ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SPORT: HOW DIETRICH MATESCHITZ BUILT THE RED BULL BRAND IN A DAY

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INTRODUCTION

Bill Gates. Richard Branson. Phil Knight: some of the world’s most famous and recognisable entrepreneurs. Each has built their fortune on a foundation of risk, uncertainty and daring, taking advantage of opportunities presented to them (or indeed that they create themselves), where others fail to see potential. These individuals have become renowned for their business acumen and success, becoming ‘celebrities’ in their own right, and gaining almost ‘brand’ status of their own. Yet few would include the name Dietrich Mateschitz – the man behind one of the world’s most recognisable brands, Red Bull – on a list of the world’s top entrepreneurs. Much like Knight and Gates before him, Mateschitz capitalised on an opportunity, and now commands over 70% of the energy drink market, in over 100 countries around the world (Gschwandtner, 2004). As such, this case explores how Mateschitz, a former toothpaste salesman from Austria, built an international brand based on an innovative and controversial marketing strategy, and what role sport has played in giving the Red Bull brand its wings.

Understanding Mateschitz’s success, the entrepreneurship behind the man, and the growth of the Red Bull brand, should begin by first assessing what ‘entrepreneurship’ actually entails. The idea of entrepreneurial spirit can be traced back to the Roman Empire, yet the actual term ‘entrepreneur’ was first utilised by international banker Richard Cantillon, in 1755, defining it as “self-employment of any and every sort” (Long, 1983:48). Over time, others have contributed to the debate of what an entrepreneur is, with a particular economic focus. However, with little consensus of a definition achieved, Howarth et al (2005) suggested that many of the existing definitions of entrepreneurship are “insufficient” and need to be combined to fully reflect the complex nature of and influential factors on an entrepreneur. Bygrave & Minniti (2000) suggested that “entrepreneurs are people who show initiative, imagination, creativity and flexibility. They are willing to think conceptually and to see change as an opportunity”.

Equally, a number of ways in which individuals can pursue this entrepreneurial spirit have been suggested, including through: (1) new products or services, (2) new methods of production, (3) new markets, (4) new sources of supply, and (5) new forms of organisation, or through a combination of these (Schumpeter, 1974). Whilst there is no denying the importance and relevance of these ways of demonstrating entrepreneurial spirit, in this case study it can be argued that a sixth method has emerged by which an entrepreneur can exploit the opportunities presented – by utilising innovative marketing strategies, philosophies or techniques – and that it is the use of this new, sixth method that could be used to distinguish sports entrepreneurs from entrepreneurs in other industries.
RED BULL TAKES FLIGHT...

In 1982, whilst working for the toothpaste company Blendax, now part of Proctor & Gamble, businessman Dietrich Mateschitz stumbled across a Thai energy drink called Krateng Daeng. Excited by the product, and recognising a gap in the global marketplace for such a drink, Mateschitz licensed the formula for Krateng Daeng (directly translated as 'Red Water Buffalo') from TC Pharmaceuticals, a Blendax licensee. In 1984, following negotiations with TC Pharmaceuticals and Krateng Daeng’s creators, Red Bull GmbH was founded in Mateschitz’s native Austria, after the original beverage was diluted and carbonated (it was thought that the original drink was too sweet and thick for a global market). Thai partners, Chaleo and Chalerm Yoovidhya, from TC Pharmaceuticals, retained 49% ownership of the new company (Mateschitz also owns 49%; the other 2% is held in trust).

In 1987, three years after establishing the company, and following extensive product testing and market research, the newly formulated Red Bull was approved and launched in Austria. Five years were spent concentrating on establishing the product and building its brand identity in the Austrian market, and on developing marketing and expansion strategies for the company’s European growth. Red Bull was launched in Hungary and Slovenia in 1992, followed by Germany and Switzerland two years later. Mateschitz then targeted the lucrative North American market, first introducing the energy drink in California in 1997. By 2004, Red Bull had achieved worldwide distribution in an industry worth in excess of €2.5 billion. The decision to enter markets in this order was an early indication as to the nature of Mateschitz’s business development plan, and how he subsequently marketed the core product. There are a number of pertinent questions that could be asked here: why didn’t Red Bull launch straight into the lucrative but highly competitive North American market, which would potentially lead to greater rewards more quickly than some of the smaller markets chosen? Would this have led to a wider, more mainstream appeal of the brand? Did Mateschitz ‘want’ mainstream appeal or did he set out to establish a counter culture or ‘anti-brand’ ideology? Was the order of market entry a deliberate attempt to develop this ideology before the core product was widely available to consumers across its target markets?

Ultimately, the success of Mateschitz and of Red Bull to-date lies in the strategy behind its growth, and the slow build that guided the brand’s early years. Red Bull is marketed as a brand and as an ideology, not as an energy drink – its core product. It is how Mateschitz decided to market the brand, by building an ‘anti-brand’, or counter culture ideology, that distinguishes him from the likes of Branson or Gates, whose successes have been achieved largely through the mainstream. Mateschitz recognised the power of sport as an industry to access and engage with many of the target markets identified by the company, and defined the

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energy drink sector as an industry leader and pioneer. The sport industry, today worth an estimated $141 billion (Klayman, 2009), offers massive potential for revenue generation on a global scale for all parties involved; Red Bull, in building a brand based on extreme sports and fast living, have capitalised on this global marketplace. In analysing Mateschitz and the case of Red Bull, we set out here to identify the brand positioning and marketing strategies underlying Mateschitz’s entrepreneurial success, but also to highlight key constructs in the strategies employed which it is hoped provide some benchmarks to which prospective sport entrepreneurs can refer.

THE RED BULL BRAND

Red Bull as a sport entrepreneurship case study begins with the development of the Red Bull product and brand, and the underlying image and identity bred within the organization since its introduction. Built on foundations of perseverance, masculinity, identity, credibility and authenticity, the Red Bull brand has become a prime example of the potential that anti-brands have in today’s marketplace. Through intelligent marketing, and patient, strategic growth from local distribution to international market dominance, Red Bull has defined the energy drinks industry and succeeded in building a brand ubiquitous in popular culture and action sports, as well as making in-roads into traditional media and sports over time.

Faced with legal barriers and difficulties in launching the product internationally during its early years, Mateschitz and his team conducted extensive market research between 1984 and 1986 while awaiting product approval, testing over 200 packaging options prior to their Austrian launch in 1987, laying the foundation for the company’s brand identity (Keller, 2002). The logo concept for the new brand, two charging bulls, was taken from the existing Krateng Daeng product, as was its name, translated into English. As well as differentiating the brand from other canned beverages, such as Pepsi or Coca-Cola, the distinctive colours, the can’s shape and dimensions, and its general design served to emphasize the difference between Red Bull and other carbonated drinks. Red Bull also sought to stand out from the crowd by setting higher prices than competing brands, seeking to reinforce the product’s efficacy and status, and establishing the company as a premium brand in the eyes of consumers. In avoiding direct competition with industry-leaders in carbonated and caffeinated drinks, Mateschitz succeeded in positioning the new product as something different, something unique, with which to present consumers.

More importantly, however, was the innovative, and yet simplified, marketing undertaken by the brand in its development and expansion through markets across Europe. Mateschitz is quoted as saying “We don’t
bring the product to the people. We bring the people to the product” (Economist, 2002:62), highlighting the fundamental principles of marketing utilized by Red Bull in the development of the brand’s ethos and mystique. Rather than approaching marketing from a universal, top-down approach as typified by larger, broader reaching companies like the big two soft drinks marques, Red Bull employed decentralized sales and marketing teams, building the Red Bull brand from the ground-up. Regional sales and marketing representatives established awareness amongst cultural icons, focusing on local and influential DJs, clubbers, ravers, and social trendsetters, growing the brand’s identity through word of mouth. Spurred on by the influence and added awareness provided by early adopters and the social elite, combined with its growing popularity as a mixer drink for vodka, Red Bull succeeded in entering new markets on the back of a known and authentic presence amongst consumers, further defining the brand, and affording the company the opportunity to dictate supply and drive demand. Students and truck drivers, too, soon discovered and spread the product’s awareness, offering authoritative evidence of its ability to provide energy and keep consumers awake. Such control over the product’s release and availability, although partially necessitated by legal complications and the gradual entry of the drink into different countries, added to Red Bull’s mystique and created an exaggerated demand in student and bar-hopping circles, defining the brand as a Generation X standard, and earning the title “the poor man’s cocaine” (Gschwandtner, 2004).

Eventually, Red Bull’s early focus on influential, night-life enjoying, European Generation Xers as a means of entering new markets and creating brand awareness across borders, evolved Red Bull into a generation-defining product for Generation Y. Immensely popular and visible throughout popular culture, sports – both traditional and extreme/adventure – and nightlife (bars and clubbing), Red Bull emerged in North America during the late-1990s and early 2000s, slowly crossing the continent in much the same way European markets were conquered. Beginning with regionalized sales and buzz marketing strategies in California similar to those used in its European expansion, Red Bull took five years to establish a sales presence across the United States, again building the brand’s name and identity slowly and organically through what the company referred to as a ‘seeding program’. Targeting specific stores, bars, clubs, and gas stations in order to restrict and control access to the product, Red Bull secured added ‘cachet’ to the brand, a mystique and intrigue that drove Red Bull’s brand in its early years. Again focusing on building an attachment to trendy nightlight spots and student life, regionalized marketing and sales directors focused on bars and stores near universities, and specifically employed students as brand representatives, as means of establishing a presence within the Generation Y community.
RED BULL ENTERS SPORT

As well as cementing Red Bull’s place with trendy, influential Generation X and Yers, Red Bull soon sought to establish the brand as a sports property, beginning with its early marketing as a provider of energy and added stamina. Credited with creating the energy drinks market as we know it today, Red Bull avoided competing directly with both established carbonated drinks, such as Pepsi or Coke, as well as better-known sports drinks like Gatorade, while establishing a presence in both sport and popular culture all the same.

Red Bull’s place in sport, as well as positioning its energy drink as being beneficial for athletes and a driver of performance, has led to the creation both of new and innovative sports properties, and of the sponsorship and eventual ownership of mainstream sports properties. The first such involvement came in 1991, with the creation of the Red Bull Flugtag event, first hosted in Vienna, Austria. The Flugtag, which calls on participants to design and build flying contraptions to be launched off a 9.1 m high ramp, signalled Red Bull’s intentions as a brand both in building a repertoire in sport, and perhaps just as crucially, in developing the brand as a prominent figure in the world of extreme sports. Aligning perfectly with Red Bull’s “Gives You Wings” slogan and ethos, the Flugtag event opened the sports market to Mateschitz and the Red Bull brand, and offered the company a place in the emerging extreme sports industry.

Since the advent of the Flugtag event, Red Bull have been ever-present in adventure and ‘new-age’ sports, spending an estimated $300 million per year on sport marketing (Curtis, 2006); sponsoring and heavily branding over 500 action sport events and athletes, including free-runners, snowboarders, and sky-divers; and further solidifying their reputation as a counter-culture brand with new events, such as Red Bull Crashed Ice and the Red Bull Air Race. As with the company’s initial marketing activities and the establishment as a Generation X icon, Red Bull’s involvement in, and support of, extreme sports and sub-cultural events has reaffirmed the brand’s values and identity, and highlighted the company’s unique interests, and its relationship with consumers. Moreover, Red Bull’s involvement in newly created sports and non-traditional adventure sports that were on the margins of mainstream popularity in the 1990s, opened the door for Mateschitz to enter more traditional, high-profile sports with a degree of authority and authenticity – key elements of Red Bull’s brand identity – both as an established drinks company, and as a brand with a successful sporting history.

Dating back to the creation of the Red Bull Crashed Ice event in 2000, Mateschitz, under the Red Bull name, has amassed an arguably unrivalled international sporting empire, boasting ownership of, among others: EC Red Bull Salzburg (Erste Bank Hockey League, Austria), FC Red Bull
Salzburg (Austrian Bundesliga), Formula One teams Red Bull Racing and Scuderia Toro Rosso, Major League Soccer’s New York Red Bulls, NASCAR’s Team Red Bull, Red Bull Brasil FC (Segunda Divisão Paulista, Brazilian second division), and most recently, fifth division German football club SSV Markranstädt, to be renamed RB Leipzig. Outside the realm of sports, Red Bull have maintained a presence in the consciousness of Generation X and Y, as well, operating a Red Bull Music Academy for up and coming DJs worldwide, creating the Taurus World Stunt Awards, and actively participating in urban art, underground nightlife, street parades, and music festivals. This growth, although staggered over the past decade, has equally seen a pronounced shift in Red Bull’s direction as a company. Now a mature product in the energy drinks sector, with an estimated 70% market share around the world (Curtis, 2006), Mateschitz’s extension of the brand into sport has signified a new era as a sports empire for Red Bull, with even further growth expected and no signs of slowing.

SPORT WITH WINGS

While Red Bull’s sports properties appear at first glance to be rather varied and unrelated, the company’s attachment to sport has in fact been undertaken with considerable, and focused, strategic intent. In much the same way as Mateschitz and his partners meaningfully branded and designed Red Bull as a means of differentiating both its product and product category from better established rivals in the drinks industry, in all of Red Bull’s sporting ventures such branding efforts have been major factors in the corporation’s success. Unlike, for instance, Rupert Murdoch’s News International Corporation, or New York sports empire Cablevision, who own and operate massive sports empires across a variety of platforms, each of Red Bull’s properties – be they purchased or created – bear the Red Bull name in some way, and have been branded or re-branded to fit the company’s colour scheme and identity. While in certain cases this redesign has angered fans and alienated supporters, Red Bull has nevertheless guaranteed itself a visible and highly recognizable presence in the sports market, in much the same way as it did in building the energy drinks market.

Perhaps most vocal in opposing the growing branded empire of Mateschitz, FC Red Bull Salzburg fans fought vehemently against the renaming of the club and the changes to the team’s colours and history. Bought in 2005 by Mateschitz under the Red Bull name, a division between fans of the club, and discord over Red Bull’s running of the organization led to a fan group forming their own club, SV Austria Salzburg, named after the original club prior to Mateschitz’s arrival. First founded in 1933, SV Austria Salzburg survived a number of changes throughout its history to both its name and ownership, though amongst
supporters the name SV Salzburg withstood. The club’s original colours, violet and white, were abandoned upon Red Bull’s purchase of the team, just as each of Mateschitz’s properties have been rebranded in the company’s colours, and the club’s emblem was adorned with Red Bull’s trademark wings. Fan groups protested against the changes and sought support from football fans throughout Europe. However, following five months of resistance, supporters of SV Salzburg relented when no agreement could be reached, as 1,500 disenchanted fans walked out on a match against Austria Vienna, never to return. The fans subsequently formed their own club, named for the original SV Salzburg, in much the same way as Wimbledon (AFC Wimbledon) and Manchester United (FC United) supporters have launched new clubs in opposition to ownership issues in English football.

Despite the issues faced in Salzburg, such controversy and notoriety has in many ways simply reaffirmed Red Bull’s reputation as an icon of the counter-culture, and the flag-bearer of anti-brands. Playing in Red Bull-named arenas and stadia, hosting new and unrivalled sporting events, and decorating everything the company touches with the red, blue, and white colours of the brand, as well as wings and the familiar charging bulls logo, Mateschitz has succeeded in building one of the most visible sporting empires in the world. Few sporting entities have enjoyed such visibility across a multitude of sports and platforms, many owners content to respect the traditions and history of sport, and the typically behind-the-scenes nature of sports ownership. Mateschitz, though, has shown a new way in which to build a brand through sport, and is evidence of the potential marketing and brand building vehicle sport provides.

**MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS: FLYING HIGH**

Despite the controversy which seemingly follows Red Bull in all of its endeavours – health concerns over the company’s core product, allegations over its contents and effects, fan alienation and unrest over team re-branding, and the re-invention and subsequent commercialisation of extreme sports – Red Bull has succeeded in building one of the most pre-eminent counter-culture brands in history, as well as amassing one of the largest and most diverse sporting empires around. By strategically targeting Generations X and Y, Mateschitz has been able to ensure the longevity of the brand in just five years from the point when the core product achieved worldwide distribution, becoming highly sought after both in bars and dorm rooms around the world.

However, the success of Red Bull as a brand, and Mateschitz as a sport entrepreneur, extends further than their success in building on the extreme sports counter-culture ethos that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Mateschitz and his partners took their time in developing the core product, its brand image, and marketing and extension strategies, in
order to best build the brand. When the product was launched in the United States, it was first sold in California and then, over a period of five years, it became available across the rest of the country. This expansion into the US market led to a rapid increase in revenue for the company, with the US market accounting for approximately 40% of the company’s turnover in 2003. Yet throughout the company’s move across the country, the same marketing and sales philosophies that guided the brand through Europe were maintained, leaving the distribution and key sales in the hands of local representatives, more in touch with the market, and better positioned to spread the company’s name and image.

Extensive product design and market research has ensured that the company has enabled and empowered Mateschitz’s overall corporate strategy. This, importantly, has allowed Red Bull to operate within a budget, maintaining a level of cost awareness throughout its sport involvement and in developing its sports portfolio. To date, Red Bull has yet to invest in the Manchester United’s or New York Yankees of the sporting world, the company rather focusing on building a property in their own design, from its foundations up. There appeared to be genuine surprise in the media when it became apparent that the Red Bull Racing team could be a realistic title contender, in a sport traditionally dominated by big spending teams like McLaren, Ferrari and, Williams. Mateschitz has proved that success in sport, as in business, can be built and not just bought, an impressive feat in the brand’s short tenure in sport.

Perhaps more important, Red Bull has equally proven to be a pioneer in utilising sport to develop and enhance its brand as an extension of the core product, rather than merely an associated property. Even though the company has sought to extend its sporting portfolio into more mainstream sports, they have chosen sports befitting the company’s own brand image. Adventurous, at times dangerous, and generally ambitious, Red Bull’s sports empire reflects the company’s own interests and identity; would Red Bull be interested in sponsoring a cricket event? At first glance, it would seem unlikely. However, for a brand whose start in sport was an event as creative and daring as the Red Bull Flugtag, to have entered traditional sports such as soccer and ice hockey may have seemed ambitious only a decade ago. It is with this success in mind that entrepreneurs aiming to build a strong sports portfolio could not ask for a better example than Mateschitz of the possibilities and potential present in sport.

**WINGS CLIPPED?**

Despite the undeniable success Red Bull has achieved since its emergence in Austria, controversy and notoriety have become part of the Red Bull brand, perceptions not always aided by the company’s own actions. When Red Bull bought Austrian football team SV Salzburg, there was uproar...
amongst fans and the media due to the arrogance displayed by Mateschitz towards the club’s history and traditions, as it was dismissively taken over and re-branded. This alienated many fans and it has taken time for the problem to be rectified. Mateschitz was considerably less cavalier in the changes imposed on the New York Red Bulls, despite the American side’s much shorter history and legacy as a club and part of a much younger league. Whether or not this was a sign of Mateschitz and his team having learnt from the Salzburg experience, or merely a different approach taken by the company, there is nevertheless some indication that Red Bull could do more in managing its fan relations as it continues to builds a strong presence in sport.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Mateschitz has managed to remain almost an unknown figure behind the Red Bull brand; Branson and Gates, by contrast, have become in many ways the faces of their respective Virgin and Microsoft brands. Mateschitz, though, prefers to remain behind the scenes, encouraging greater attention on the brand and the properties themselves, a strategy which to date has paid dividends. However, in this same context, it could be suggested that in fact, Red Bull’s extreme sports properties have become the image most associated with the brand, rather than Mateschitz or even the energy drinks market it popularized. However, Red Bull’s presence in other sports, such as ice hockey, has yet to lead to the same associations and in-roads into the sports market. Beyond Red Bull’s ties with adventure sports, the brand is best known as an alcoholic drink mixer, or owner and sponsor of sports teams, rather than as an energy drink or sports drink. In order to gain greater authority and identity in the traditional sports Mateschitz has entered recently – soccer, motor racing, ice hockey – Red Bull must do more to tie the energy drink to more mainstream sports, without damaging the long-standing brand equity built through an involvement in the extreme sports market, which would alienate the company’s core target market.

Finally, in investigating and analysing Red Bull and its strategies for success, it has become apparent that there needs to be a balance between exposure in mainstream media and its ethos as an anti-brand. While the company already boasts a successful and long-standing print and television campaign, centred around its trademarked ‘Red Bull Gives You Wings’ theme, there remains considerable potential in expanding awareness of the brand and enhancing the organisation’s status as a sports empire through increased media exposure. To this end, Red Bull must do more to utilize the mainstream media, in order to generate greater attention, attracting an increased fan base to their many sporting events and teams, and potentially increase sales of Red Bull’s slowly expanding product line. Unfortunately, to date much of their marketing strategy has centred on basic but effective word-of-mouth advertising campaigns, which has proved incredibly beneficial for them in the extreme sports genre; however, media coverage has become a vital

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means of attracting consumers to the more mainstream sports, particularly in sports such as soccer and ice hockey whose revenues are driven by ticket sales. As such, in order to continue the brand’s staggering growth over the past decade, and to further expand into traditional sports as they have, Mateschitz would be wise to embrace the popular media, whilst remaining true to the company’s overarching identity and culture.

CONCLUSION
Ultimately, the success of Mateschitz as a sports entrepreneur is in many ways unparalleled. Whilst other entrepreneurs have similarly developed successful businesses, and other sports owners and innovators have perhaps achieved greater success within the sporting realm, few companies rival Red Bull’s innovation and perseverance in utilizing sport as a key driver of business and extension of the core brand. Remaining true to the company’s core values and identity, Mateschitz has used sport to further promote and grow the Red Bull brand and reach a broader audience of fans and consumers internationally. By stressing authenticity and establish the brand as an icon of the extreme sports sub-culture, the company pioneered not only the energy drinks market, but also the use of sport as a brand extension. Given the success Red Bull has achieved over the past twenty-five years, and what we know about entrepreneurship and the role it plays in sport, there can be little doubt of Mateschitz’s place amongst sports elite, alongside more famous names like Phil Knight, Adi Dassler, and Mark McCormack. Whilst it remains to be seen what future endeavours and extensions Mateschitz and Red Bull have planned, the foundations laid within youth culture and sport should no doubt ensure that the company’s market dominance and presence in sport will continue.

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