenon naturally occurs and to generate an understanding where the perspectives of the research participants is crucial for the quality of the project (Bryman, 1988; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The qualitative approach is a natural choice of data collection method since the chosen units of analysis (the ice hockey associations) for this thesis given the author access to participants with knowledge and responsibility working with branding questions. This has given the authors the possibility to get a deeper in-
sight and interact with the participants to take part of their experiences and create an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Finally collection of data in qualitative studies can be collected through either primary or secondary data sources (Bryman & Bell, 2007). For the purposes of this thesis semi-structured interviews was conducted with 7 division 1 ice hockey clubs with participants having responsibilities within management, marketing and branding tasks. This has been the source of primary data collected for this thesis. Databases and websites have been the main sources of secondary data to support the creation of the theoretical framework and support of the analysis of the empirical data. Arguments for and detailed descriptions of how this was conducted are described in the following sections.

3.5 Primary Data

Primary data is originated by the researchers’ for the specific purpose to address the research at hand (Merriam, 2002). Since primary data is tailored for the actual research purpose it means that it often has higher cost and takes longer time to obtain. In this study semi-structured in-depth interviews both face-to-face and telephone interviews with key individuals working in the chosen ice hockey organizations have been used for primary data collection.

3.6 Secondary data

While primary data is collected specifically for the purpose at hand, secondary data is originally collected for other purposes than the problem at hand (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Advantages with using secondary data is that it is often accessible, has low cost and is time saving (Saunders et al. 2009). Merriam (2002) also claims that secondary data can be used to confirm, strengthen and increase the validity of the collected primary data. The authors have collected secondary data through a number of sources available to the authors. Academic journals and articles made available through the full-text databases by Jönköping University and also literature found in the Jönköping University Library have been useful. Key words like brand, brand equity, brand equity in sports, brand building, brand management in sport, etc. were searched for through the different available databases to gain a holistic picture of the most applied and recognized theories and models within the areas of branding and branding in sports.

Secondary data has been useful in order to create the theoretical framework in this thesis and mainly consists of theoretical propositions and models regarding the brand building process in general and specifically for sports organizations. The secondary data further helped and guided the process of collecting the empirical data in terms of illustrating and clarifying the categories created by the authors in the interview guide in order to cover the most crucial aspects in the brand building process in the lower level sport team setting.

3.7 Sampling

Since the authors of this thesis have adapted a qualitative approach to gather the empirical data it was crucial to find teams and participants that were willing to share and also perceived to withhold valuable information towards the topic of the thesis. Patton (1987) states that the key element in selecting the appropriate unit of analysis is to be specific in what type of units it is you want to say something about. Since this thesis evolves around branding in a lower level, ice hockey setting in Sweden, the authors decided to focus upon teams currently playing on the third level in Sweden, what is called division 1. Further limitations were made towards the location of these clubs due to the fact that the authors in the planning stages wanted to arrange personal face-to-face interviews. Here financial constraints regarding travelling limited the number of teams that were within travelling range. It was decided that rather than random sampling,
what Marshall and Rossman (1995) calls purposive, convenience sampling should be adapted meaning that the authors contacted sport teams within travelling distance (convenience) that were perceived to be rich in information and willing to share and give access (purposive) to the authors about the branding process within their individual organizations. While a truly random and representative sample can justify a generalization to a larger population (Malhotra & Birks, 2007) the reasoning behind purposive sampling is that it is suitable in the way that it allows the researchers to select cases rich in information towards the research problem. To ensure that the participant teams were rich in information Patton (1987) recommends certain criteri-
ones to be established for the participant cases to meet. In our case the following criteria were set:
- The club should currently be playing in division 1 and have done so for a minimum of 2 years.
- The club should have at least an awareness of brand management (calls were made asking if the teams were interested and at the same time the authors determined whether they were suitable cases by asking them some questions regarding their branding efforts).
- The teams should be within travelling distance (later removed, explained in 3.9 interviews).

The authors found eleven teams that fulfilled these criteria while 2 of them declined to participate, stating that they did not have any time for an interview, 8 teams accepted to participate.

3.8 Interview Guide

To be able to answer the purpose and research questions of this thesis semi structured interviews were held with participants from 7 Ice hockey teams to get as broad and deep understanding as possible of the different aspects of branding in the lower level sport club setting. An interview guide (appendix 3) was prepared in line with the categories stated at the end of the theoretical framework to cover the most important aspects of branding identified in the theoretical framework and also make sure that the authors covered the purpose and research questions of the thesis. The interview guide consists of four main categories being the four research questions for the thesis (explained in the summary of the theoretical framework). The following four categories were identified for the interview guide; brand identity, brand positioning, branding challenges and the final category were factors to create and strengthen the team brand. Within each category several questions were constructed to cover the specific areas within each category as extensively as possible. The questions were made as open, clear and less leading as possible to open up for the respondents to answer as freely they could as well as leaving room for elaborating on important concepts. The interview guide was designed consisting of both open questions for discussion and probing questions for the interviewers to be able to go deeper into certain subjects that the participants might not discuss or leave out in their answers. Yin (1994) claims that in order for the collected data through qualitative in depth interviews to be as rich in information as possible surrounding the relevant subjects to be discussed it is useful for the participants to be able to be prepared and be aware of what the interviews will concern. The interview guide was therefore created in both English and Swedish in order for the participants to really understand the questions and also to be able to send it to the participants some days before the interview. This is why the interview guide was sent to the participants so that they could reflect upon the brand management in their specific ice hockey associations and answer as deeply and sincerely as possible during the actual interview. Finally the emails sent to the participants explained that the interviews were intended to be an open discussion and that participants were free to add any relevant information outside of the proposed interview guide they felt were not mentioned in the guide and they felt significant to the topic.
3.9 Interviews

This study consists of both personal interviews and telephone interviews. While the intention was to only do personal face-to-face interviews this had to be changed during the process of booking interviews. Some of the teams that agreed to act as participants had a hard time scheduling times far ahead. Since the authors had to cover a lot of travelling distance, and participants could not find suitable times for meetings, we were eventually forced to agree upon telephone interviews with 5 of the participant teams. In this section the face-to-face interviews are covered while the telephone interviews are covered in the following section. However the same interview guide was used for both interviews.

According to Saunders et al. (2009) semi-structured, in-depth interviews can be used to collect qualitative data. When conducting a semi-structured interview, the interviewer usually follows an already planned interview guide in order to make sure that relevant and certain information is gathered from the different interviews. It is though important that the interviewer is flexible during the interview and not excludes the possibilities of restructuring the questions regarding the development of the discussion. For the face-to-face interviews both of the authors participated, though with somewhat different roles. One of the authors led the discussion while the other one kept track of the topics discussed as well as making notes for the most important observations made. Saunders et al. (2009) also suggest that by using the so called probing technique, which means to motivate participants to clarify, enlarge upon or further explain their answers during the interviews, the researcher can easier fully elicit insight into the discussed areas (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). This gives an opportunity to discuss the questions that the researcher has not previously considered or explain the deeper meanings and feelings the respondents might have about important issues that for instance quantitative survey techniques cannot provide (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). This approach was applied to the best of the author’s capabilities during the interviews. Furthermore the face-to-face interviews lasted from 1 hour (Vita Hästen) up until 1 hour and 50 minutes (Mjölby) see table 1. Both interviews were held in the offices located in the ice hockey arena of each individual team for the participants to feel as comfortable as possible in a familiar setting.

Shaw (1999) also emphasizes the importance of the interviewers neutral position during the interview. Except from the neutrality and openness of the questions asked the authors also attempted to not impose our own thoughts and meanings during the interviews and allow for the interviewees to express their personal experiences and meanings on the topic. The interviews were also recorded for the interviewer not having to make complete notes during the interviews and instead fully focus upon the interview at hand.

Furthermore transcripts of the interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews were conducted in order for the collected information to be reflected upon when it was still clear in the mind of the authors. Shaw (1999) underlines this as an important part for the later analysis of qualitative data and this will also be further explained in the analysis section. As soon as the transcripts were written they were sent to the participants email in order for them to verify the content but also in order for them to add any relevant information possibly forgotten or not discussed during the interview session. Also misunderstandings/misinterpretations could be removed. Only one of the participants had minor things to add from the transcripts.

3.9.1 Telephone interviews

As also mentioned earlier, problems occurred in the scheduling of interviews forcing the authors to schedule and conduct 5 of the interviews by telephone. According to Bourque and
Fielder (2003) the advantages with telephone interviews is that they are less expensive and time efficient, which also eventually was the main reason why the authors chose this type of interviews. Despite the mentioned advantages for telephone interviews, Malhotra and Birks (2009) argues that face-to-face interviews gives an opportunity to observe and interpret responses, facial expressions and body language, notice and correct upon misunderstandings and minimize the risk of missing important data which are important aspects that could not be included due to the nature of the telephone interviews. The authors did experience problems with one of the interviews due to bad reception and the participant not having read the interview guide in advance. It caused the authors to repeat and reface some of the questions and also some questions had to be skipped when the participant did not understand the questions. However for the other participants for the telephone interviews there were minimal problems, much due to the fact that participants had an idea of what we were do discuss.

3.10 Research quality

‘Research findings should be as trustworthy as possible and every research study must be evaluated in relation to the procedures used to generate the findings’. (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p 109). The use of concepts describing trustworthiness differs between qualitative and quantitative data. While quantitative data commonly describe trustworthiness of data with the use of concepts like validity, reliability and generalizability (Malhotra & Birks, 2007) qualitative research on the other hand more commonly adapt concepts like credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability to assess trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1987; Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). Even though the concepts are different for quantitative and qualitative data the principle of the approaches are still similar (Long & Johnson, 2000). However to assess the trustworthiness of this thesis the authors have adapted the qualitative concepts discussed in the following sections.

3.10.1 Credibility

Credibility is comparable to the quantitative dimension of internal validity, which seek to ensure that the research measure what it intends to measure (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the use of well established research methods and analysis techniques should be used in order to ensure the credibility of the collected data. The authors of this thesis have used semi-structured interviews as a means for data collection, which is a common qualitative technique along with a qualitative step-by-step analysis framework adapted from Shaw (1999) in order to ensure the credibility of the analysis of the empirical data. Further Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommends some familiarity with the participant’s organization and culture before conducting the data collection process. Due to the many years of experience within the “ice hockey environment” both with management and players the authors claim to have a pre-understanding that have helped during the interviews in the way that terminology and understanding of what the participants discuss related to hockey assisted in establishing a relationship of trust between the participants and the authors. Finally triangulation is recommended as a technique for establishing credibility (Shenton, 2004). The most common meaning of triangulation is the use of combined methods to compensate for the individual methods limitations and exploit their respective benefits (Guba, 1981). As this thesis does not apply different methods this kind of triangulation is not reached. However Shenton (2004) suggests another form of triangulation that involves the use of a wide range of informants and participants called triangulation via data sources. The strength of this method concerns the individual perspectives and understandings being verified against each other to reach as deep an understanding as possible (Shenton, 2004). By interviewing participants from 7 different clubs during the data collection process the researchers have worked to achieve this form of triangulation. By acquiring different perspectives from different organizations to broaden the knowledge within the area of
branding in the lower level sport club setting an understanding is reached and verified by the individual participants.

3.10.2 Transferability

Transferability can be compared to what is called external validity in quantitative research and is concerned with whether the findings of a study can be generalized to other populations (Merriam, 1998). Shenton (2004) claims that findings of qualitative research are specific and conducted to a small number of it is impossible to demonstrate that findings are directly applicable to other environments. However there are researchers that claim that findings could at least to some extent be valuable to other areas than the specific areas under investigation (Stake, 1994; Denscombe, 1998). It is though crucial that the results of a qualitative study must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the association or associations and, possibly geographical area in which the fieldwork was conducted (Shenton, 2004).

The authors have tried to describe the context of the interviews as well as the context that the interviewed clubs are a part of in order for the possibility of transferability to occur, at least to other lower level ice hockey teams in Sweden. However as stated one should be careful to make generalizations within qualitative studies and mainly the findings of this thesis are applicable to the context of the interviewed sport organizations.

3.10.3 Dependability

In quantitative research dependability can be related to the reliability of the research, meaning if the study was repeated in the same context with the same methods and participants the results would be the same (Shenton, 2004). However, in qualitative research this is problematic due to the researchers individual observations that are tied to the interpretations and the presentation of the findings and that these findings are a published description from a specific moment in time (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). To address the dependability of qualitative research Shenton (1999) recommends that the research process should be explained in detail to give other researchers the opportunity to repeat the study. Specifically the research design and implementation (what was planned and executed), detail of the data gathering and reflection upon the effectiveness of the methods and process of the project should be thoroughly explained in order to enable readers of the thesis to develop a thorough understanding of the methods and their effectiveness. The authors of this thesis have attempted to clearly and thoroughly explain the research design and methods chosen for the data collection. Furthermore the interview guide used are presented to the readers of the thesis in order for them to understand the questions asked to the participants as well as details of the context of the interviews as well as detailed transcripts for each interview to make the results and analysis possible to control for the reader.

3.10.4 Conformability

To reach total objectivity in any research is close to impossible as even experiments and questionnaires are designed by humans and the infringement of researcher bias is unavoidable (Patton, 1987). The researcher must however do what is in their power to make sure that the findings are the outcome of the experiences of the participants and not the result of the researchers preferences (Shenton, 1999). The authors of this thesis have to their greatest extent tried to stay as objective as possible towards the research in general as well as the participants and their answers specifically. Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasizes that the decisions made towards the methods used should be acknowledged within the research report. The motives for favoring one approach over another has to be explained in terms of strengths and weaknesses in the techniques to justify the choices made. Throughout the thesis the authors have to their best of capabilities tried to explain why certain choices has been made as well as stating what the bene-
fits as well as weaknesses of the certain choices have been to allow for the reader to judge the objectivity of the authors. Once again, our detailed methodological description hopefully enables the reader to determine how far the data and constructs emerging from our choices may be accepted.

### 3.11 Data Analysis

Yin (1994) claims that there are no one specific formula or technique for analyzing qualitative data that is the “best”. However some general guidelines are commonly associated with qualitative data analysis. Normally four steps are present in this process. The first step is gathering the data. The second step involves reducing the data; meaning to code, classify and connect the data that are perceived to be of the highest importance. The third stage concerns presenting and displaying the data and the fourth and final stage normally concerns verifying the data (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). However in order to ensure the validity of the data analysis of this thesis the authors have applied a guide to qualitative data analysis by Shaw (1999). It consists of a six step process that takes the mentioned four steps into somewhat more detail, and simply put consists of a continuous analysis and interpretation of data from the first interview until the empirical data collection is concluded. This process enables the researcher to continuously adjust the research technique and questions that is discovered to develop an understanding of the research area and gain the most insight into the participant’s reality (Shaw, 1999). Furthermore this technique helped the authors to analyze the data on a continuous basis, which Patton (1987), due to the nature of qualitative data being massive in information and content, claims is almost a necessity when collecting qualitative primary data. The theoretical aspects of the steps and practical measures taken by the authors are explained below.

![Qualitative data analysis](image)

**Figure 4 - Qualitative data analysis (Shaw, 1999).**

**Analysis on site:** Shaw (1999) recommends starting the interviews only guided by the existing pre-understanding the researchers might have about the research area. However the authors of this thesis were also directed by the interview guide (appendix 3) created and based upon the theoretical framework and categorized by the research questions of this thesis in order to have some assurance regarding the relevance of the collected data. Still, as recommended by Shaw (1999), the in-depth interviews were kept open to gain the most interesting responses and perspectives from the participants and to gain an understanding of what to focus upon for the further data collection. By having an open discussion and an open mind towards the research area the participants were able to talk freely about what they regarded as most important from the topic of discussion. The use of in-depth interviews and the fact that the interviews were recorded allowed the authors to focus on the participant’s responses and perspectives for themes also
interesting for the further data collection.

Running the data open: As soon as possible after the interviews were conducted the data was transcribed and notes were made towards what was perceived as relevant for the final analysis. Shaw (1999) states that this second stage involves reading the transcripts before further interviews are made. This holds two purposes; to get the researchers acquainted with the data and to start structuring the data into meaningful categories. The authors were thereby able to gain an awareness of the most important patterns and topics to further focus upon and could add, and to some extent, change the focus on certain subjects of the interview guide discussed during the interviews. One example was the impact of volunteer workers that were not considered an important factor from the start of the interviews. This will be further discussed in the results and analysis.

Focus analysis: In this step continuous comparing of the new data with the previous coded data should be done in order for the researchers to see patterns but also divergences from the different interviews (Shaw, 1999). By constantly comparing the collected data in terms of categories and codes some categories were expanded and others limited for the up-coming interviews. Categories were to some extent also changed and re-labeled during this process as new similarities and differences were discovered in order for the categories to make sense. At this stage most of the interviews had been conducted and the authors had started to gain somewhat a holistic picture of the research area. A perception of what was the most significant categories was more or less identified to be focused upon for the remainder of the interviews.

Deepening analysis: At this stage the core categories and organization of data should have been structured for a deeper analysis and interpretation of the relationships between certain findings and why these relationships exist (Shaw, 1999). Furthermore this step holds two purposes; to compare existing concepts and theories with the findings of the particular study. Second the evaluation of the discovered findings in comparison to existing literature in order to see if any additional relevant data have been discovered. After the categories of data had been more or less been understood and connected at this point, the authors started to gain an understanding of how branding and brand management in the lower level sport club setting could look like based on the collected data. Similarities, differences and other elements that were considered central to the purpose of the thesis were analyzed against the theoretical framework and the previously created categories (appendix 2) and summary of this framework. Finally we compared the existing knowledge with the findings of this thesis in order to see if any contributions had been made particularly the lower level sport club setting.

Presenting the findings: in the final step Shaw (1999) discusses how the data should be presented in a way that is conceivable to the target audience of the study. Further the importance of presenting the findings to the participants in order for them to confirm and that the interpretations of their reflections during the interviews were correct. This is important for the validity of the data so that no misunderstandings and clear misinterpretations have been made by the researchers. The authors of this thesis presented the transcripts of each of the interviews to the individual participants to make sure that no misunderstandings had been made. Further the participants were given the opportunity to add relevant information they felt was forgotten during the interview sessions. Finally the participants got a copy of the final paper when the thesis was completed in order for them to take part of the findings presented. It should be noted that this thesis have not been written for the participants, similar to e.g. a consultancy report, thus are the content and layout of the paper designed more for the academic purpose of a master thesis instead of what could be perceived as a more useful report for the participants.
4 Empirical findings

Here our empirical findings will be presented and they will follow the order of our research questions. The authors have tried to present the most important elements and factors discussed in the interviews regarding how the involved teams approach brand management. As the goal is not to present the reality of each team but rather to give the most holistic picture as possible of how teams at this level work to build and strengthen their brand overall, the authors recommend the reader to look into appendix 4 if a more complete picture of the individual organizations reality is called for. However the authors have chosen to illustrate reality with the help of quotes from the interviews in order to justify, and for the reader, to later see how and why interpretations and connections to theory have been made.

Following are the names, titles and time of the interviews. The clubs will occasionally be mentioned with initials if the name is repeated a number of times in a row. The interviewees will be mentioned by its last name in the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name – title</th>
<th>Club</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frans Fransson – Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Halmstad Hockey (HH)</td>
<td>2012.04.10 – 40 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Johansson – Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Vita Hästen (VH)</td>
<td>2012.04.11 – 58 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sten Åke Lövdahl, Chairman</td>
<td>Mjölby Hockey (MH)</td>
<td>2012.04.11 – 1 hour 50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan-Erik Modigs, Chairman</td>
<td>Vimmerby Hockey (VH)</td>
<td>2012.04.17 – 49 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnus Tegerup, Vice Chairman</td>
<td>Nyköpings Hockey (NH)</td>
<td>2012.04.18 – 59 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pär Åkerström, Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Mariestad Hockey (MaH)</td>
<td>2012.04.25 – 52 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curt Karlsson, Chairman</td>
<td>Kungälv Hockey (KH)</td>
<td>2012.04.26 – 35 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 - Interview Participants

4.1 Brand identity

There was a large discrepancy in terms of identity amongst the teams reaching from a more advanced approach to a rather indifferent attitude. In this section the authors wanted to know how teams had formed their identity and what they perceived it to be. Following are some examples to illustrate the differences in their approach.

Nykopings Hockey were one of the more advanced teams in terms of identity where Tegerup considered the establishment of a clear and strong brand identity to be one of the most important tasks to create a successful ice hockey association. NH has established four core values they want their team and organization to represent:

“Posting online surveys for fans and the community, and having workshops with members of the organization together with management, we have developed four key values to be the core of our identity. We mutually agreed upon Strength for life, willingness to win, together and mutual respect. We wanted to involve as many people as possible to unify the organization about some common values.” (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

Tegerup believes that this involvement from the fans will make them more committed and devoted to the brand and the organization than if management had developed the identity and values themselves. NH was the only organization to really work closely together with their fans and the community in establishing the identity of their organization. Tegerup further claimed
that their identity for instance reflected the values conveyed to their younger teams but also in what type of players they looked for in their senior team. Further NH were one of two teams (also Vita Hästen) using their goals and ambition as part of their identity in order to gain support from their fans and sponsors. Both claimed that fans and sponsors mostly reacted positively and that this was reflected in their financial and emotional support. Vita Hästen founded their identity not so much on core values but more on the goals for the team. They have a clear out-spoken goal of moving up to Allsvenskan (second league in Sweden). Johansson did mention some key words that were part of their identity, like “team spirit”, “never give up” and “towards Allsvenskan” as key phrases used.

“The people, the companies and sponsors in Norrköping shares our vision of who we are and where we want to be in the future and I believe that if our vision were not founded in realistic goals we would have neither the financial support nor the spectator numbers we do have”. (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

For the other teams, including VH, their approach was not as thorough as illustrated by Nyköping. Several teams had established core values and keywords in order to build and create an identity, however the approach was far less advanced. Most teams had founded their identity on key words established by management without any support or interaction with fans our other interests. One example was Mjölby that had tried to establish an identity in terms of core values and key words they want their team and organization to represent. It spells KUGGE in Swedish and stands for Kvalite = quality, Utveckling = development, Glädje = joy/happiness, Gemenskap = fellowship and Engemang = commitment. Lövdahl also explained that they have developed a slogan to represent the association, which translated to English would say something like; ”Mjölby Hockey - best on the ice and in every other way” (Mjölby Hockey – best på is och på alla vis). Furthermore youth development was something they felt they were, and wanted to be recognized for along with a healthy economy. Finally Lövdahl added that he did not really know how well their identity was communicated and accepted by their fans or others as the communication with spectators were not ”as good as it should be”.

The remaining teams had no clear approach to the establishment of an identity nor could they point to what their association’s identity really was. Mariestad stated that they lacked a clear identity and for the key words associated with the club Åkerström said that the only thing he felt the team were associated with were not really something they themselves had encouraged.

“The only thing I can think of that fans associated with our team is the term Raggar Hockey, which isn’t really something we have promoted in any way nor is it a positive association. It is definitely something we would like to change.” (P. Åkerström, personal communication, 2012.04.25)

“Raggar Hockey” is a Swedish term that more or less translates into “Redneck Hockey”. As stated above this was something they wanted to replace with more positive associations like being known for an offensive style of play. However no plan for how this was to be fixed was yet founded. Halmstad also lacked a clear identity, even though they seemed to have the competence and plans to start working with their identity. They suffered from previous years poor management, financial problems and lack of continuity in the organization.

“A clear branding strategy have been lacking for the past few years but the establishment of a long term strategy and a clear identity is something consciously worked on at the moment.” (F. Fransson, personal communication, 2012.04.10).

Kungälv Hockey followed in the line of teams lacking a clear approach and strong identity as well as communication with fans.

“We have no clear established identity in terms of core values or key words. We build upon a sound youth development and having local players from Gothenburg”. (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).
**Summary:** The different teams have different approaches to brand identity. It reaches from a clear thorough process of how the identity has been established and what it represents, to teams that in reality does not have an identity. One of the teams also said that their identity were associated with terms not wanted nor implemented by the organization. The lack of communication with fans, sponsors or members of the organization seem to be lacking for almost all teams when it comes to establishing their identity. The only exception was Nyköping that on the other hand approached those tasks very seriously.

### 4.2 Positioning

Here the second research question is illustrated and explained; how does lower level teams work to position their brand in the market. In the interview guide the focus has been upon the selection of market segments, what teams target groups are and how teams distinguish themselves from competitors. In order for the teams to say anything about how they try to distinguish themselves from competitors the teams were first asked who they considered their main competitors to be. Also in this category there were some variation amongst the teams in how they approached positioning and also what they considered important in order to distinguish themselves.

#### 4.2.1 Segmentation and target groups

When it came to segmentation and target groups there was a general consensus amongst the teams that their local community where seen generally as one target group. Little or no segmentation or differentiation between target groups or characteristics of such had been made and the messaging to attract certain groups more than others were not regularly implemented. Instead some wanted to increase their target group additionally.

*We are starting to expand our horizon in terms of target audience, meaning not only the municipality of Vimmerby but neighboring cities also. The purpose is to get more spectators and interest from more people, and to be interesting to sponsors and companies outside of Vimmerby. We have however no clear target group in terms of demographics or customer characteristics. The marketing message is rather general to this point.*

(J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

There were teams that had tried to target some groups more than others for certain games.

*We advertise somewhat differently for different games. As Sunday games start earlier we promote this as family games with activities for the kids as well as a family price on tickets. Fridays have been advertised more as VIP or after work games, with possibilities to come early and grab something to eat and drink before the game.*


Vita Hästen had also started to realize that by not targeting and adapting messages to certain groups they might be missing out on potential customers:

*I would presume that our regular customers are mostly men between 25 – 75. What we perhaps should work harder on is try to reach women in our marketing and try to get more girls to attend our games*.


#### 4.2.2 Competitors

Secondly teams were asked who they considered to be their main competitors as an introduction to how they further would distinguish themselves from these. All teams considered other sport teams as competitors, whether it was ice hockey, soccer, floor hockey, speedway, handball or basketball teams depending on what was present in the teams local community. All teams considered them to be competitors’ for spectators, sponsor funding and/or media coverage.

*There are a soccer team in the top league in Sweden, a basketball team; Nyköping Dolphins playing in the top basketball league in Sweden and Vargarna which is a speedway team in the top division here in Nyköping. We fight pretty
hard against all these teams for fans but particularly for sponsors and their financial support.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

There was one team that said their biggest competitors were also their biggest challenge to be successful. Kungälv, the only participant team in this thesis located in the same town (Gothenburg) as an Elitserien team (Frölunda), claimed that they heavily impacted the competitiveness of their organization. Carlsson, explained that since this were a team with a professional standard in everything from their players, to their game experience and their organization it was hard for them to attract fans and sponsors.

“It is a team with 10 – 12 0000 spectators per game. Of course they possess a huge market share. Why should people go see our games when they can go see one of the best teams in Sweden?” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

There was however some teams that considered sport teams as competitors for other reasons than sponsorship, fans or media. Vimmerby for example mentioned recruitment to their younger teams as something they compete for.

“We have a soccer team and a floor hockey team in town…we also battle with them for recruitment. The younger teams are the future of the organization and our senior team. We need to distinguish ourselves also to get kids to choose hockey. If they don’t choose hockey when they are young they most likely never will”. (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

Some teams also considered TV as one of their main competitor nowadays:

“It is ice hockey every night on TV, and I believe people prefer to be comfortable in their own home – why should they come here and see division 1 hockey when they can watch Elitserien at home?” (S.A. Lövdahl, personal communication, 2012.04.11)

None of the teams regarded other leisure activities (cinema, festivals, bowling, restaurants etc.) as their competitors.

4.2.3 Differentiation

In terms of differentiation, the reasons as to why it was important to stand out from their competitors were of a general consensus; to gain more spectators, more sponsors and more media coverage. However the strategies to how this should be achieved and for which of these customer groups it was most important to distinguish themselves for, the answers differed more. Some teams regarded the presence in local media as most valuable in order to increase attention and awareness about the association.

“We have managed to gain a good relationship with the local media, often ensuring us front page coverage and numerous articles in the local newspaper discussing what happens in the organization, for instance when new players are signed. It gives us an edge towards other teams”. (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

Others focused more upon sponsors (and fans) due to their big influence on the financial status of the organizations.

“We want to create a platform for sponsors to meet and interact while given the opportunity to enjoy the game. The key to this is not only to present a good team, but to present an event that is perceived by both the audience and sponsors as something special that they would enjoy attending”. (F. Fransson, personal communication, 2012.04.10).

Vita Hästen had another differentiation strategy, building, again, mostly on their ambition and goals.

“The only thing we really do to gain sponsors and position ourselves is to promote our goal of Allsvenskan. Further we show that the product we present is in line with the goal we have and in that way the sponsors get credit for their money invested.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).
A similar point made by the teams were however that they felt a growing need to start enhancing and differentiating through the game experience, meaning that expectations were growing among fans towards the game being more of an entertainment experience, not “just” a hockey game. This will be discussed further in challenges and factors to build and strengthen the brand.

“Our reality has changed with the development of how hockey games are conducted nowadays. Before it was just the game that mattered, maybe sell some hotdog and coffee, but the audience did not demand much more. For instance does the Elite teams today offers so much more, even though we don’t compete with them directly, we also believe our customers want to be entertained”. (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

**Summary:** All teams considered sports teams as their main competitors and that they were competing with them for spectators, media coverage and sponsors. Some also considered other teams to be competitors for young players to their youth divisions and some considered TV a competitor nowadays. Not any of the teams considered other leisure activities as competitors. The differences however were most relevant to how teams tried to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Most teams mentioned one or two examples for how they could stand out to individual customers (sponsors, media, fans), but individual differentiation strategies for all of these groups were not present. When it came to target groups, fans, media and sponsors were as mentioned the most important ones. No further diversification of the customer groups was made (demographics, lifestyle, age, etc.). One team had tried to differentiate marketing efforts for different types of games during the week and some had started to consider targeting women, as they were perceived not to be regular visitors and a potential customer group. However this were discussed and not yet implemented.

### 4.3 Challenges to building and strengthen the brand

In this part the third research question is discussed; what are the main challenges encountered in the establishment of a team as a brand?

#### 4.3.1 Finances & management

Finances were mention by all teams as an obstacle to build and strengthen their brand as well as a challenge to numerous other improvements the teams wanted to make in their organizations. Also most of the teams blamed the lack of previous years management’s experience and competence in handling financial issues in the organization. Almost every team interviewed had experienced serious financial problems in the past, currently or just started to come out of or their financial struggles. Vimmerby also experienced this problem but were one of the teams that added how the financial problems led to other difficulties regarding the reputation and confidence of the club and how resources had to be used for re-building the reputation.

“We struggle with the past leadership of the organization that put the organization in a very bad financial state. Today our brand and our actions are very much about regaining the confidence of sponsors and the community, to create trust and insurance that this will not happen again.” (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

A particular important aspect regarding the finances of the teams were the dependence on sponsorship. Most of the teams said that the approach and funding from sponsors was something they wanted and needed to develop in order to improve their financial status. Some teams found this to be a difficult task and for instance Mjölby felt sponsorship were like begging for money. In order to progress in these areas they considered getting an outside actor to take care of it.

“We are considering to hire a professional, taking care of all marketing, sponsorship, everything. However we cannot afford it right now. Perhaps working on provision, getting 50 % of what he can get in would be an idea? I don’t know...” S.Å. Lövdahl, personal communication, 2012.04.11)
Finally some teams also said that it was hard to maintain good relationships due to the lack of time at their disposal, since they were managing the club on their spare time. Also the “real” jobs of many of the managers were totally different compared to the tasks (e.g. handling sponsorship) they faced in their workplace.

4.3.2 Volunteer workers

Another major challenge that was revealed during the interviews was the crucial need for volunteer and ideal workers. This was underlined by nearly all of the participant organizations.

“One of our biggest challenges is to get people with the right competence and experience together with a commitment to the association and the team to improve the overall performance of the organization” (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

Mariestad added to this discussion by saying that not only were they dependent on volunteer workers but there were a problem in offering high quality on their services due to people doing this for free, on their spare time.

“They are doing it for free and to help, so it is hard to demand to much from them. At the same time you want to offer quality in your services”. (P. Åkerström, personal communication, 2012.04.25)

This was as, as mentioned earlier, a shared problem with several of the teams. Some also felt the problem was of an increasing character.

“We are an organization built upon volunteer workers, but the interest from people to help out is decreasing. It is a challenge for us.” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

For one team it had now become so hard to find volunteer workers to take different jobs helping out in the organization that the chairman had to take on several “jobs” not really included in his job title.

“People seem more and more discouraged to help out. It has become a big problem. Personally I have had to stand in the parking lot to organize parking because no one else did it. I hand out blankets to people who are cold during the game. These are just some examples.” (S.A. Lövåhl, personal communication, 2012.04.11)

Finally several teams had experienced a lot of changes in management due to this fact that people are doing tasks for free in addition to their regular jobs. This has led to a lack of continuity and frustration in a several of the organizations.

4.3.3 Team performance

Another challenge mentioned by most of the organizations, regardless if the goals of the team were to move up to Allsvenskan or just survive in the league, was the performance of the team. Teams all claimed that how the team performed affected the brand and how customers perceived it. There were however some interesting statements made concerning team performance. Vita Hästen was one of the teams with an ambition to move up to Allsvenskan:

“A challenge for us is that we are almost too good during the regular season, we win almost every game and people think that they might as well stay home and wait for the playoffs. Then if we don’t make it in the playoffs the disappointment from fans is huge.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

A team with the goal of survival and establishing themselves in the league, Kungälv, said the following regarding team performance:

“Too establish ourselves and avoid negative promotion we need a team that performs. It is connected to our financial problems also, we cannot afford star players, and we have to rely on our youth development and own players.” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).
4.3.4 Heterogeneous customer groups

Sports teams are often faced with the challenge of having to satisfy a number of different customer groups. By the definition applied here “customer groups” is not considered to be different characteristics of spectators and fans but instead larger groups of customers like fans, sponsors, the municipality and media. The interviewed teams all regarded these actors as different kinds of customers and considered them also to have different kinds of needs. The most common actor regarded as a challenge in this context was the municipality. All of the teams interviewed explained that their municipality was the owner of their individual arenas. This were regarded a challenge to some due to their lack of cooperation and dialogue with the municipality and some claimed that the municipality did not have an interest in the well being of their association.

“The cooperation with the municipality is a problem. They are against most of the changes we want to make and the only thing they really care about is that we pay the rent on time” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

There were teams that did not share this opinion and said that the municipality actually was supportive of their actions and ambitions. This seemed, coincidence or no coincidence, to be the fact for those teams with the highest goals for their team. Vita Hästen is one example of such a team with an ambition of moving up the league system:

“We have a dialogue and cooperation with the municipality. They share our ambition and know our goals, it is a non-existent problem for us.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

Other teams said that they experienced sponsors and spectators, if not to be a significant challenge, at least an actor that was particularly important for the financial well being of the organization:

“Without financial support from sponsors and the people buying tickets and season tickets to our games our efforts and goals of reaching Allsvenskan would not be possible”. (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

Fans were also regarded as an increasing challenge due to higher expectations. This is discussed further in the next section.

4.3.5 Service characteristics: Customer expectations & facilities

Amongst the service characteristics discussed in theory and in the interviews it was customer expectations that stood out the most. Teams claimed to have noticed that the expectations of customers have increased, that they are more selective of games they would like to attend and that outdated facilities and the increased standards elsewhere often were one of the main reasons why customers expectations had escalated.

“The rink we have today is 30 years old, it has the necessary functionality but lacks the modern aspects of todays arenas and has fallen behind in development. We need improvements to meet the expectations of our customers. The idea is that people should come to the arena earlier and leave later and in that way spend more money while they are here”. (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

Nyköping also had discussions regarding meeting the increased expectations and had started to realize that to stay competitive they needed to offer something more than ‘just the game’.

“I believe sport is becoming more and more a total experience event, where people go to watch games for different reasons. Some are die-hard fans but others go to be part of an event and an experience. We have to be part of this development and we have the facility that gives us an opportunity to do this”.

“It is a little bit like in the NHL, half of the crowd is there to have a beer and a slice of pizza with their friends as much as they are there to see the game”. (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).
Even though Norrköping seemed to be ahead of the other teams in terms of ambitions for their facilities and the visions for their arena, almost every team regarded that they had to improve their facilities to stay competitive to fulfill the expectations of spectators and sponsors.

4.3.6 Negative publicity and word of mouth

These were categories very seldom mentioned as challenges by teams. While negative publicity had been experienced one by one team, regarding an incident where the local newspaper had written about troublesome fans, this was the only incident mentioned throughout the seven interviews. Negative, or positive, word of mouth were not discussed by the teams in any way.

Summary: The main challenges discovered were financial issues, the need for volunteer workers, team performance, the relationship with the municipality, and management of the changing customer expectations. Several teams had trouble involving volunteer workers, which they are so dependent on, and examples where the chairman of an organization having to take care of several different tasks not included in his job title. The financial aspects seemed to lie as a foundation for numerous other challenges. For instance would a lot of teams like to improve their facilities to better meet customer expectations and perhaps capture a wider audience, but without resources this were not possible.

4.4 Factor to exploit

Here the fourth and final research question is addressed; what are the main factors lower level sports teams exploit in order to become and strengthen their brand? These are elements teams mostly are in control over and that they consider influence their brand.

4.4.1 Fan involvement: The game experience

The game experience where discussed by all teams as a method to build and strengthen the brand. Still, how the game experience was designed in order to increase customer satisfaction, interest from media and sponsors were diverse. One approach mentioned by a few teams was to imitate professional teams (Elitserien teams) approach to a total game experience:

“Our idea is to be a miniature version of the professional teams in terms of facilities and service experience, of course adapted to the financial resources we have” (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

Two teams (Vita Hästen and Nyköping) seemed to be well on their way following this idea and already had implemented a lot of elements that could be considered a part of such a miniature professional service experience. For instance Vita hasten said that they had an intro with music and lights for the player’s entrance on the ice, competitions and lotteries, puck-throwing competitions and, in cooperation with sponsors, competitions were spectators could win trips. Further they had a well functioning cafeteria a long with offers of public transportation from town to the arena. While both Vita Hästen and Nyköping had a VIP area, Nyköping offered their sponsors and special guests 8-9 VIP lounges all with possibilities to have food served from the arena kitchen. There were also connected conference areas for larger gatherings and meetings. Both of these teams were also the ones with the highest average spectator numbers (appendix 5) and the arenas with the highest standards.

“You could say that our facilities holds quite a high standard to serve guests and sponsors at a satisfactory level. We try to be at an Allsvenskan level before we get there. We want to be prepared”. (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

“We try to create a complete service experience from the customer buys the ticket, till he enters the arena, buys a game program and a hot dog until he watches the game and eventually leaves for home.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).
Common for the other teams were that they seemed to have a current gap, created by the lack of personal and financial resources, between what they were planning and what they actually were doing. All teams seemed to have parts of a total experience included but they were not offering such a total service offering as the two leading teams. However the lack of personal competence and financial resources does not tell the whole story. A team like Mariestad, with a turnover and spectators numbers close to for instance Nyköping (8,5 million SEK), seemed not to have the same perception of the importance of improving their game experience and facilities in order to strengthen their brand image.

“In Mariestad we have a well known brand partially because we have no direct competitors, so maybe the brand is more important other places with more competition from teams and for sponsors and spectators?” (P. Åkerström, personal communication, 2012.04.25)

Kungälv, the team with the lowest spectator average of the participants, were another team not focusing on the game experience to strengthen the brand:

“There is no real hockey audience in Kungälv. I don’t see why we should put money into intros or trying to be like an Elitserien team. We are no Elitserien team and I’ve been to places with 2-300 people in the stands doing stuff like that, it looks stupid. All we can do is to try to play good hockey.” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

4.4.2 Marketing actions

Merchandising

Merchandising was one area approached with significant variation amongst the teams. Different types of merchandise sales were discussed, from a fan shop at the rink, online stores or a catalogue of different merchandise. A few teams had focused upon merchandise as an important part of their brand building efforts.

“The arena has a fan shop that opens up a couple of hour’s before the games and sells different kinds of fan products e.g. jerseys, t-shirts, sweaters, hats and other merchandise with the NH logo. We also have an online shop to reach customers outside the rink.” (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

However several teams had close to no sales.

“We do not sell any type of merchandise, not at the arena or anywhere else. The fan club, I think, sell some jerseys but we do not have any kind of merchandise sales.” (S.A. Lövdahl, personal communication, 2012.04.11)

Player management

Previously team performance was discussed as a challenge for teams. Participants explained through the interviews how the teams are constructed as a branding effort. Local players, with an attachment to the town, were one element considered of importance for all teams, some more than others.

“Our identity is about developing young players with a Vimmerby character. Without local players on the team we would not meet our own criteria. We get positive feedback from sponsors as well as our audience for this. We are one of the division 1 teams with the most local players on our team. It becomes a reason to follow the team.” (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

For Kungälv local players were the cornerstone of the entire organization. Not only because they wanted it to be but also because they could not afford any other solutions.

“We cannot build a team on so called star players. We do not have the money for it. We want to build on young, talented players, and players that play the game because they think it’s fun, not because they want to make a lot of money. We cannot provide that.” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

The teams with the highest ambitions regarded however the combination of local players with “star players” to be vital.
“Local players is of importance, both for the audience and for sponsors to see that there is a local belonging to at least some of the players on the team. However we are a team looking to be an Allsvenskan team, without some dominating players on the team we would not win games and that would not exactly increase our support either.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

Advertising and promotion
All teams use the local newspaper and their home page as regular advertising medias. Most of the teams are also starting to use social media, but there are differences in how well this has been integrated into their marketing actions. Some said that a Facebook page exists but not actively updated from the organizations side, while others said that Facebook and Twitter are important parts in conveying their message and to reach people that they might not reach through for instance the newspaper. In order to capture a broader audience a couple of the teams had random “PR stunts” to increase interest and awareness:

“We also do the occasionally PR stunts like having a car driving around town with LED screens promoting tonight’s game or putting up full size poster of players. We try to adapt to the old saying; if your not visible, you don’t exist”. (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

The teams that had set high goals for their teams were also very active in using this as promotional messages in their advertising, and further said that this was a very important part in why they received both financial support and a strong emotional commitment from their fans.

One promotional aspect that was applied by all teams were manipulation of the ticket price as a promotional effort to increase spectators numbers. The most common were 1 SEK games where spectators only paid 1 SEK to attend the games while sponsors agreed to pay 1 SEK for each paying visitor. Other examples were half the price for tickets, pay for 1 ticket get 2 and/or pay 10 SEK per goal. However, as teams had their highest spectator numbers and most profitable games during the season for these games, all experienced a considerable decrease for the next game. Some even experienced the lowest attendance number of the year for the next.

On field performance
All teams said that team performance, as much as it was a challenge, it was also a crucial factor in strengthening the brand. Without a winning team record, participants said that it was hard to convince spectators as well as sponsors to invest and visit the arena. Certain teams did discuss how team performance were not a determining factor and that, as discussed earlier, the game experience, advertising and the facilities could help attract sponsors and fans. It was also mentioned by some that for instance focusing on developing young players could give spectators, at least a short term, greater acceptance of poor results as they considered the development of young players more important than winning.

Technological advances
The Internet has become an important tool to promote the brand for these teams, and all teams have an active home page (appendix 5). Some teams also have their own fan clubs that runs their own fan page and online community for discussion between fans. There was a common perception that the homepage was an important media for advertising and to promote sponsors. In terms of communicating with fans through the Internet, social media were also adapted by some of the teams, most commonly through Facebook, however teams claimed that this could probably be improved.

Also in this category some teams stood out more than others. For instance Nyköping used the homepage for other purposes as well:

“The homepage is used for numerous intentions. Of course the regular information and advertising, but we also use it for live streaming of the road games, as an alternative, since division 1 games are not broadcasted.” (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).
Summary: There are numerous actions teams can take in order to create and strengthen the team brand. Different teams all have their own approach, however some factors seem to be present for all. The game experience, from parking and ticket sales, to cafeteria and handling of sponsors and VIPs during the games are mentioned as important elements in increasing customer satisfaction and commitment, and stay competitive. How many of, and how well these elements are performed is however of great variation. Some seem to have adapted the “miniature version of Elitserien”, other seems to have plans for this and some say that they cannot afford or have any interest in trying to be something they are not. However as teams regard the commitment from fans important very little is done in order to figure out customer expectations and what they regard as important to increase their commitment. There also seems to be a general awareness, with some exceptions, about what needs to be improved in order to strengthen the brand and in turn increase interest and external financial support. Further there seem to be a gap between awareness and plans, to implementation and seeing things through.

The most popular factor in increasing spectator numbers seem to be the short-term manipulation of ticket price for single games. The results are impressive, however only for that game. All teams seem to go back to their regular numbers as soon as the next game.

Merchandising, fan shops and online sales is also present among some, but not for all. Some teams actually do not have any sales at all. Advertising is mostly applied through newspapers and the homepage. Certain teams have started to realize the potential in reaching a larger audience through social media and have created Facebook and Twitter accounts in their teams name. There are also examples of teams doing PR stunts to increase interest and commitment from fans.
This section analyzes the empirical findings with the help of the theories presented in the frame of reference in order to provide a greater understanding of the research area. The analysis follows the order of the research questions.

5.1 Brand identity

This first part of the analysis considers the first research question; how does lower level sport teams create and manage their brand identity?

The formation of a strong brand identity is important in order to enhance customer’s brand awareness, meaning customers ability to recall and recognize the brand (Ross, 2006), but also increase brand awareness and associations in the sense that customers relates certain values to the brand (Keller, 2001). In the formation of an identity for sports teams Richelieu (2003) claims that two elements is vital; the establishment of attributes of the team and the value the team represents to its fans. The first step means that managers must work to establish some core values that the team should be recognized for and represent. The second step involves the transition of the core values into a value proposition accepted by the fans to support and trigger the buying decision (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Kashani, 1995). Richelieu (2003) recommends teams to involve fans in the formation of their identity in order to create a stronger commitment and acceptance of the teams core values and identity. Regarding the participant teams there was a large discrepancy in terms of how the question of identity was approached reaching from a more advanced approach to a rather indifferent attitude towards identity. There were one organization however, that inline with the criteria stated by Richelieu (2003), had involved their members, leaders and management as well as fans in the creation of core values and a value proposition to establish an identity.

“Posting online surveys for fans and the community, and having workshops with members of the organization together with management, we have developed four key values to be the core of our identity. We mutually agreed upon Strength for life, willingness to win, together and mutual respect. We wanted to involve as many as possible to unify the organization about some common values.”

However, as mentioned, this was the exception. Some teams had formed an identity consisting of core values, but similar for these teams were that management had designed their value propositions without any involvement from fans or other actors. According to Schilhanecck (2008) the idea of establishing a brand identity is that the stronger and clearer the identity of the club brand is, the stronger and more unique will the associations customer hold towards the brand be (Schilhanecck, 2008). Richelieu (2003) stated however that it is crucial in this step for managers to ensure that the value proposition is understood and agreed upon also with the fans. It seems like a lot of the teams have only done half the job. By not involving and communicating with the fans, the constructed identity looses one of its main purposes; to create positive brand awareness and associations with customers. Further the ability to gain new customers is weakened as the identity, according to Berry (2000) is the only evidence of what the sports organization stands for and must appeal to the customers in order to gain their attention. When teams neglects to involve their customers and community they potentially miss out on creating positive associations towards the brand as well as the opportunity to attract new customers. There were also teams totally lacking any approach to a formation of a brand identity.

“We have no clear established identity in terms of core values or key words. We build upon a sound youth development and having local players from Gothenburg”. (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).
An interesting aspect were how one of the teams that were lacking a clear identity (Mariestad) seemed to have lost control of their fans perception of their identity.

“The only thing I can think of that fans associated with our team is the term Raggar Hockey (Redneck Hockey), which isn’t really something we have promoted in any way nor is it a positive association. It is definitely something we would like to change”

The authors believe that this is one indication of what could happen when teams not consciously work to form an identity as well as establishing an identity together with their fans. If teams do not deliberately try to form their identity and promote their values, fans will form their own, and as in the example above, they may not always be positive. We are not saying that teams consciously working to establish their identity, involving their fans and focusing on core values, will not have fans with negative associations. However what we are saying is that these teams are more likely to have more fans sharing their values and have a stronger commitment to the brand than those not seriously working to form an identity. Also, according to Berry (2000), these teams have a higher probability to attract new customers. A strong identity is what Keller (2001) claims creates brand awareness in customers recognizing and recalling the brand and associates the club with the proposed values. Without a clear and consistent message of the clubs identity, the likelihood of awareness and positive associations is decreased (Keller, 2001). There is also hard for teams that have founded their values only in the offices of management and lack communication with their fans, to really know what their fans perception of their identity is. As previously discussed we have seen that among several of the teams that have established some sort of core values and identity, they still lack communication with their fans. This could hypothetically mean that some of these teams, in line with Mariestad, also have fans with negative associations towards the team brand and identity, they just don’t know it. Without a proper line of communication it makes it hard to really know whether fans have accepted the identity constructed by management or if they have negative perceptions. Finally, if you do not know fans perception it is hard to change it.

5.2 Positioning

This part of the analysis considers the second research question; How does lower level ice hockey teams in Sweden work to position their brand in the market?

As discussed in the frame of reference, positioning is an important component in the creation of a strong brand and brand equity (Richelieu, 2003; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999). Positioning is about creating an offering in the minds of the customers that is clear and distinctive relative to competitor’s offerings (Kotler, 2008). Further Richelieu (2003) recommends that teams should identify their competitors and define their target market and market segments to further be able to differentiate and position their brand in the market place.

5.2.1 Selection of market segments & Target groups

Through market segmentation companies can divide a larger population into smaller segments that can be reached more efficiently with an offering (products/services) that match their unique needs (Kotler, 2008). This first step means that the team should identify the customers believed to be the most receptive to the value proposition developed as part of their identity. These potential customers would represent the target market for the future development of loyal fans and the long-term value of the brand (Richelieu, 2003). As we saw in the results teams had not performed any research in terms of finding out what type of customers that could be most receptive to their core values or identity. Kotler (2008) suggests that by dividing a larger population into smaller segments it would be easier to reach these with services that match their unique needs. Teams seemed to feel this either to be unnecessary or had not really considered it.
There was a general perception amongst the teams to try to get as many people as they could for support and to the games, and that you do this best by targeting “everybody”. The closest thing to customer segmentation observed were how teams considered some customer groups to be more important than others. Certain teams regarded sponsors as important due to their financial support, others found media of significance due to exposure and of course spectators that come to watch the games. What the authors find interesting here, is that none of the teams considered to segment and target different types of customers, particularly fans, within their region. Kotler (2008) claims that customers have different wants and needs, and that by appealing to those needs with a specified offering you can attract more and new customers. This was not an applied strategy amongst the teams. Teams instead discussed to widen their horizon to a larger target population but not specific customer groups within those areas. There was only one team that to some extent, consciously, targeted different segments in their marketing efforts by trying to reach different types of customers to different games.

“We advertise somewhat differently for different games. As Sunday games start earlier we promote this as family games with activities for the kids as well as a family price on tickets. Fridays have been advertised more as VIP or after work games, with possibilities to come early and grab something to eat and drink before the game.” (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

There was also one other team that had started to realize that it could be a potential in trying to market themselves more towards specific segments.

“…What we perhaps should work harder on is to try to reach women in our marketing and try to get more girls attend our games.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

It is hard to say whether teams at this level would benefit from segmenting and targeting specific market segments based on e.g. demographics (age, gender, family size etc.), income, education, lifestyle etc. Teams on this level can only appeal to a certain number of customers, as their exposure is limited mostly to their own region. However, the authors would claim that, in line with the arguments of Kotler (2008), some segmentation and targeting practices probably would be beneficial. To have some insight into what different types of customers expect and prefer when going games, like Nyköping to some extent have done, trying to reach different customer to different games. For example can the spectator base be very complex consisting of men, women and children with different backgrounds and ideas of what they want to see and experience during a sporting event (Schilhaneck, 2008). Because customers have different wants and needs, and by investigating these needs and develop an offering that to some degree meets those needs, teams most likely would have a positive effect on customers buying decisions.

5.2.2 Competitors - who to differentiate from?

Identifying your competitors is important to be able to see how you can differentiate your own offering relative to competitors (Kotler, 2008). When asked about competitors all of the teams had a similar perception of who their main competitors were. All teams mentioned that other sports teams were competitors, not only for spectators and fans but also for sponsors, media coverage and recruitment.

There are a soccer team playing in the top league in Sweden, a basketball team; Norrköping Dolphins playing in the top basketball league in Sweden and Vargarna which is a speedway team in the top division here in Norrköping. We fight pretty hard against all these teams for fans but particularly for sponsors and their financial support.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

Some teams also saw other sport teams as competitors for recruitment, which seems to be a characteristic of the lower sport club setting, that not only are they competing for sponsorship and spectators, they are competing for recruitment as kids are the future of their organization. Burton and Howard (1999) and Schilhaneck (2008) claims that commonly sports teams also
compete for customers with other actors than sport teams. Leisure activities like cinema, festivals, restaurants etc. are all activities suggested as competitors to sports organizations. These were not frequently mentioned by the participant teams as who they considered to be competitors. It is hard to determine how big of a competitor these activities are, but it is not unlikely that certain customers for instance find it more entertaining to go to the cinema than a ice hockey game, meaning that an awareness about these offerings should be at least considered as potential competitors.

5.2.3 Differentiation

Kotler (2008) describes differentiation as the decision companies (teams) makes towards how target customers can be reached and the communication of the full mix of benefits that differentiate the brand from competitors. As discussed some segmentation and targeting of certain groups of customers were made by the teams. Spectators, sponsors and media were regarded as different groups but further segmentation of spectators were minimal. In terms of differentiating from competitors and determine their position in the marketplace, this was not discussed very broadly by participants. Differentiation was made more towards individual customer groups (e.g. either fans, sponsors or media) but not all groups were targeted differently by one team. For instance to give sponsors a good experience at the games, to cooperate with media to get good coverage or to have a good team and decent service for customers were focused upon, but seldom all customers were regarded of equal importance by one team. Organizations considered it important to stand out in order to gain more spectators, more sponsors and more media coverage, however what others were doing, how they compared and what they could do differently from competitors in order to stand out were not clearly planned for. Some teams had forgot to answer the question proposed by Kotler (2008), “Why should customers buy our brand” and instead moved directly to “what can we do to get more customers”? The crucial difference between these questions lies in the fact that teams seemed to build their actions on their own assumptions of what customers want, instead of going to the customers first to get hands on knowledge of their preferences. However one similar point made by most of the teams were how they regarded that they had to start differentiate and strengthen their position in the marketplace regarding the game experience. This was not so much based on market research and feedback from customers but more on what they regarded as a general increase in customer expectations.

“Our reality has changed with the development of how hockey games are conducted nowadays. Before it was just the game that mattered, maybe sell some hotdog and coffee, but the audience did not demand much more. The Elite teams today offers so much more, even though we don’t compete with them, customers want to be entertained.” (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

5.3 Challenges

This section will discuss the third research question of this thesis; What are the main obstacles encountered in the establishment of a team as a brand?

A challenging task for all firms is that the brand very much exists in the minds of the customer making the management of brands a challenge (Schihaneck, 2008). To make this even more difficult, sports teams often face a number of challenges particular to the sport club setting. We will now go through the main challenges identified for the lower level sport clubs setting connecting them to relevant theory. Some of these elements are, as seen appendix 2, challenges that are considered more controllable than others for the teams.
5.3.1 Finances & Management

Financial stability is mentioned as one of the key elements by Richelieu (2003) to be able to properly adopt a brand strategy and implement vital marketing actions. A significant challenge for all teams at this level were the impact and difficulties of handling their financial state in building and leveraging their brand. The reason for the financial problems was commonly rooted in previous years mismanagement. Richelieu (2003) further claims that without a stable economy teams often have more than enough working out financial issues than concentrating on building and strengthening their brand. This seems very much in line with the findings from this study. For instance Vimmerby experienced financial problems and had just started to stabilize their financial situation but the past financial problems were still haunting them:

“We struggle with the past leadership of the organization that put the organization in a very bad financial state. Today our brand and our actions are very much about re-gaining the confidence of sponsors and the community, to create trust and insurance that this will not happen again.” (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17)

A number of teams claimed that they were now starting to stabilize their economy once again, however it seems as this problem is a reoccurring challenge as a lot of the teams had experienced problems a number of times in the past. Several teams had been on the brink of bankruptcy often blaming the lack of competence and ignorant attitude of previous years management and now struggled to get back on their feet. Schilhanek (2008) mentions that the lack of experienced and competent managers can harm any sport organization or company often due to managers impact on the handling of all administrative, marketing and financial aspects of sports associations. Schilhanek (2008) further particularly emphasizes sponsorship as a factor crucial for sport teams and much dependent on management. It is their task to manage the financial efforts of the organization along with dealing and retrieving sponsorship. This seemed to be a big challenge for the lower level sports teams, to find competent and experienced employees and managers. Looking specifically at sponsorship, Speed and Thompson (2000) claimed that along with skills and experience, teams must be able to find companies with a personal interest in the sport/team and/or manage to create strong and positive brand associations for potential sponsors to be willing and see a gain in being associated with the organization. This was a problem for some of the teams and often those with the lowest turnover and income from sponsorship. For instance Mjölby mentioned that they felt sponsorship were like begging for money and that companies were just not interested in sponsoring. Again, what becomes crucial for sports organizations is to create positive associations for the brand in order to seek corporate sponsors that are willing to put money into their sport organizations and see a profit in being associated with the sports team (Ross, 2006). Given the expectations of the sponsors making use of the dual transfer of their own and the clubs image to their customers (Ross, 2006). Teams have to realize that sponsorship should be a win-win situation, not to be considered a charity from companies. In general the financial status and the management skills and experience also seem to go hand in hand for teams at this level. The problem is however understandable as most teams cannot afford hiring full time employees, and tasks are covered by people “willing to take the job” instead of selected, capable candidates. Perhaps the statement made from one of the teams regarding these problems, is not such a bad idea after all? “We are considering to hire a professional, taking care of all marketing, sponsorship, everything. However we cannot afford it right now. Perhaps working on provision, getting 50 % of what he can get in would be an idea? I don’t know...”

Also as both theory and teams suggested, the financial troubles are not an isolated problem. It influences the reputation and the trust from outside actors and it is also the root of some of the other challenges about to be discussed.
5.3.2 Volunteer workers

As the theoretical framework of this thesis very much consists of theory related to studies conducted in a professional team sport setting, the challenge of volunteer workers is sparsely discussed. In fact the authors of this study did not come across any specific theory within this particular area. However for the lower level sport team setting it is considered one of the main challenges in delivering professional services and meeting customer expectations. Furthermore this again influences customer’s brand perceptions and associations towards the service quality (Grönroos, 2007). This challenge is also connected to the financial state of the organization; teams cannot afford to pay workers for their efforts, they rely on people’s willingness and commitment to help. Nearly all of the teams participating in this study underlined the challenge and importance of having competent volunteer workers. The following quotes illustrated some of the challenges for these teams.

“One of our biggest challenges is to get people with the right competence and experience together with a commitment to the association and the team to improve the overall performance of the organization” (J.E. Modigs, personal communication, 2012.04.17).

“They are doing it for free and to help, so it is hard to demand too much from them. At the same time you want to offer quality in your services”. (P. Åkerström, personal communication, 2012.04.25)

As many of the teams considered this to be a challenge, some teams also said that the problem is increasing and that it has in some cases led to the leaders of the organizations having to involve themselves in tasks outside of their job description.

“People seem more and more discouraged to help out. It has become a big problem. Personally I have had to stand in the parking lot to organize parking because no one else did it. I hand out blankets to people who are cold during the game. These are just some examples.” (S.Å. Lövdahl, personal communication, 2012.04.11)

What this means is that organizations struggling with financial issues are forced to have management, which is appointed to take care of these problems, do jobs others were supposed to. This obviously takes focus away from important managerial tasks. This is a considerable challenge for teams at this level and the authors believe this is an important factor to improve in order to strengthen team brands. What seems critical in this matter is for teams to create a commitment to the brand and organization where people care and feel part of the club in order for them to feel like they are part of helping out their “own” club, not obliged to help a club they do not care about. As the purpose of this thesis is not to solve the challenges met by teams at this level, but rather describe the challenges and the branding process, we will not go into further suggested solutions to this problem here, other than what was just stated above. We will however address this question to some degree also in the later discussion.

5.3.3 On-field performance

Team performance is, compared to volunteer workers, very much discussed in sports branding literature. The fact that it is almost impossible to control the outcome of the game makes it one of the distinguished challenges for building a strong sports club brand (Ross, 2006; Schilhaneck, 2008). One would might believe that teams performing well and being in the top of the table year after year, would not be as concerned for team performance as team’s struggling in the bottom. However seemingly particular for teams at this level where how teams even at the top with goals of winning the series and take the step up in the league system, still struggle with e.g. attendance numbers. Vita Hästens claimed that winning almost becomes a problem for them:

“A challenge for us is that we are almost too good during the regular season, we win almost every game and people think that they might as well stay home and wait for the playoffs. Then if we don’t make it in the playoffs the disappointment from fans is huge.” (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).
A team at the “other end”, with the goal of establishing themselves in the league (Kungälv) also was concerned with team performance. “To establish ourselves and avoid negative promotion we need a team that performs. It is connected to our financial problems also, we cannot afford star players, and we have to rely on our youth development and own players.” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

Couvelaere & Richelieu (2005) underlines that a minimum of team success also is a prerequisite for sports teams for them to expect fans to associate themselves with the team and for the club to have the foundation to build a successful brand. Field performance is an underlying dimension in sports and to capture loyal fans to a loosing team is a difficult task (Ross, 2006). This also seems in line with the findings from the participating teams. Even though teams with a winning record also complained about challenges in sustaining and increasing spectator’s numbers, it was clear that the teams struggling to avoid negative qualification and concerned with loosing records had considerably lower spectator numbers than those with a higher ambition, turnover and more of a winning record (Appendix 5).

5.3.4 Heterogenous Customer Group

Theory suggests that there are a number of diverse customer groups with different preferences that sport organizations have to relate and appeal to (Schilhaneck, 2008; Gladden et al. 1998). The participant teams mentioned sponsors, media, fans and the municipality as different types of customer groups that they regarded as important to satisfy in order to build their brand. There was however some differences in which of these teams regarded as most important. Some considered sponsors and customers due to their financial impact on the associations other mentioned media in order to gain exposure and interest in the community. Still the most frequently mentioned, and most often regarded as a challenge were the municipality due to the fact that it owned the arena of all the individual teams. Even though not all teams had equally the same challenges with the municipality, one team stated the following: “The cooperation with the municipality is a problem. They are against most of the changes we want to do and the only thing they really care about is that we pay the rent on time” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

Gladden and Funk (2002) claimed that sports teams also have a number of key audience groups a part from the direct fans (regular spectators), mentioning sponsors/VIPs, media and the municipality, all with potentially different interests. Furthermore, that the club have to have this in mind when trying to shape the image of their brand (Schilhaneck, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002). The statement from Karlsson illustrates how teams have to work hard in order maintain a cooperation with these actors due to their individual importance to the organizations. If some of these actors feel neglected or are unwilling to cooperate it can hurt the teams. Particular to the lower level sport clubs setting the municipality, in owning and having control over teams arena, and spectators and sponsors, due to their financial importance, seem crucial.

5.3.5 Service characteristics: Customer expectations

Part of the service characteristics of sports is the heterogeneous customer groups, as discussed earlier, and their different expectations that has to be fulfilled in order to strengthen the individual customers commitment to the brand (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Schilhaneck, 2008; Gladden et al. 1998). Particularly to the lower level sport club setting explored were the changes teams had noticed in spectators expectations. Teams claimed to have noticed that the expectations of customers have increased, that they are more selective of games they would like to attend and that particular the combination of outdated facilities and the increased standards in the Elite teams facilities were one of the main reasons for this change.
“I believe sport is becoming more and more a total experience event, where people go to watch games for different reasons. Some are die-hard fans but others go to be part of an event and an experience. We have to be part of this development and we have the facility that gives us an opportunity to do this”.

“It is a little bit like in the NHL where half of the crowd is there to have a beer and a slice of pizza with their friends as much as they are there to see the game”. (M. Tegerup, personal communication, 2012.04.18).

Almost every team regarded that they had to improve their facilities to stay competitive and for spectators as well as sponsors to find the arena an attractive place to be. The statements regarding customer expectations fall in line with Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) saying that it becomes crucial that the service provider, being the sports association, to provide an experience besides the performance of the team, to make the service experience as pleasant as possible regardless of the outcome of the event (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). One of the biggest challenges of services and particularly sports is to manage customer expectations (Grönroos, 2007). As sports teams have a number of different customer groups they need to map and identify these expectations in order to meet customer demands and increase the perceived service quality (Grönroos, 2007; Gladden & Funk, 2002). In order to meet the particular expectations regarding the facilities, which seemed not to be met at the moment, teams need to work hard to find financial funds to improve their arenas. Without spectators at the arena they loose income from tickets, merchandise, food/drink and possibly the interest from sponsors as well. While it is a complex problem for these clubs, it seems as a challenge they are forced to deal with in the coming years in order to stay competitive.

5.3.6 Negative publicity and word of mouth

Both publicity and word of mouth marketing could be just as much a powerful positive for organizations and companies as it can be negative and is one of the three components of spectator’s brand equity (market induced antecedents) by Ross, (2006). Publicity were not regarded as an important factor by the teams and this could also be true as this is easier to follow than word of mouth communication. Negative word of mouth was not mentioned as a particular challenge to any of the teams involved. However the authors considers this a more important finding due to the potential impact it could have on sports teams and the seemingly unfamiliar awareness about the possible affects. While service providers delivering high service quality can make good use of their positive reputations as customers spread the word to their friends, relatives, online etc. it can be equally, if not more harmful, to teams not meeting the expectations of their customers (Grönroos, 2007). First of all these customer are not likely to come back and will spend their money elsewhere, and second, and perhaps most importantly, they are likely to contribute to negative word of mouth that can make sport association’s also loose potential new customers (Grönroos, 2007). The authors believe that this is something for teams, also at this level, to be at least aware of due to its possible effects on customer’s perceptions of the brand.

5.4 Factors to exploit

The fourth and final research question will now be addressed: What are the main factors lower level sports teams exploit in order to become and strengthen their brand? To answer the fourth research question the authors have taken into account and combined the organization, market and experience induced antecedents from Ross (2006) and the third step in the model by Richelieu (2003); developing a branding strategy and marketing actions. The analyses will point to the most important findings from the participant team interviews and analyze them in light of the theory. These factors are all considered to be controllable (appendix 2) factors that teams can exploit in order to build and strengthen the brand.
5.4.1 Fan involvement: The Game Experience & Facilities

The game experience is one such controllable factor where teams can control the service quality and the entertainment experience in order to strengthen the commitment from fans, again disregarding the game itself (Schilhaneck, 2008; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). The game experience can also help strengthen brand associations and loyalty by meeting or exceeding customer expectations (Grönroos, 2007; Gladden & Funk, 2002). This was also the perception of the interviewed teams; they regarded the game experience as a controllable brand-building factor. However they approached it very differently. Some teams wanted to copy the Elitserien teams, trying to adapt a miniature version of their games, and some were also well on their way. Others found the game experience, for their team to be something they regarded as less important. “There is no real hockey audience in Kungälv. I don’t see why we should put money into intros or trying to be like an Elitserien team. We are no Elitserien team and I’ve been to places with 2-300 people in the stands doing stuff like that, it looks stupid. All we can do is to try to play good hockey.” (C. Karlsson, personal communication, 2012.04.26).

Kungälv were the team with lowest average of spectators to their games, the lowest turnover and struggling most performance wise. It seems to the authors that the trend amongst teams at this level is that they will be forced to adapt to their surroundings. Even though the professional teams are competing at a totally different level, they need to adapt and show customers that they are focusing on something more than just the game. In Ross’s (2006) model one category, organization-induced antecedents, mentions some factors that teams can control in order to strengthen the experience and service quality for fans.

- Event marketing: includes cafeteria, catering.
- Personnel factors: trained and experienced personnel, regulations for customer contact, adequate stadium staff.
- Performance processes: handling of sponsors and VIPs, complaint management, time management, fixed waiting times for ticket purchases, entry arrangement, catering.
- Infrastructure in/around arena: adapted for children, VIP room, monitors, parking possibilities, public transportation, fan areas.

There are some differences from the suggested elements by Ross (2006) to what the teams in this study have focused upon. The biggest difference, and also the most lacking as we discussed in challenges to building the brand, is the personnel factors and the need to improve the facilities. Regarding the facilities Underwood et al. (2001) says teams should try to make the arena a place to represent what the club stands for where a unique atmosphere can help create the emotional commitment needed to retrieve loyal customers. The facilities is something numerous teams discuss as to what they would like to improve in order to create a better game experience and strengthen the brand. The other areas mentioned above, as displayed in the results section, seem to be somehow integrated in what they described as their approach to the game experience, though to different degrees and focus. But by developing the game experience further Ross (2006) and Brooks (1994) suggests that consequences like higher revenues and a more emotional atmosphere can be created. This due to the increased level of excitement and entertainment delivered to the fans during the event. It comes down to the quality of the implementation of the controlled organization induced antecedents.

5.4.2 Marketing Actions

Merchandise
The sale of team merchandise is according to Richelieu (2003) and Burton and Howard (1999) an important factor to leverage team brands. It can help teams take advantage of their brand, extending their offering into revenues from sales of team merchandise. Teams in the lower level sport club settings approach to merchandising were of great variation. Most of the teams had
some sort of merchandise sales extending from a fan shop at the rink selling a few articles to
teams having online stores, fan shops and possibilities to order a large variation of merchandise
from catalogues. While Aaker (1994) and Keller (1993) warn for over extension of the brand
through merchandising and other extension opportunities (e.g. restaurants, barbershops etc.)
could harm and dilute the brand, this is not a problem for teams at this level. The authors be-
lieve it is more the other way around, that most of the teams have room for improvements
when it comes to merchandising. Particularly for teams that had none, or close to none, mer-
chandising are missing out on potentially revenues that can help overcome the financial chal-
lenges that most of the teams struggle with.

Player management

The compilation of the team and player management is considered a controllable variable that
can be included in the organization induced antecedents by Ross (2006) and is also one of the
internal catalyst factors by (Richelieu, 2003). It is claimed that for instance signing a star player
and/or having local players in the team that fans recognize can help draw support and attention
to the brand and build a stronger commitment and loyalty to the team (Richelieu, 2003;
Schilhanec, 2008). Local players were considered of particular importance due to their local at-
tachment but also to the financial struggles of the organizations. Having players developed from
their own organization cost less and were considered a reason that people came to watch the
games, to watch someone they knew.

“Our identity is about developing young players with a Vimmerby character. Without local players on the team we would
not meet our own criteria. We get positive feedback from sponsors as well as our audience for this. We are one of the div-
ision 1 teams with the most local players on our team. It becomes a reason to follow the team.” (J.E. Modigs, personal
communication, 2012.04.17)

Some teams claimed that both local and star players with some special skills, were important
both for the audience and for sponsors for them to see that they were serious about reaching
their goals and that sponsors got their moneys worth on their investments in the team. All these
statements are in line with the arguments by Richelieu (2003) and Gladden and Funk (2002) that
player management is an important factor to increase commitment and strengthen the brand.

Advertising and promotion

This category falls within the internal catalyst factors (marketing actions) by Richelieu (2003)
and organization induced antecedents by Ross (2006) as part of the marketing mix (promotion).
Advertising is one technique in promoting and communicating the core values of the team in
order to increase brand awareness with customers and potential customers (Couvelaere & Rich-
elieu, 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2005). All teams used a number of medias in order to promote
their brand and their values. The local newspaper, the home page and social media were the
most commonly mentioned. Gladden and Funk (2002) also suggests promotional campaigns or
promotional stunts like giveaways, pricing campaigns or other similar efforts that sports organi-
zations can use to communicate the brand message and strengthen the brand. There was one
aspect of these promotional campaigns that were frequently applied by teams, and that was
pricing campaigns, specifically manipulating the ticket price. All teams had 1 SEK games, half
the price for tickets, pay for 1 ticket get 2 and/or pay 10 SEK per goal the team scores etc. to
increase the commitment from fans. However an interesting aspect of these campaigns were
that as teams all said that they had their highest visiting numbers during this games, all teams also
said that they were back to normal, if not even worse the next game. This shows that, even though these campaigns are profitable for teams, they are short-term solutions that in the end
do not influence the commitment from fans. It indicates that teams have to think long term,
and find ways to make people want to come back and stay loyal to the team. The authors be-
lieve that teams should perhaps not remove these campaigns, due to their profitability, but they
should still focus on advertising as a long term campaign, communicating their core values to increase the long term commitment and loyalty from fans. Other types of PR stunts were also mentioned but this was more infrequently applied. Vita Hästen were one team that had applied other type of efforts:

“We also do the occasionally PR stunts like having a car driving around town with LED screens promoting tonight’s game or putting up full size poster of players. We try to adapt to the old saying; if your not visible, you don’t exist”. (R. Johansson, personal communication, 2012.04.11).

Interestingly were also that teams with the highest ambitions, turnover and spectator numbers (Appendix 5) used this frequently in their advertising. In fact Vita Hästen said that promoting their goals (“Towards Allsvenskan”) were their most commonly used phrase in their advertising. The authors will be careful of drawing the lines between advertising, turnover and spectator numbers, however it is an interesting fact that teams with high goals are the ones presenting the highest numbers in turnover and fans. Also the teams themselves claimed that their high goals were one of the reasons they received financial support from sponsors as well as a strong commitment from fans.

**Technology advances**

The technological advances within communication and the emergence of the Internet have opened up a variety of possibilities for sport teams to advertise and interact in a new media (Richelieu, 2003). A website can strengthen the bond with the team and its fans by posting updates, videos, as well as offering online communities for fans to interact (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2002). All of the teams stated that they have an active website and that it has become a very important tool to promote the brand. A number of teams also had a fan page with a discussion forum and most of the teams were now starting to interconnect their homepages with social media. Particularly Facebook, to expand their online presence and ability to interact with customers were highlighted. The social media application was however a new phenomenon amongst teams and was the least developed Internet media. Theory does warn also for the application of technologies like the Internet, to keep up with the latest trends and have updated solutions (Richelieu, 2003). Further that a poorly developed site with little updates and lack of involvement from fans can develop into a liability and a cost instead of a measure to build the brand (Dunleavy, 2000). This however seemed to be less of a problem for the teams as all seemed to put a lot of effort and focus into their homepages and often teams claimed that this is where the customers are now and probably will be in the future. The authors would also like to mention one team that kind of went the extra mile, offering live streaming of road games on their homepage. The authors believe that teams that are willing to do these extra efforts for their fans, things that make them a bit better and stand out a little bit more from their competitors, are those who probably will be noticed and appreciated by their customers and fans.

**On-field performance**

As on field performance is one of the biggest challenges to building a strong brand literature suggests that a winning team can also be a brand-building factor (Richelieu, 2003). In order to be prepared or overcome demands and the challenge of team performance Waltner (2000) suggested that the style of play and how the team is promoted also influence the perception customers might have regarding on-field performance. For instance promoting the team as a fighting for survival team or underdog can decrease the expectations. This is actually close to what some of the participant teams in this thesis are doing. Teams short on resources are relying on their youth development and local players to gain acceptance from fans to their team at times are not performing as well. What teams should be careful about though, is to promote the message long term, that they are a fighting for survival team because it could send the message to customers that the managers do not themselves believe in the team (Waltner, 2000).
6 Conclusions

In this thesis the authors have described the branding process for lower level, meaning division 1, ice hockey teams in Sweden based on in-depth interviews with 7 ice hockey associations. The answer to the four questions below should fulfill the purpose of how sport teams at a lower level work to build and strengthen their brands. Furthermore the main findings are illustrated in appendix 6 where the authors have compared the most important aspects from the theoretical framework (appendix 2) to the findings of this thesis.

Research question 1
Regarding the first research question, how teams work to create a brand identity, we have now seen in the results and from our analysis that it is clear that teams vary in their approach to creating and communicating their identity. Brand identity is one of the components that set the tone for how to create a solid brand. The authors would argue that only one team meets the theoretical criteria presented in this thesis and that the other teams either lacks communication with fans or any establishment of a clear identity at all. The most important finding here were the lack of involvement and communication with fans towards what the team and brand should represent. One of the key strengths of sport brands is the ability to create an emotional commitment from fans. This is also an underlying factor for strong sports brands and brand equity, however this is hard to achieve without a proper line of communication with your customers. The authors believe that for the teams operating at this level the different customer groups (sponsors, fans, municipality etc.) must be approached individually for greater involvement in the process of creating a strong identity in order to take advantage of the potential emotional commitment from fans. The findings also indicate that teams that lack a clear brand identity risk loose control over fans perceptions, as were the case with one team, where fans associated negative values towards the team, that management really did not want to be associated with. The risk is for those teams not handling the establishment of an identity in a proper manner to find themselves associated with perceptions not advantageous to the team and brand.

Research question 2
How teams work to positioning their brand in the market was the second research question for this thesis. It included the selection of market segments and target groups as well as differentiation strategies against competitors (Kotler, 2008; Richelieu, 2003). For market segmentation teams regarded fans, sponsors, media and the municipality as their target customers. Theory suggests that teams should, particularly for fans, target the most receptive customers to their value proposition (core values) in order to be able to meet their needs and expectations. While teams had an idea of who they customers were, closer targeting and insight into customer expectations were lacking. Some did claim that the reason for this were their limited exposure outside of the local community thereby defending the targeting practices of trying to get “everybody” to their games. The authors believe that some segmentation and targeting practices probably would be beneficial to teams also at this level. To have some insight to what different types of customers expect and prefer when going to a game could be what help attract new customers and be more rewarding than a general message to “everybody”. Teams regarded main competitors to be other sports teams fighting for spectators, sponsors and media coverage. Leisure activities (cinema, restaurants, festivals, etc.) that might also fight for the same customers were not consider as competitors by the participant teams and could be something for the teams to be aware of in the future. Differentiation was made more towards individual customer groups (e.g. either fans, sponsors or media) to whom regarded as most important, but no differentiation strategy for all customer groups were made by individual teams. Teams at this level seemed to
build their differentiation efforts more on their own assumptions of what customers want, instead of going to the customers first to get hands on knowledge of their preferences.

**Research question 3**
The third research question were challenges faced by teams in building and strengthening their brand. Financial challenges were one of the biggest obstacles to build a brand at this level and impacted teams ability to implement efforts to strengthen their brand e.g. improve facilities. Every team had been, wore currently in or on their way out of financial struggles. One of the main reasons for this, and a characteristic of the lower level sport club setting, was the management and personnel capabilities of the organizations. Teams often lack skills and experience in management that teams too claimed were the main reason for the financial struggles. Furthermore teams have recently started to experience serious problems in finding volunteers. This is a challenge not much discussed in theory and seems to be a characteristic of the lower level sport club setting as well. This was a crucial challenge as lower level teams are mainly run and managed by volunteer workers. Another challenge for teams were on field performance. The teams with loosing records had the lowest spectator numbers and lowest financial support from sponsors. However an interesting fact was that a few teams at this level even experienced decline in loyalty and attendance numbers when they were winning too many games! Winning during the regular season series did not matter as much. It is the qualification to Allsvenskan that matters. It was then customers came back. Further satisfying customers expectations, particularly for increasing service quality and facilities were a problem. This was largely influenced by another challenge, being that the municipality owns all the participant teams arenas). Finally theory suggests that negative word of mouth and bad publicity can be challenges to sports teams (Ross, 2006; Grönroos, 2007), but teams at this level did not experience nor consider the two factors to impact their branding process. The authors would like to warn for, particularly negative word of mouth, as the consequences can be harmful and hard to detect if no communication and interaction with fans are present.

**Research Question 4**
The fourth and final research question addresses factors teams use in order to build and strengthen their brand. Since the teams had experienced increased expectations from customers towards the game experience and facilities these two factors were important in order for the team to strengthen their brand and customers brand image. A re-occurring term during the interviews was to implement a “miniature version of the Elitserien teams” approach to the game experience. The improvement and the term “game experience” means that teams should try to build and strengthen their brans by focusing on elements separate from the uncontrollable factor of the outcome of the games. A number of different efforts were mentioned by teams to improve the game experience, reaching from cafeteria and catering to handling of sponsors, VIP rooms, volunteer workers and intros and music for the games. However several teams had a gap between what was planned for and what was actually implemented. Further merchandising were an important factor emphasized in literature in order to increase revenues. This was something teams approached differently and some teams have a great, unused potential for additional revenues from merchandising. Advertising was another important factor to strengthen the brand. Different medias (newspaper, homepage, radio, etc.) were used to create brand awareness and associations. The opportunities provided by the Internet offers a great potential for lower level teams, to a relative low cost, create a forum for interaction with fans, e.g. through Facebook. Some teams had started to take advantage of these opportunities, however there was still considerable room for improvement. Player management were also considered important for teams at this level, particularly having local player were seen as a factor contributing to customers commitment to the brand and also tolerance towards team performance.


7 Discussion

Teams in the lower level setting seem to operate in a challenging economic environment due to their limited exposure and interest from spectators and sponsors outside of their local community. Furthermore teams are affected by how most activities are performed on a volunteer basis often with the lack of experienced and capable employees. This of course impacts their ability to construct and strengthen their brand. Furthermore, as the arena, game experience and atmosphere are important in order to create an emotional commitment with fans and a strong brand, the fact that the municipality owns the arenas forces the teams to be under the mercy of their local authorities. While building a brand may not be a cure for all problems, the authors believe that the brand is part of the equation in order to assist sport teams in increasing revenues, for instance through merchandising, and gain some more financial stability. Strong brands are able to generate trust and loyalty from customers, sponsors and not unlikely, the municipality as well. Building a strong sports brand is about creating positive associations with customers that survives even through tougher times. Accordingly, teams can make their fans live the brand and thus generate revenues even when team performance is low. Throughout this thesis we have tried to describe how teams at this level currently are working to establish and build their brands. While several teams are starting to consider their brand as an important asset in the battle for success, the authors have also pointed to a number of aspects with room for improvement. Particularly teams have to realize that without discovering the expectations and the involvement of their fans it is hard to create customer satisfaction and loyalty.

An interesting finding was also how teams with winning records had hard times increasing, even maintaining their spectators numbers. Managers have to realize that winning may not be enough. A strong brand is not built on winning alone; the winning record has to be taken advantage of with the help of a clear brand strategy. It is then fan loyalty and attachment can be increased and additional revenues can be withheld. Ideally, a team should build a brand strong enough to protect the organization and team from the contingencies of team performance.

7.1 Further research

As this thesis only discusses branding from the perspective of managers, an interesting aspect for further research would be to look into how the team brands actually are perceived by the fans. Particularly since this thesis has pointed to the problem of teams lacking insight into fans expectations and preferences a study of these aspects would be interesting for sure.

Furthermore a similar study with a larger sample could verify or add to the conclusions made in this thesis.
Appendix

List of references


Appendix


Appendix


Shentton, K., A., (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects, Education for information, P.63-75


http://zport.se/start/mersport/hockey/1.4429751-skilda-varldar-nar-oik-moter-karlskrona


Appendix 1: Factors influencing brand management

Catalyst factors, constraints and "moderating" variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalyst factors</th>
<th>Constraints and &quot;moderating&quot; variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal catalyst factors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Constraints</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Fans bonding with the team&quot;</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Entertainment experience for the fans</td>
<td>- Trend phenomenon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Team’s involvement in its community</td>
<td>Decrease in loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Physical facilities</td>
<td>- Decrease in customer loyalty toward brands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing actions</td>
<td>- Less and less loyalty from the players toward their team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- On-field jerseys</td>
<td>Life cycle of sports leagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sale of team’s merchandise</td>
<td>- Maturity or decline phase of professional sports leagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Players’ management</td>
<td>General entertainment offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Promotional campaigns</td>
<td>- Competition from other entertainment alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Commercial partnerships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Customer Relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Marketing programs (CRM)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>External catalyst factors</strong></td>
<td>&quot;Moderating&quot; variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market size</td>
<td>Legal framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Access to a large fan base and lucrative TV deals</td>
<td>- Centralization in managing the league’s brands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry changes</td>
<td>- Legal status of the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Merger of sports with the entertainment and communications industries</td>
<td>Finances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological advances</td>
<td>- Resources of the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Development of new means of communications</td>
<td>On-field performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Winning!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix 2: Theoretical overview

**RQ1:** How do lower level teams establish their brand identity?
- **Determinants:** Brand Identity
  - Richlbsen (2005)
- **Contributing Factors:** Brand Awareness
  - Aaker (1996)
  - Berry (2000)
- **Key themes for interview**
  - Attributes of the team
    - Management Perception
  - Value the team represents to its fans
  - Fans' perception
  - Core Values
    - Keywords:
      - Covellere & Richlbsen (2005)
      - Keller (2001)

**RQ2:** How do lower level teams establish their brand positioning?
- **Determinants:** Brand Positioning
  - Richlbsen (2005)
- **Contributing Factors:** Brand Awareness
  - Aaker (1996)
  - Berry (2000)
- **Key themes for interview**
  - Segmentation
  - Targeting
  - Competition
  - Differentiation
    - Burton & Howard (1999)
  - Covellere & Richlbsen (2005)
  - Keller (2008)

**RQ3:** What are the main challenges encountered in the establishment of a team as a brand?
- **Determinants:** Challenges
  - Ross (2006)
  - Richlbsen (2005)
  - Scharlnack (2008)
  - Gladlen & Funk (2002)
- **Contributing Factors:** Brand Awareness
  - Brand Association
    - Aaker (1996)
- **Key themes for interview**
  - Controllable factors
    - Richlbren (2005)
  - Uncontrollable factors
    - Richlbren (2005)
  - Word of mouth
    - Berry (2003)
    - Landis & Cooper (2000)
  - Quality performance
    - Ross (2006)
    - Richlbsen (2005)
    - Scharlnack (2008)

**RQ4:** What are the main factors a sports team can exploit in order to become a brand and reinforce its brand image?
- **Determinants:** Brand Strategy
  - Richlbsen (2005)
  - Ross (2006)
  - Underwood, Brand & Bar (2001)
- **Contributing Factors:** Brand Loyalty
  - Brand Association
    - Aaker (1996)
- **Key themes for interview**
  - Controllable factors
    - External catalyst factors
      - Richlbsen (2005)
    - Organization induced antecedents
      - Ross (2006)
    - Experience induced antecedents
      - Ross (2006)
  - Game experiences
    - Facilities
      - Richlbsen (2005)
      - Ross (2006)
      - Underwood, Brand & Bar (2001)
  - Technological advances
    - Richlbsen (2005)
  - Marketing actions
    - Merchandise, Advertising, Player management
      - Richlbsen (2005)
      - Covellere & Richlbsen (2005)
      - Ross (2006)
      - Gladlen et al. (1998)
      - Gladlen & Funk (2002)
      - Scharlnack (2008)
Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Interview guide:

**Introductory questions:**
- What is your position and tasks with the club and how long have you been working in your respective organization?
- Do you or any other employees in the organization work fulltime or on a volunteer basis?
- In working with team sport, what do you believe is the most important factors in order to be successful?
- In working with team sport, do you perceive the brand to be an important factor in order to be successful? Why/why not?
- Do you as a team have an established brand strategy? Why/Why not?

1. **Brand identity - questions to discuss: (R.Q1)**

   **Open questions:**
   - What comes to your mind when you think about your sport club (brand) identity?
     **Attributes of the team:** How would you describe the identity of your team and organization?
   - Do you have a determined brand strategy, meaning a distinct idea and plan for what your brand should represent and how you will achieve this? If so, how did the construction process of this strategy look like?
   - If no clear brand strategy, how do you work with the team brand?

   **Value the brand represents to its fans/others:**
   - Who do you believe is the most important target audience for your brand? Why? (Sponsors, spectators/fans, municipality, others?)
   - Have the fans had any input in the establishment of the identity of your team brand? In that case how?
   - What do you believe are the benefits of your brand? (What does fans get “in return” - what do you believe the fans think is the most important attributes of your brand?). How is these benefits promoted?

   **Probing questions:**

   **Attributes of the team:**
   - Have you as managers established any core values you want the team and organization to represent? Or keywords (ambition, solidarity, fighting spirit etc.)?
   - If yes, what did this process look like?
   - Who took part of this process (managers, staff, players, fans etc.)?
   - What have you done to make these values visible throughout the organization?
   - How do you promote your team in terms of goals/objective? (underdog, fighting for survival, top team – aim to move up the league system?)

   **Value the brand represents to its fans/others:**
   - Why do you believe it is important/not important to have a clear brand identity?
   - Is it important for the fans?
   - Do you know if the values of the brand are understood and accepted by the fans?
   - How do you know how fans perceive the team and the organizations?
   - Have you done any type of surveys to investigate fans perceptions?
Appendix

Brand Positioning – questions to discuss: (R.Q.1)

Open questions:
- Selection of market segments & differentiation of the brand in the market
  - By positioning your team we think of who you believe is your main competitors, what you have done in order to distinguish yourself from them, who is your target customers, how have you tried to reach them? With these factors in mind, what comes to mind when you think about positioning of your team brand in the market?
  - Who do you consider to be your main competitors? Why? (Sports teams – hockey teams or other sports teams, other leisure activities – cinema, other sports activities, bowling, TV, video games, restaurants, festivals, etc., anything people could do on their spare time instead of ice hockey).
  - Do you try to differentiate yourself in any way towards these competitors? In that case, how?

Probing questions:
Selection of market segments
- Do you have a target market in terms of customers you specifically try to reach with your marketing efforts? In that case how and why?
- Have you done any type of market research to identify what your typical fan(s) look like?

Differentiation of the brand in the market
- How do you differentiate yourself from competitors? (marketing, game experience, special offers, ticket prices, etc.)
- Are the marketing medias (internet, newspapers, magazines etc.) and the type of messages you use diversified towards different consumers or is it general towards “all” potential customers?
- Considering your fan base, do you perceive them with similar characteristics or is it a diversified group?

2. Challenges in establishing a team brand: (R.Q.2)

Open questions:
- Working in an ice hockey association like your own, what do you perceive to be the biggest challenges in general in order to build a successful team (e.g. financial issues, competitors, consumers lack of interest for ice hockey, lack of interest from sponsors, consistent level of quality, the performance of the team, commitment/loyalty from fans etc.)?
- What do you consider to be the biggest challenge(s) in building your brand? Why?

Probing questions:
Heterogeneous customer groups:
- How many different customer groups do you have? E.g. Fans (men, women, children), sponsors, media, municipality and what are the challenges to satisfy all these groups’ different needs and expectations?

Team performance:
- What is the biggest challenge in order for the team to perform well?
- Do you regard team performance as important in building and strengthening your brand?
Fan commitment/loyalty:
- What do you believe is the biggest challenge to enlarge your fan base and create a strong fan commitment to the team and club? Do you work on specific efforts in to strengthen the fan commitment?
- Does your attendance numbers vary a lot when your team is performing poorly?
- If we look at players, how many players do you usually trade/switch from one season to another?
- Do you have any local players on the team and to what extent is this important/not important to the organization? Why/why not?

Service quality & service characteristics:
- Considering the quality of your services (parking, transportation, cafeteria, competitions, VIP service etc.) what do you believe is the biggest challenge in order to have high service quality?
- Have employees/volunteers received any training?
- Have you experienced any problems with dissatisfied fans?

Word of mouth and publicity:
- Have you experienced any problems with bad publicity?
- Have you experienced any negative rumors or talk about your organization in the community?

Finances/management:
- What is your organizations turnover?
- Is your association profitable?
- What are the biggest financial challenges in managing your organization?
- What are the biggest financial challenges in establishing and strengthening your team brand?
- What is your and other managers full time jobs/educational background?

3. Factors a sports team (can) exploit in order to become a brand and reinforce its brand image. (R.Q.3)
Open questions:
- What do you perceive to be the most important factors you can exploit to build or strengthen your brand (the game experience, facilities – VIP room, cafeteria, fan shop etc., merchandise, fan page/online community, advertising, team compilation, cooperation with companies/other sport teams)?
- What are the specific measures you have taken in order to build and strengthen your brand?
- How can you as an organization create a positive brand image in the eyes of the fans regardless of how the team performs?
- Are the arena designed with particular thought on the total experience of fans? How?
- If you consider the game experience, disregarding the game itself, what are you as an organization providing to enhance the experience for the fans before, during and after the game?

Probing questions:
Fans:
- In terms of things you can control to build your brand, how does a regular game experience look like for the fans?
- What are the key features of the arena for the fans? (anything for the children, handicapped facilities, cafeteria, fan shop, public transportation)?
Appendix

- Do you have certain happenings or rituals that are repeated before, during or after each game? What? How?
- Do you have a web page? Is there a fan community where fans can interact, chat and discuss?
- Are you active on social media?

**Sponsors:**
- Do you have any type of catering or cafeteria service during the games?
- Do you have any kind of VIP rooms or service? What does this services consist of?
- Do you have any particular efforts performed for sponsors during the season? During games? Other?

**Merchandise:**
- Are team merchandise (caps, hats, jerseys, etc.) a part of your brand strategy? How?
- How are team merchandise sold? Where? Outside the arena?
- How do you sell your team merchandise? Do you have a fan-shop or online store?
- In terms of staff, have they received any special training? Do they have particular tasks to perform each game?

**Advertising/promotion:**
- How do you regularly advertise and promote your brand? (Internet, newspaper, radio, local television etc.)
- Do you have any regular promotional campaigns? What does these consist of?

**Other factors:**
- When you are trying to find new players, are you looking for these players to have certain characteristics/fit with your brand identity? Do you have one or two star players? Local players?
- Are the players on the team involved in any brand building activities besides from playing the games? (Involvement in the community, meetings with fans, autograph/picture sessions etc.)
- Does the association own its own arena? Are you free to make any changes you would like inside or outside of the arena?
- Do you own, and in that case, are free to display your logo anywhere you would like within the arena?
- Do you have a system for handling complaints?
- How are tickets sold?
- What kind of specific measures do you do in order to maintain and increase attendance numbers in general? Does these efforts change or do you have specific measures during loosing streaks?
- Have you done any research to find out why people are coming or not coming to your games?
- Bad publicity - How were these matters dealt with, or how would they be dealt with if they occur?

Is there anything you would like to add that you feel not have been discussed regarding branding in your organization?
## Appendix 4: Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>R.Q. 1: Identity</th>
<th>R.Q. 2: Positioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Halmstad</strong></td>
<td><em>Key attributes</em>: Be Professional, youth development</td>
<td><em>Positioning</em>, mapping competitors, defining their <strong>target market</strong> and how to differentiate themselves are steps planned for but not yet fulfilled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>How</em>: In starting phase of brand development. lack of identity &amp; clear core values.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vita Hästen</strong></td>
<td><em>Key attributes</em>: Goals part of identity. (Towards Allsvenskan). Be professional, never give up. Highlights the youth division.</td>
<td><em>Competition</em>: Sports teams and other leisure activates. <em>Differentiation</em>: Use goals as differentiation point, operate during the winter season.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>How</em>: Created by management.</td>
<td><em>Target group</em>: 25-65 years - males, want to attract women from the region of Norrköping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>How</em>: Created by management.</td>
<td><em>Target group</em>: Region of Vimmerby, work to attract visitors outside Vimmerby.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nyköping</strong></td>
<td><em>Key attribute</em>: Power for life, willingness to win, together and respect.</td>
<td><em>Competitor</em>: All other leisure activities. <em>Differentiation</em>: Focus on the game as an “event” &amp; “experience”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>How</em>: Is created together with fans. Highlights youth division. Surveys and workshops was used.</td>
<td><em>Target group</em>: Whole region of Nyköping. Target different audiences for different games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mariestad</strong></td>
<td><em>Key attribute</em>: No established identity. Fans have misconceptions of who we are: “Redneck Hockey”.</td>
<td><em>Competitor</em>: No direct competitor. <em>Differentiation</em>: Due to lack of competition there is no felt need for differentiation strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>How</em>: No plan for identity, lack of customer interaction.</td>
<td><em>Target group</em>: Entire region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>How</em>: No keyword nor identity. Want to be associated with youth development. Management lack will to change.</td>
<td><em>Target group</em>: No clear target group due to competition within the region.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Mjölby**

*Key attribute:* Quality, Development, Joy, together and Commitment.

*How:* Clear goal of how they want to be perceived but there is no communication with fans and knowledge how they are perceived.

*Competition:* TV, other sports association.

*Differentiation:* Fronting that association is for everyone.

*Target group:* Mjölby region, focus on the families with small children. Municipality is considered important.

**R.Q. 3: Challenges**


**R.Q. 4: Brand strategy**

- Focusing on creating an event, not just “a game”. Planned not implemented. Merchandising online/offline. Advertising: Homepage/social media, player’s visibility in community. Arena: modern VIP room.

---

**Halmstad**

*Team performance – reach goal of Allsvenskan. Too good for the regular season? High customer expectations. Maintain/increase spectator numbers despite of winning record. Volunteer workers → achieve high service quality. Historically have financial difficulties.***

**R.Q. 3: Challenges**

- Get people with experience & competence in management.

**R.Q. 4: Brand strategy**

- Create a game experience, “from parking to they leave the arena”. Increase attendance numbers: Ticket price (e.g. 1 kr game). Active in advertising: regular advertising + social media & PR stunts. Interact, work close with sponsors (highest turnover 12-14 mill.). Professional organization but some internal turbulence.

---

**Vita Hästen**

*Team performance, rebuild and create healthy financial state (to improve outdated facilities) develop youth program. Regain confidence from sponsors & audience. Hard to involve volunteer workers and attract sponsors.*

**R.Q. 3: Challenges**


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**Vimmerby**

*Team performance, rebuild and create healthy financial state (to improve outdated facilities) develop youth program. Regain confidence from sponsors & audience. Hard to involve volunteer workers and attract sponsors.*

**R.Q. 3: Challenges**

- Team performance, rebuild and create healthy financial state (to improve outdated facilities) develop youth program. Regain confidence from sponsors & audience. Hard to involve volunteer workers and attract sponsors.

---

**Nyköping**

*Financial problems, have to re-gain trust from sponsors/audience. Increase attendance numbers. Team performance. Improve youth development and lo-

**R.Q. 3: Challenges**

- Financial problems, have to re-gain trust from sponsors/audience. Increase attendance numbers. Team performance. Improve youth development and lo-

---

**R.Q. 4: Brand strategy**

- Create game experience → well on their way. Active in merchandise sales. Advertising: newspaper (good media coverage) homepage (ads, spon-
### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Challenges and Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mariestad</strong></td>
<td>Financial problems, hard to increase amount of visitors and hard to involve ideal workers and increase service quality. Improve fans associations. Increase fan commitment, how? Hard to attract sponsors and satisfy heterogeneous customer groups. Outdated facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kungälv</strong></td>
<td>Struggle to gain sponsors and increase financial status. Severe problems to increase amount of visitors and very hard to involve ideal workers. Frölunda Hockey (Elitserien team) – have large market share. Municipality owns arena – unwilling to help. Lack interaction with fans (e.g. social media). Lack management competence within e.g. marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mjölby</strong></td>
<td>Hard to improve financial support, low turnover. Sponsorship feels like “begging” – no relationship with sponsors. Hard to increase amount of visitors and involve ideal workers is big problem. Outdated facilities, cold arena.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Increase customer expectations.

Sponsors, live streaming) and social media. Promote high goals. Sponsors: very good VIP service. Merchandising: good assortment online/offline store. Municipality helpful & positive.

Connection between fans and players (fans corner), homepage, social media, radio & newspaper for advertising. Some merchandise sales. Some events during games and other. Plans to improve facilities.

Attract spectators: 3 kr game, nothing more. No “game experience”, focus on playing good hockey (though finished last place two years in a row). New homepage. Little merchandise sold. No connection between players and fans. Little cooperation with sponsors. Young, local players.

Increase spec. numbers: 1 kr game is used. No “game experience”. Limited activity on social media. No merchandise sales. Advertising: newspaper, homepage, Facebook, posters, visible in the community (players/jerseys), cooperation with Linköping (Elitserien), fan base reduced. Interact with a group of loyal fans.
### Appendix 5: Team information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Turnover</th>
<th>Established</th>
<th>Webpage</th>
<th>Spectator number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halmstad</td>
<td>3 million</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td><a href="http://www5.idrottonline.se/HalmstadHF-Ishockey/">http://www5.idrottonline.se/HalmstadHF-Ishockey/</a></td>
<td>300-400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vimmerby</td>
<td>4.3 – 4.5 million</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vimmerbyhockey.se/">http://www.vimmerbyhockey.se/</a></td>
<td>600-700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyköping</td>
<td>8.5 million</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nykopingshockey.se/">http://www.nykopingshockey.se/</a></td>
<td>1200-1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariestad</td>
<td>6-7 million</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mariestadbois.se/">http://www.mariestadbois.se/</a></td>
<td>800-900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kungälv</td>
<td>3.5 million</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kungalvhockey.se/web/">http://www.kungalvhockey.se/web/</a></td>
<td>300-350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mjölby</td>
<td>3.5 million</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mjolbyhockey.com/">http://www.mjolbyhockey.com/</a></td>
<td>300-400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix 6
RQ1: How does lower level sport teams create and manage their brand identity?

- Attributes of the team - Management Perception
- Value the team represents to its fans - Fans perception
- Core Values – Keywords

Brand Identity  Brand Awareness

Interaction with fans is missing. Only one team had involved fans in the process of developing an identity.

Q2: How does lower level sport teams work to position their brand in the market?

- Differentiation
- Segmentation/Targeting
- Competitors

Brand Positioning
Richelieu (2003)

Brand Awareness

Some positioning efforts are made, however lack holistic picture of positioning.

- Service quality
  (Customer expectations, Employees, Interaction)

  Schilhanec (2008)
  Grönroos (2007)

Customer expectations were considered biggest challenge. Still lack communication.

- Volunteer Workers

Increasing challenge to find volunteers. Teams are dependent on the.

- Finances/Management
  (Sponsors)

  Richelieu (2003)
  Schilhanec (2008)

One of the biggest challenges. All have financial struggles. Impacts ability to build/strengthen brand.

RQ3: What are the main challenges encountered in the establishment of a team as a brand?

- Heterogeneous customer groups
  (Customer expectations)

  Grönroos (2007)
  Schilhanec (2008)

Fans, sponsors, media and municipality were considered different groups. Municipality have effect, owning the arena

- Word of Mouth/Publicity


Not considered by teams. WOM may have large impact should be considered.

- Onfield performance

  Couvelaere & Richelieu (2005), Richelieu (2003), Shilhanec (2008)

Winning considered to impact the ability to have a strong brand. Winning too much had neg. Impact on attendance.
### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ4: What are the main factors a sports team exploit in order to become and strenghten their brand?</th>
<th>Brand Strategy</th>
<th>Brand Loyalty</th>
<th>Brand Association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Game experience</td>
<td>Considered crucial to satisfy customer expectations. However, a lot was planned not implemented.</td>
<td>• Player Management</td>
<td>Local players are of importance for brands. Star players can increase attention further.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technological advances</td>
<td>Regular advertising, ticket sales and promotion were well developed. Most have great potential for revenues in merchandising as well as possibilities to improve fan interaction through e.g. social media.</td>
<td>• Marketing actions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richelieu (2003)</td>
<td>• (Merchandise, Tickets, Arena, Advertising, social media, Teams involvement in the community)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Characteristic of, or elements lower level team’s have implemented.**
- **Elements lacking or in need of improvement.**