

Ambush marketing in sport: A conceptualization and investigation of managerial implications

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Aim of paper and research questions

The aim of this research is to investigate the nature of, and conceptualize scientifically, ambush marketing, addressing the research question: To what extent has the changing sponsorship environment impacted upon ambush marketing, and what are the managerial implications for sport sponsors?

Literature review

Within sponsorship literature, ambush marketing research has emerged over the past twenty years as an area of considerable interest, characterised by four predominant themes: (a) an identification of what ambush marketing is and its aims and objectives (Sandler & Shani, 1989; Meenaghan, 1994; Crompton, 2004; Séguin & O'Reilly, 2008); (b) the use of consumer-based measures of ambush marketing's impact on sponsorship, such as post-event consumer recall sponsorship studies (Sandler & Shani, 1989; Meenaghan, 1998; McDaniel & Kinney, 1998); (c) the discussion of the ethical concerns surrounding ambush marketing and the morality of ambush campaigns (Meenaghan, 1994; Payne, 1998; O'Sullivan & Murphy, 1998); and (d) the exploration of the legal implications of ambush marketing efforts, and the relationship between ambush, intellectual property rights, and passing-off (Townley et al., 1998; McKelvey, 2006; McKelvey & Grady, 2008).

While this research base has provided an initial understanding of the concerns surrounding ambushing, it nevertheless remains a largely underdeveloped field. Furthermore, although the discussion of ambush marketing is necessarily rooted in the discussion of sport sponsorship, there is a dearth of research into the actual impact of ambush marketing, from a practical, managerial, or strategic perspective. Finally, and most disconcerting, no definitive understanding of ambush marketing exists, and recent developments in sport marketing have raised renewed concerns over the actual impact of ambushing on sponsors, and what specifically constitutes ambush marketing. The academic understanding of ambush marketing is based on definitions proposed twenty years ago, and based on a limited perspective on the aims, motives, and uses of ambush marketing as a marketing communications tool. It is with these limitations in mind that this study aims to conceptualize ambushing, contributing a definitive understanding of contemporary ambush marketing, and adding to the existing discussion on sponsorship management and protection.

Research design and proposed data analysis

The current study follows on a previous evaluation of the current practices and strategies employed in ambush marketing, and the defence against ambush campaigns by commercial rights holders and sport sponsors. Following the creation and analysis of a unique database

of ambush marketing cases, a series of semi-structured, explorative interviews were carried out with industry practitioners and researchers, representing both ambush marketers and stakeholders in the official sponsorship framework. These interviews were then coded and examined, along with the case database, leading to the construction of a typology of ambush marketing strategies. Based on these findings, a hypothesised conceptual model of ambush marketing has been created, in order to further explore the evolution of sponsorship management as a result of ambushing.

Discussion of progress

Based on results from both an extensive and dynamic documentary analysis of ambush, parasite, guerrilla, and event marketing sources – and the subsequent creation of the Ambush Marketing Case Database – and a series of interviews undertaken with sponsorship industry practitioners and ambush marketing researchers, a unique typology of ambushing has emerged, based on *presence* and *remote* ambush strategies. The identified methods range from such strategies as ‘Predatory Ambushing’ – the direct ambushing of a market competitor – to more recent developments, including ‘Value Ambushing’ – the use of an event’s stated values or themes in order to imply association.

This typology, as well as an extensive investigation of the responses to ambush marketing by commercial rights holders over the past twenty-five years, have led to the emergence of an hypothesised conceptual model of the impact ambush marketing and the changes to sponsorship in recent years has had on sponsorship management, a framework to be further tested in future research. This model, as well as a renewed definition of ambush marketing and the development of an ambush marketing typology, provide the foundations for a conceptualization of ambushing, much needed for sport sponsors and sports properties, as they attempt – often in vain – to combat the threat posed by ambushing.

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