
COUNTER-STRATEGIES TO FIGHT AMBUSH MARKETING: DOES HUMOR HELP?

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Abstract

1 MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH GOALS

As sport sponsorship has been in a state of constant expansion over the last two decades, so too has the practice of am-bush marketing. Ambush marketing describes activities of brands aimed to generate the positive effects of sponsorship without an official affiliation with the event or property (Burton & Chadwick, 2008). While ambush marketing is a serious concern for both official sponsors and event organizers, its prevention is a challenging task. The establishment of clean zones in and around event venues can protect official sponsors on-site, however, it seems relatively insignificant as the majority of today's ambush activities occur in the media. Legal actions have proven ineffective because there are numerous opportunities for associative advertising beyond illegal activities such as trademark infringement. Another approach to combat ambush marketing – so-called “name and shame” campaigns that denounce the ambusher – can decrease attitudes toward the ambusher brand (Mazodier, Quester & Chandon, 2012). However, this strategy creates additional awareness for the ambusher and can lead to unfavorable attitudes toward the sponsor (Jain & Posavac, 2004) as excessive sponsorship protection may result in perceptions of overcommercialization. This research addresses these issues by examining the efficacy of alternative counter-ambushing strategies, in particular the use of humorous ads, and compares these strategies with both the name and shame approach and educational ads.

2 CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Two streams of literature provide the conceptual background to this study: research on comparative advertising (Jain & Posavac, 2004) and research on the effects of humor in advertising (Eisend, 2011). Based on these conceptual under-pinnings, we derive hypotheses regarding the relative effects of three counter-ambushing strategies that sponsors can use: (1) sponsors can publish educational content that informs the public about ambush marketing and its consequences without directly referring

to a specific ambusher brand, (2) sponsors can denounce the behavior of a specific ambusher, a strategy that is referred to as “name and shame” (Mazodier, Quester & Chandon, 2012) and (3) sponsors can use a humorous ad that conveys a more positive and confident response to the ambusher’s activities (Humphreys et al., 2010). We hypothesize that humorous counter-ambushing ads will be more believable (i.e., producing less counterarguments) compared to both educational and name and shame ads. In addition, we propose that using humor (versus no humor) enhances both affective (i.e., ad attitude) and cognitive (i.e., perceived response appropriateness) variables, which in turn increase (decrease) attitude toward the sponsor (ambusher) brand.

3 METHODOLOGY

The hypotheses were tested in two laboratory experiments that manipulated counter-ambushing ads between participants (study 1: N = 224; study 2: N = 170). Study 1 used a fictional diving event and fictional energy-drink brands for both the ambusher and the sponsor, while study 2 used a fictional golf tournament and two real condom producers as ambusher and sponsor brands. Each subject was exposed to two professionally produced stimulus ads; one displaying an ambush ad followed by one of the three counter-ambushing ads (humor vs. education vs. name and shame). Next participants completed a questionnaire containing multi-item scales of the dependent variables as well as manipulation check variables.

4 RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results show that a humorous (vs. education and name and shame) counter-ambushing ad produces significantly less counterargumentation relating to both the ad content and the sponsor brand. Humor enhances ad attitude, which mediates positive effects on the sponsor brand. However, the humorous counter-ambushing ad has the undesirable side effect that it also increases attitudes toward the ambusher brand. This effect occurs because of higher acceptance of ambush marketing when the humorous ad is compared to the name and shame ad. When the humorous ad is compared to the educational ad, the effect of increasing attitudes toward the ambusher is caused by decreased perceptions of response appropriateness. The results contribute to theory development of how counter-ambushing communications work. They indicate that the effects of different counter-ambushing campaigns are ambivalent and therefore the goals of the sponsors should be taken into account when selecting a strategy. Sponsorship managers who aim to increase the affective associations with their brand are recommended to use humorous counter-ambushing ads. However, they should bear in mind that recipients may have a more positive attitude toward ambushers too. Therefore, sponsorship managers who aim to increase the uniqueness of their brand’s status as official sponsor (as opposed to ambushing competitors) might prefer educational ads even though this strategy is perceived as less appropriate compared to the humorous approach.

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