

# Sponsorship Ambushing: Addressing the Challenges Facing Sport Managers

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Keywords: Ambush marketing, sponsorship

## Abstract

Ambush marketing has emerged over the past twenty years as a key concern of sponsors and rights holders. As sponsorship investment has grown, so too have the efforts of non-sponsors and competitors to associate with major sporting properties. The evolution of ambushing – adapting to counter-ambush strategies and identifying greater opportunities to ambush – has signaled a need for researchers and practitioners alike to better understand the nature of ambush marketing, and perhaps most importantly, the strategies available to rights holders and sponsors to counter these efforts.

The aim of this paper will be to identify what ambush marketing is, what forms it takes, and what challenges it poses for sport managers. Specifically, the paper will examine ambush marketing from a historical perspective, identifying the common strategies and efforts employed over the past two decades, the counter-ambushing strategies taken by commercial rights holders and official sponsors, and present a series of recommendations and implications for sports managers attempting to combat ambushing in sport sponsorship.

Historically, counter-ambushing strategies have fallen under three predominant categories: legal action, ‘name-and-shame’ media efforts, and on-site regulation of potential marketing activities. More recently, event organizers and host countries have also begun instituting legislation in order to protect against ambushing, and secure greater investment from sponsors. Unfortunately, while these measures have been proposed and discussed by researchers, there exists a dearth of research meaningfully addressing the strategies and means available in countering ambush marketing. Instead, ambush marketing literature has largely been concerned with three main themes: the impact of ambush efforts on consumer recognition and recall of sponsors (Shani & Sandler, 1989, Meenaghan, 1998), the ethical considerations and implications of ambushing (Meenaghan, 1994, Payne, 1998), and the legal framework surrounding ambush marketing, and potential defenses against (Townley, Harrington & Couchman, 1998, Farrelly, Quester & Greyser, 2005). While this research base has provided an initial understanding of the concerns surrounding ambushing, it remains a largely underdeveloped field.

Moreover, past studies have yet to provide an agreed upon definition for ambush marketing, highlighting the difficulties faced by researchers and practitioners in identifying and defending against ambushers. Drawing upon existing definitions, the authors propose a new, more concise definition: "Ambush marketing consists of a strategic marketing effort to capitalize on the awareness, attention, goodwill – and

other associated benefits – generated by a sponsored event or property, without an official or direct connection to the property."

To develop a better understanding of the counter-ambush strategies available to sponsors and commercial rights holders, a documentary analysis was undertaken, noting past efforts taken by ambushers, and the counter-strategies taken by sports properties and sponsors in response. A team of two researchers independently read and coded in excess of 300 documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles, news and print media, web-based news services, and legal documentation. The research team then met to identify common observations and themes within their analyses, leading to an inter-coder agreement on key themes and findings. Considerable emphasis within the analysis was placed on those ambushing attempts involving the ambushing of direct competitors, incidents drawing international media coverage, multi-national promotional campaigns, or those attempts which garnered preventative or reactionary counter-ambushing efforts.

The authors constructed a database of more than 215 high-profile cases of ambush marketing, identifying the year and location of the incident, the sporting event or property, the ambushing party, the ambushee, the attempted ambush activity, and the counter-strategy employed, where applicable. Subsequently, in outlining and exploring these incidents, a number of key themes within ambushing have been identified, including legal, legislative, and marketing strategy-based efforts. Most notable within this analysis, however, is the negligible impact that most counter-ambush strategies have had, including the lack of long-term planning by sponsors and rights holders, and the ineffectiveness of legal action in the majority of ambush incidents.

Based on these themes, the paper will propose a number of new strategies for defending against sponsorship ambush, and the inherent managerial implications therein. These recommendations include the need for greater involvement on the part of sponsors with event organizers, the improvement of efforts in activating and leveraging sponsorship partnerships, the importance of greater strategic and long-term planning on the part of events holders, the limited but appropriate use of legal means where available, and the opportunities available to sport managers to improve sponsorship strategies in the future.

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