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# The Impact of Ethnic Diversity on the Ladies Professional Golf Association: A Case Study of Anheuser-Busch and its Sponsorship Objectives and Strategies

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## Abstract

Between January 2001 and November 2009, players of Asian descent won nearly 30% of the 287 LPGA-sanctioned tournaments held during the period. By contrast, only 15 years ago (in 1995), an Asian player won only one of the 37 LPGA tournaments held that year (Ladies Professional Golf Association [LPGA], 2009). Clearly, a new generation of golfers has significantly increased the ethnic diversity of the LPGA and its tournament winners. This study investigated whether and how ethnic diversity in the LPGA has influenced the objectives and strategies of LPGA sponsorship decisions for the Anheuser-Busch Company (A-B). This research included 11 semi-structured interviews and two observations at A-B events as a participant. Multiple sources of evidence were collected and analyzed through categorical or “thematic” analysis: interview transcripts, field notes, A-B business documents, and physical artifacts. “Selling more beer,” “opportunity,” and “the best competition available” emerged as key themes in my findings. The increasing ethnic diversity of the LPGA through the ascendance of Asian players clearly impacted A-B and its sponsorship objectives and strategies. Contrary to what some have feared about language or cultural barriers as detriments to LPGA sponsorship, A-B expertly utilized the LPGA’s growing diversity for its own competitive advantage through market-driven and awareness-driven goals in its sponsorship decisions.

## Background

This is probably going to get me in trouble, but the Asians are killing our tour. Absolutely killing it. Their lack of emotion, their refusal to speak English when they can speak English. They rarely speak. We have two-day Pro-Ams where people are paying a lot of money to play with us, and they say hello and goodbye. Our tour is predominantly international and the majority of them are Asian. They’ve taken it over. (Jan Stephenson, LPGA Tour winner, as cited in Kessler, 2003, p. 72)

Hall-of-Fame LPGA pro Jan Stephenson made the above statement almost six years ago. At the time, Stephenson’s comments made headlines in the golfing world for what was then viewed as racially insensitive remarks, and she was criticized by then-LPGA commissioner Ty Votaw. She was immediately ostracized in the

ladies’ golf scene (Van Sickle, 2008). Then, in fall 2008, the LPGA sent shock waves through the golfing industry by announcing an “English-only” policy—a widely criticized and extremely short-lived rule that mandated that foreign players learn functional English within two years or their Tour Card would be suspended. The rationale for such a dramatic measure was that LPGA sponsors were growing unhappy with the lack of interaction and dialogue with some international players during Pro-Am tournaments and that both the LPGA and its sponsors were threatened by a corresponding decreased value of sponsorship. Are the explosion of Asian winners of LPGA tournaments and their lack of English skills, combined with cultural barriers, finally testing the patience of key sponsors? Did the LPGA’s new language policy validate Ms. Stephenson’s controversial comments from six years ago?

Thoroughly answering these questions might seem to require visiting and studying all past and present LPGA sponsors, but directly querying sponsors would likely prove ineffective. The sensitive and controversy-prone act of commenting on players' linguistic and cultural aptitudes, as opposed to their playing skills, would likely preclude getting genuine answers. Instead, this study opted to more deeply probe LPGA sponsor A-B as an exemplar to examine how the company views and copes with what may seem like a detrimental by-product of the globalization of women's professional golf.

## Literature Review

### *The Growth and Potential of Ethnic Consumers in the United States*

The importance of ethnicity in today's marketing practices is amplified by the speed with which ethnic minority communities and markets have been expanding. According to the United States Census Bureau's middle series on the national population, the combined racial and ethnic minority population will grow from 79 million in 2000 to 178 million in 2045, and the minority share of the total U.S. population is projected to increase from 29% to 46% during these 45 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). In terms of purchasing power (disposable personal income), minority purchasing power may reach \$4.3 trillion or as much as \$6.1 trillion if income disparity is eliminated by 2045. Thus, the share of minority purchasing in 2045 is expected to range between 32% and 46% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000).

Among these impressive numbers, narrowing the focus to a particular group of ethnic minorities in the U.S. presents more intriguing figures. Census 2000 reveals that Asian-Americans are now the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, driven principally by immigration, which has skyrocketed in the last 30 years (Gitlin, 2002). Furthermore, Asian-Americans far surpass all other ethnic groups on socio-economic indicators. For example, Asians command the highest average household income of any group in the United States, at \$55,521, and they have the highest level of education of any group (Gitlin). Other qualities that make the Asian-American market attractive to companies are that (a) Asians tend to make major purchases, (b) Asians tend to be brand loyal, and (c) Asians tend to be willing to pay for quality (Hulin-Salkin, 1987). Based on their population and economic growth rates, purchasing power, and other attributes of both minority groups in the United States overall and particular ethnic groups, the importance of race and ethnicity, particularly in the business context, cannot be over-emphasized.

## Objective-Based Sponsorship Evaluation

Extensive published literature emphasizes the importance of setting clear objectives prior to acquiring a sponsorship agreement (Stotlar, 2005). Market-driven objectives such as increased market share, new client acquisition, new product awareness, and on-site sales (Copeland, Frisby, & McCarville, 1996; Irwin & Sutton, 1994; Kuzma, Shanklin, & McCally, 1993) are key criteria that corporate sponsors carefully review before partnering with a sporting entity. Furthermore, awareness objectives, image objectives, and employee morale objectives also constitute critical rationale for pursuing sports sponsorships (Stotlar, 2005).

For this case study, it was thus important to identify and review essential sponsorship objectives of A-B first to determine whether those objectives have evolved in the wake of the influx of Asian players to the LPGA Tour. Today, financial transactions in sports sponsorship account for nearly \$15 billion (Shank, 2009). Regardless which ethnic group predominates on the Tour or which ethnic group is the fastest growing, the primary focus of any sponsorship activity remains to evaluate and deliver results with respect to a set of objectives.

## Korean Domination in the LPGA

In 2006 and again in 2009, 11 tour winners on the LPGA were Korean players. South Korea has been by far the single most dominant international delegation on the Tour in the last 15 years. The LPGA witnessed 15 different South Korean Tour winners in the past four years (LPGA, 2009). The South Korean pipeline in women's golf is strong—more than 30 South Koreans competed on the Futures Tour, the LPGA's developmental tour (Crouse, 2008). No single nation besides the United States has produced more LPGA Tour winners and has dominated in any league as South Korea has in the LPGA. By accounting for 90% of the "Asian wins" on the LPGA in the last 15 years, South Koreans have become the "default representatives" of Asian golf. With such a remarkable rise to golfing prominence by the Asians, which has helped to define the LPGA as a premier organization for global competition, comes an array of unforeseen and challenging issues for the governing body.

## New Challenges for LPGA Constituencies

Despite the contribution of Asian players in globalizing the Tour, the LPGA faces issues that were non-existent 15 years ago. In fall 2008, the LPGA made an unsuccessful attempt to adopt an "English-only" policy. Sponsors were allegedly growing discontented at the inability of Asian players to interact in English during

Pro-Am rounds. To understand the magnitude of this issue, one needs to look no further than the \$4,000–\$12,000 entry fee that each participant pays for what the golfing industry advertises as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. These individual and corporate Pro-Am fees are the single largest source of revenue for an LPGA tournament (Brennan, 2008). If the participants do not feel that they have received adequate returns on these expensive investments, retaining those revenues in subsequent years would become more difficult. Between 2008 and 2009, the LPGA lost more than 16 title sponsors and is now faced with only 14 guaranteed title sponsors for 2010 (Cutler, 2009). Of course, the majority of these terminations can be attributed to the global economic recession of 2008. But, clearly the LPGA was not able to generate competitive return-on-investment in the judgment of its title sponsors.

The problem of Asian players not being able to interact well on the Tour may go beyond a language issue to be also a cultural issue. For example, teen-aged girls in South Korea are seldom raised to mingle and socialize with elderly strangers for money (Crouse, 2008). Coming from a culture in which self-promotion and outward expression of emotion are not valued, it would take an extensive and time-consuming cultural makeover for these South Korean women to more completely satisfy the LPGA and its sponsors with their interpersonal interactions on the tour.

Most importantly, the challenge lies ahead for the LPGA sponsors themselves. As previously stated, LPGA tournaments attract Pro-Am revenues from both individuals and corporations. As title sponsors of the tournament, a pre-determined number of free Pro-Am slots are allocated and utilized as a leading platform for VIP customer entertainment and new business prospecting for sponsoring corporations. Sponsors have become dismayed as VIP guests at these hospitality events have become increasingly dissatisfied with their Pro-Am experiences due to lack of English interaction with Asian players. Sponsors and the LPGA must work together to address the new challenges that accompany the unprecedented level of ethnic diversity on the LPGA. But, the LPGA's controversial "English-only" policy was not a viable solution.

## Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a major LPGA sponsor like Anheuser-Busch responds to and takes advantage of this new situation—the rapidly changing ethnic landscape of the LPGA—in meeting its corporate sponsorship goals and strategies. The research question guiding this case study was how does the Asian ascendance in the LPGA influence the marketing objectives and strategies of Anheuser-Busch's

LPGA sponsorship? Considering the rapid growth in the population of ethnic consumers in the United States, one can reasonably predict that ethnic groups or communities will soon play a major part in how sport sponsorships are pursued and implemented in the near future, if they have not already have done so. Little research has been done regarding ethnicity in sport sponsorship despite the urgency of the issue and the potential importance of this growing generation of consumers.

## Methods

The unit of analysis for this study was the Anheuser-Busch Company (A-B), around which the case for the study was formed. Within this case, a number of sub-categories, such as A-B brand teams, functional departments, regional offices, retail partners, and LPGA liaisons, are included in the analysis. This type of case-study design is called an embedded case-study design (Yin, 2003). The study included 11 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and two events in which the researcher observed as a participant—the LPGA Asian Players Reception presented by A-B and the Grace Park Golf Clinic for the partners of A-B. Multiple sources of evidence, including interview transcripts, field notes, A-B documents, and other physical artifacts, were collected and analyzed. To ensure the reliability of this study, the investigator followed Denzin's (1984) triangulation protocol by employing multiple methods and multiple sources of evidence. Other techniques, such as member checking, peer examination, typicality category, and multi-site designs, have further bolstered the validity and reliability of the study. Collected data were organized around certain topics, key themes, or central questions for interpretation and were analyzed via categorical aggregation technique (Cassell & Symon, 2004).

## Findings

### *Anheuser-Busch Asian Marketing and Golf*

A-B has a dedicated senior executive who serves the marketing and community relations needs of its Asian retailers and consumers and continuously devotes a sizable amount of resources to Asian marketing programs. Two of the company's most successful Asian marketing programs leveraged Michelob Ultra's golf sponsorships. Specifically, more than 16 Korean-American retailers participated in a Pro-Am event at the LPGA Michelob Ultra Open at Kingsmill and spent a memorable day playing a round of golf with Korean-American LPGA professionals. In addition, selected members of the Korean-American Grocers Association (KAGRO) and Korean-American liquor store owners

were invited to the Grace Park Golf Clinic in Pebble Beach, California, for a day of interaction with Michelob Ultra's PGA Ambassador. Dennis, the Asian Marketing Director for A-B, observed that a large percentage of liquor-store owners in the United States are Korean Americans. He also noted that the fact that the PGA has been producing a growing number of South Korean stars allows A-B to partner its biggest customers with Korean-American PGA players for unforgettable golf experiences.

The two golf events that the researcher was fortunate enough to observe as a participant provided unique insights into what actually takes place at these invitation-only corporate hospitality programs. In the case of the Monday Pro-Am tournament at the Michelob Ultra Open at Kingsmill, VA, participants were absolutely thrilled to be able to play on the same course that the professionals would play on later in the week. At the Grace Park Golf Clinic, grown men seemed like teenage autograph seekers as the superstar of the PGA interacted with them on and off the course. The most explicit common features of the two events were (a) every invitee at each event was relevant to A-B's business growth or potential, and (b) A-B employees worked very hard to make invitees feel connected to A-B and loyal to the company's brand.

## **Sell More Beer!**

Interviewed employees and representatives of A-B expressed a simple and clear objective for their PGA sponsorship—to sell more beer. Dianne, an PGA sponsorship manager at A-B, described her sponsorship objectives in the following manner:

If there's an (athlete) appearance at the Albertson's Boise Open, I work with our Albertson's gentleman, our sales rep, to set up an appearance where now I have this, an Ambassador, Grace Park, that can make an appearance during your tournament that you're sponsoring. So they manage the Albertson's relationship. You know, we don't . . . it's church and state, we (sports marketing and sales) separate the two here. But we all, you know, work together. At the end of the day, we all try to sell beer. (Dianne)

Dennis echoed the same sentiment, specifically by leveraging South Korean success on the tour:

Oh, absolutely. The Asian success in the PGA is a change in accessibility and it also creates more marketing opportunities, and change is good. 'Cause the bottom line at the end of the day is selling more beer. (Dennis)

If this is the case, what strategies does A-B deploy to achieve this unequivocal business objective? Dennis shared the following:

It's a once-in-a-lifetime for a lot of these guys. I mean, if you can only imagine the fact that they are not only able to get up that close, but actually talk with them [Korean PGA players] and get autographs and pictures. There are, there have been stories of some Korean retailers that have created shrines in their home of every possible autographed item, plus photographs, in their living room. It's a source of pride, nationally especially. And the key point is we are offering them something our competitors cannot. We are, in fact, we're talking about share of mind and share of heart that they'll always associate this positive experience with Anheuser-Busch and the brands that we, we are a part of. (Dennis)

Lee, a Korean VIP customer of A-B who owns three large Japanese restaurants in Arizona, explained the effectiveness of A-B hospitality programs for A-B brands and how they build loyalty toward A-B:

Look at the bar. It's all A-B stuff—the neon signs and everything. When other companies show up here and try to hang stuff on the bar, we say "No." Because we do get special treatment from A-B, we tend to sell more A-B products. I think loyalty works the same way for Americans, too. In my opinion, the truth in Asia is also the truth in the Western culture, right? (Lee)

Another important way of leveraging PGA sponsorship to sell more beer was the use of point-of-sales (POS) materials. Peter, the sales representative in San Francisco, emphasized the value of effective POS in increasing shelf space at retail. Dianne elaborated on the specific types of POS materials that A-B utilizes to influence the wholesale and retail environment, and the process required to introduce POS contents:

[With Grace Park], we have our point-of-sale, we've done posters, we've done autographed cards, we've done price cards, we've done quite a bit of an array of point-of-sale with Grace's face on it. We've done national print ads. . . . We say, we print them, send them out to all the wholesalers and then we create templates on ABmarketing.com for the wholesaler to print off a template and he can print it with. It can be any market, or any price, or, you know, supporting any type of things like that, so we do golf outings, we do meet and greets with retailers at our events, at any event that we sponsor, we've done several of those. We do four of those per year, per contract. (Dianne)

## **Opportunity**

Peter noted that his San Francisco sales region comprises 40% Asian business. Granted, San Francisco is an extraordinary cultural melting pot, but the business

implications of Asians for A-B are commensurate with those of other corporations in America. Dennis, the Asian Marketing Director at A-B, summed up the impact of Asian LPGA players on his business:

I think opportunity is probably a better, better word. As the number of Asian and Asian-American athletes, in sports for example, increase in terms of number and in visibility, it has provided the company with broader opportunities to marshal its core properties such as its sponsorships in LPGA, soccer, basketball, to reach out to these new areas that would also have more specific relevance to the Asian consumer. For example, the Korean (A-B) retailers in the United States represent roughly 15 million cases, which translates into at least \$150 million worth of business to the company. My goal for next year is to increase the understanding of the importance of Asian consumers and Asian retailers as they contribute to the bottom line of the growth of this company. Take a look at Mercedes-Benz, Rolex. I mean, you open up the door and you look at who's advertising to Asians. These are folks that recognize that Asians have a significant impact on their bottom-line, they damn well better market to them. As far as our company? It's starting to get there. Do they have a way to go? Absolutely. Will international events and Asian LPGA golfers play a part in it? Absolutely. Asian Olympics, World Cup, Seoul Olympics. It's forcing a realization that if you're really a global company, you really have to have a global mentality. (Dennis)

Interestingly, Dianne, who was responsible for signing Grace Park to represent A-B, did not see at the time the opportunity to utilize Grace in Asian markets. She said that the ethnicity issue was an added value to the company as it turned out, and that ethnicity was not one of the criteria while reviewing the athlete endorsers as long as they could communicate in English. For Dianne, the priority was to find an athlete, White or Asian, who had the most approachability and celebrity status because of A-B's heavy emphasis on customer entertainment. Still, she repeatedly admitted,

[The] cross-over appeal of someone like Grace Park (Asian) or Sergio Garcia (Spaniard) always gives the company a little more choice of going after targeted consumers if we want to. (Dianne)

### **The Best Competition Possible**

To solicit views from my participants on the rise of Asian LPGA players, the researcher read them the controversial quote from Jan Stephenson mentioned in the opening of this case study. Every one of them disagreed with what Jan Stephenson had to say about

Asians "killing the LPGA." Two of the European-American participants, Brad and Dianne, both of whom work on the A-B sports marketing team, explained that the emergence of top-notch Asian players has brought better competition to the Tour. Three of the Asian participants reacted as if they were visibly offended by Stephenson's comments. To illustrate the diverse perspectives, responses from four of the participants that contrast in style but are similar in essence are presented below.

1. Brad, Senior Director, International Sports Marketing (European-American male):

I totally disagree with it . . . from what I have seen, I think a number of the Asian players, particularly with their capabilities, have really brought the sport up to a much more competitive level, and have made it much more difficult for, you know, some of the, some of the players that may not be as talented to advance or get "Top Ten" on a consistent basis, so maybe there's a little bit of jealousy there. I have no idea whether the Asian players are doing interviews or what, I just have no knowledge of that. But, I certainly think they have been and have performed extremely well and have brought the game up to higher standard. (Brad)

2. Dianne, Senior Sports Marketing Manager (European-American female):

I think she's wrong. I mean, I know she's wrong because we've had . . . I've been to several of these receptions, we have Korean receptions at the Mic ULTRA Open and the response that I hear back from our wholesalers, both American and Asian . . . I mean, half the field, they're all, I mean, people who participate in the Pro-Am. Never heard one negative, and they (Asians) couldn't be more approachable. And I think that the LPGA needs to be and deserves to be the best women's professional golf league out there, wherever the players come from. You want the best competition. I mean any major league sport in America has the best athletes they possibly can. So I don't think you should limit any players. (Dianne)

3. Dennis, Asian Marketing Director (Asian male):

Absolutely racist! It's from a bitter woman who's at the end of her career. Who obviously was not as accomplished as a Nancy Lopez, or a Betsy King, or a Beth Daniel. It's unfortunate she said it . . . I mean the fact of the matter is, why isn't the same being said about Annika, she's Swedish? Alright she speaks English better than some of the Asian players. She still won the lion's share of the (LPGA) tournaments and nobody complained, and why? Because she's white. At least, Jan

Stevenson's not complaining 'cause she's white. You know. (Dennis)

4. Lee, A-B retailer in Arizona (Asian male):

That's like her spitting on her own face. If she's not good enough to compete with these Asian girls . . . This is not an international trade we are talking about here, where a quota system prevents unfair pricing policy by overseas competitors, but this is performance—the battle of competency. I too have thought about this issue and some people do say that American sponsors run away from the LPGA because of the Asian emergence. I don't think that would be the reason if they indeed shy away. Still, there's an inequality in wages and the type of works that women can pursue. Can women hit 300 yard drives? If they did, the purse would increase and maybe sponsorships may increase as well. Between the PGA and LPGA, which tour generates "better" or "more impressive" shots? It's a matter of "show"—which tour is more pleasing to watch for the fans? They're not spending pocket cash to sponsor these events. We're talking a few million dollars. If so, people may be more interested in investing in the "better" tour. It's not a matter of Asian players that are causing sponsors' lack of interest in the LPGA. It's spitting on one's own face. If they can't compete, they don't compete. Who told them not to compete? (Lee)

Mr. Cho, whose daughter is a Korean-American LPGA professional, had an interesting perspective on the emergence of Asian LPGA players and the future outlook for Asian players:

It takes about \$300,000 annually to cover the expenses of touring in the LPGA tournaments. Not all Korean girls will make it annually. There are some girls who sold their houses in Korea for a shot at making it on the Tour. It takes a lot of money to tour here. Not everyone will be able to afford it on long-term basis. Only top 15-20 money winners can break-even, so I think less and less girls [directly] from Korea will play in the LPGA in the future. (Mr. Cho)

At the conclusion of these interviews, the phrases that remained most vivid in memory were "the best competition," "the best skill level," and "the best field of athletes." At least to the participants of this study, the issue of ethnicity or ethnic background mattered little. As long as the LPGA produced the best competition from the best field of women golfers, this particular sponsor did not seem to care. In summary, the reaction on the issue of ethnic diversity in the LPGA was overwhelmingly favorable.

## Discussion

As an official sponsor of the LPGA, A-B presents an alternative perspective in leveraging the new ethnic composition of the LPGA. Based on the single-mindedness of its sponsorship objective of selling more beer, A-B has adopted strategic solutions to take advantage of the new reality: (1) the company put into place dedicated resources to pursue active marketing toward Korean-American communities in the United States, specifically with high-impact Korean-American wholesalers and retailers, (2) the company made a strategic shift to focus its LPGA hospitality events on high-volume Korean-American business partners, which has proven to be effective in loyalty-building and customer retention, (3) the company signed Grace Park, a South Korean frequent champion in the LPGA, as one of its Michelob Ultra Golf Ambassadors and tactically utilized her in its marketing communications platform with respect to its Asian customers, for example, in Point-of-Sales materials, guest appearances, golf clinics, Pro-Am rounds, and TV commercials. Most important, A-B swiftly identified the potential associated with the phenomenon of Asian prominence in the Tour and seized opportunities associated with this development.

The recent debate over the language proficiency, or lack thereof, of certain foreign players did not present an issue for A-B. In particular, the Michelob Ultra brand's association with the best female golfers in the world took higher priority. Many Asian stars on the LPGA were portraying images of winners, and that was all that mattered for A-B. While a Tour-wide mastery of the English language would certainly help A-B to expand its brand communication audience, A-B has opted to acknowledge personal and cultural discrepancies among the Asian golfers on the Tour and work with the new reality. In lieu of mandating the LPGA and foreign players to speak the sponsors' language, A-B decided to speak the players' language and found a perfect fit in its Asian communities throughout the United States.

Not every LPGA sponsor will have the luxury of having product offerings as broadly marketable as A-B's. Nevertheless, it is the proactive mindset of A-B to prepare its sponsorship team to maximize the new opportunity on the Tour provided by the athlete's changed racial and ethnic composition that deserves consideration. The globalization of the LPGA has accelerated and is unlikely to slow. Given this fact, a sponsor can choose to embrace the new opportunities or to avoid them. LPGA authorities, too, have responsibilities to cater to sponsors' needs with respect to the new diversity of its athletes; however, the ultimate responsibility

of fully leveraging LPGA sponsorship falls squarely on the shoulders of each sponsor; they can grow their businesses by custom-tailoring their sponsorship objectives, strategies, and tactics.

## Post-Submission Updates

During the editing and revision stages of this manuscript, A-B announced that it would terminate its sponsorship of the 2010 Michelob Ultra Open at Kingsmill, but it will continue to work with the LPGA. The public rationale given for the decision was the need to “create a footprint in more tournaments,” but pundits claim that the economic downturn and the merger of Anheuser-Busch with Belgium-based InBev led to the tournament’s demise (Kurz, 2009). Moreover, with the number of guaranteed LPGA tournaments in 2010 shrinking to about half of what it was just three years ago, two South Korean-born LPGA professionals have recently decided to return to South Korea to try to qualify for the Korean Tour in 2010 (Moon, 2009). It would be interesting to monitor their success in South Korea, as such a movement could result in a mass exodus of budget-conscious foreign players competing in downsized LPGA tournaments.

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