

Mass Participation Events Survey Project Description

Background

Since the late 1960s, running has been transformed from an activity which was the sole preserve of competitive athletes to a leisure pursuit open to all. After many decades of athletics having been dominated by a small number of top level competitors, increasingly more runners began to sign up for marathons during the 1970s.

As far as we know, this trend continued in the 1980s, but was followed by a period of stagnation during the early 1990s. The sales of running shoes continued unabated, particularly among young people, but whether they actually went running in them is another question altogether. In the second half of the 1990s, the running market revived and showed clear signs of a 'second wave of running' after the millennium turn. All over the world, city marathons and other running events reported a record number of participants. In Europe too, more and more runners could be found on the streets, in the woods, and in the parks: fat and thin, slow and fast, in casual sportswear or specially designed running outfits, and increasingly more often than not female.

Most European Athletics Member Federations must have followed this running boom with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they must have been greatly pleased with the expansion of running as a sport. Yet, on the other hand, they have witnessed a strong decline in their market share. After all, only a limited number of those involved in running are actually affiliated to an athletic club.

In Germany for example, about 13 million people practice running as a leisure sport, and about 4.3 million describe themselves as ambitious runners, while the members of the Deutsche Leichtathletik-Verband number around 900,000. The same goes for the Netherlands, where 3.9 million people practice running, of which 1.3 million regard this as their main sport, whereas the Koninklijke Nederlandse Atletiek Unie counts approximately 120,000 members.

This limited and diminishing market share might not be surprising in the light of the needs of the new groups of runners and the expansion, commercialisation and professionalisation of the running industry. For most runners, fitness and health are more important reasons for participating in running than social contacts and performance. Moreover, present-day runners can find tailor-made services on the Internet and from commercial organizations. These services include training schedules, clothing and nutritional advice, injury prevention and treatment, and running events, which used to be the monopoly of athletics clubs in the past.

However, these trends also raise important questions about how the running market is changing, which management and marketing strategies have been developed by European Athletics Member Federations to respond to these market changes, what successes they have had, and what they can learn from each other in that respect.

Aims and objectives

Against this background, the objectives of this research project are to gain more insight into:

- the information that European Athletics member federations have on the size and segmentation of the running market in their country and their market share;
- the member federations' best guess of the number of sanctioned and non-sanctioned running competitions/events and number of runners participating in at least one event per year;
- the way(s) in which each member federation has responded to trends in the running market;
- the different structures that member federations have created – and the most successful and promising management and marketing strategies they have developed – to respond to trends in the running market in their country;
- the information gap on these topics.

The research project aims to assist the European Athletics member federations in developing well-considered and effective strategies to further expand the running market and increase their market shares by learning from and cooperating with other member federations and the running industry.

Methodology

To obtain the information needed, the following methods will be used:

- desk research on (trends in) the running market in Europe;
- a webbased survey of all European Athletics member federations (N=50);
- in-depth telephone interviews with representatives of member federations (N=10), selected on the basis of the survey results with respect to running trends and management and marketing strategies.

Project organisation

The project will be led and coordinated by prof. dr. Maarten van Bottenburg, director of Van Bottenburg – Research & Consultancy, and professor of sports processes and sports policy at the Utrecht School of Governance of Utrecht University. The web based survey and interviews will be carried out in close collaboration with the W.J.H. Mulier Institute, a Dutch centre for research on sports in society, of which Van Bottenburg was one the founders.

Project results

Research results will be presented in a report to European Athletics, a key note address at the Mass Participation Events Conference in Frankfurt (7-8 December 2009), and a summary article on the European Athletics website.

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