

LEVERAGING SPONSORSHIP TO BUILD AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION BETWEEN BRAND AND CONSUMER: A CROSS-INDUSTRY EXAMINATION OF ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR SPONSORSHIP ACTIVITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Objectives of this research were to a) determine the extent to which sponsorship is being utilised to build an emotional connection between brand and consumer, and b) establish a conceptual framework that assists managers to develop and implement strategies with which to build this connection. As the majority of sponsorships relate to sport, this research has strong application to the development of sport marketing theory and practice. The premise of connecting with consumers at the emotive level is a relatively new construct in sponsorship marketing and a review of the literature has proved limited. Sponsor brands may seek to be involved in the emotional relationship between consumers and their preferred activities to influence the formation of favourable attitudes towards the sponsor brand, subsequently influencing the consumer's purchase behaviour (Meenaghan, 2005). Further, the importance of affect-based messaging in attitude formation is supported by Kim, Lim and Bhargava (1998), who found affect plays a more important role in attitude formation than cognitive processing.

METHODS

Meenaghan's (2005) model of sponsorship communication effects was selected in this study as a theoretical base to isolate those sponsorship objectives that have the capacity to create an emotional connection. Using semi-structured depth interviews with senior executives, an analysis of seven major organisations operating in Australia across different industries was conducted. This provided insights into sponsorship practices related to building an emotional connection between brand and consumer. The companies studied were predominantly multi-nationals and represented brands in the categories of beer, energy, finance, government, non-alcoholic beverages, petroleum and sportswear. Most respondents were interviewed face-to-face, although one interview was via telephone as the respondent worked in Switzerland. While the context of the research produced many local examples, there were also numerous global perspectives given the nature of the companies studied and approach used. Outcomes thus can be applied across the sport marketing / sponsorship industry.

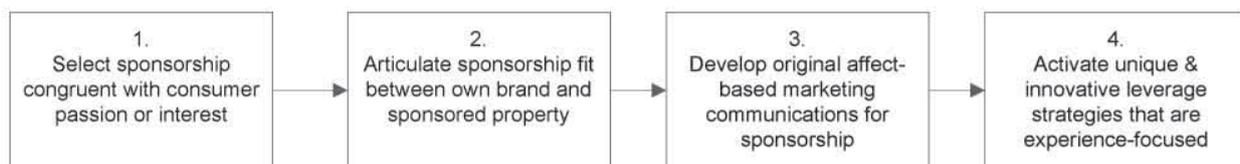
RESULTS

Selecting a sponsorship property the target market is passionate about was found to increase a brand's chances of connecting with consumers at the emotive level through the conditioning process. The results of this study also demonstrated support for congruency between sponsor and property which, when further aided by articulation, is found to assist image-based sponsorships in influencing consumers at the attitudinal level. Additionally, organisations perceived to be leveraging sports sponsorships most effectively were each involved in team-based sports, highlighting the positive association between consumer passions / interests and fan involvement. The results also indicated that those organisations with the most creative and original sponsorship executions utilised affect-based messaging in their respective sponsorship-linked marketing and leverage strategies. They also used communication channels appropriate and relevant to their target market. Finally, organisations perceived to be leveraging their sponsorships most effectively, leveraged at a rate at least equal to the cost of the rights. This suggests a sufficient budget is necessary to develop innovative, unique and meaningful sponsorship campaigns and denotes a higher level of sponsorship sophistication than that recorded in organisations with less congruent and less effective sponsorships.

DISCUSSION

The findings show the most creative attempts made to connect emotionally with consumers came from brands that have a sophisticated approach to sponsorship in general – from the sponsorship selection stage to the execution of leverage strategies and associated activation tactics. Specific recommendations to increase sponsorship effectiveness and sophistication within an organisation include: conducting sponsorship portfolio audits to identify and eliminate non-congruent properties; engaging an external brand and / or sponsorship marketing agency to provide strategic direction for each major sponsorship; and development of creative marketing collateral focusing on affect-based messaging to influence consumers at the emotive level. In researching the processing mechanics involved in sponsorship communication effects, an informed view of how organisations can leverage sponsorships to build an emotional connection with consumers has been developed. The conceptual model proposed at Figure 1 demonstrates how to build the emotional connection between brand and consumer. By recognising a conceptual model that defines the steps involved in connecting emotionally with consumers, organisations will be better equipped to achieve their sponsorship objectives – from selection to activation.

Figure 1: Using sponsorship to build the emotional connection between brand and consumer.



In summary, to connect emotionally with consumers, sponsor organisations should first ensure their brand's sponsorship is congruent with the target market's interests. Second, the sponsorship should be articulated, particularly if fit is image-based as this improves sponsorship processing, resulting in better sponsor recall (Cornwell et al, 2006). Third, development of original, creative, affect-based marketing communications to enhance favourable affective attitudes is essential. And finally, activation of the sponsorship at a rate at least equal to that of the respective rights fee, through leverage strategies that create meaningful and authentic consumer experiences, is recommended.

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