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DEI and Brand Marketing of a Women’s Off-Road Rally in Morocco’s Sahara Desert

Created in 1990, the off-road competition Gazelles Rallye established an extraordinary niche in motorsports, testing personal limits and the spirit of adventure while crossing the wilderness of the Sahara Desert in Morocco. But, only women could participate. In 2022, new strategic business concerns were gathering in number and urgency for the organizers. Issues included environmental sustainability, possible lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the agency’s product portfolio, and questions about expansion of operations.

Formally known as the Rallye Aïcha des Gazelles du Maroc (Aïcha Rally of Gazelles of Morocco), the competition was organized and sponsored by Maïenga (pronounced Ma-yen-gah), a woman-owned French sports events agency headed by Dominique Serra, founder and CEO of the agency and creator of the annual event, and Marina Vrillacq, general manager and event manager.

Over the past 30 years, the Gazelles Rallye had developed a unique brand image, leading Maïenga to proudly name its community of Gazelles a “tribe of modern women.”¹ Since those early days in 1990, Maïenga’s positioning of the Gazelles Rallye in 2022 still limited participation on the basis of gender alone—women only—and did not recognize the broader segment of possible participants who identified as female. As issues of DEI would inevitably become more prevalent in France, as in other global markets, Serra and Vrillacq’s traditional, gender-only approach to market segmentation and brand positioning risked becoming out of step with the lived reality of participants in their rallies.

For example: How important to the agency’s continuing success was its brand image of women as “Gazelles”, rather than of persons who identify as female? Would a broader view of DEI that included gender identity offer new market opportunities? How might government DEI regulations in Maïenga’s home country of France shape its target marketing strategies? How should Maïenga prepare to handle any backlash against current gender-restricted positioning of the Gazelles Rallye in France or in other countries?

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