

(SP) THE IMPACT OF COMMITMENT, TRUST AND SATISFACTION ON THE RELATIONSHIP QUALITY BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL SOCCER CLUBS AND THEIR SPONSORS

André W. Bühler

University of Plymouth, UK

Introduction

Most studies on sponsorship perceive sponsorship as a discrete transaction (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998; Walliser, 2003). Indeed, at the heart of any sponsorship deal lies, by definition, the exchange of service and service in return (Meenaghan, 1983; Sleight, 1989). However, in view of the shift from the transactional to the relational paradigm that has been taken place in the general marketing literature, it is quite surprising that the relational aspects of sponsorships have been widely ignored in the sponsorship literature so far. The only notable exceptions come from Farrelly and Quester (2003, 2005) and Chadwick (2004) who started to see the relationship between sponsors and sponsees as one characterised by relational rather than transactional exchanges. Therefore, a further establishment of the relational aspects of (sports) sponsorships is necessary. This study seeks to contribute to existing knowledge by gaining a deeper understanding of the dimensions determining a good relationship quality between professional soccer clubs and their sponsors.

The concept of relationship quality (RQ) has been examined in various different business contexts so far, but only once in a sports sponsorship context (Farrelly and Quester, 2005). This comes as a surprise in view of the fact that relationship quality has been considered to be an important indicator of relationship success (Bejou *et al.*, 1996; Hennig-Thurau, 2000; Ivens, 2004) and business performance (Lee and Wong, 2001). However, it is generally agreed that RQ is a higher-order construct made of various distinct – but related – dimensions (Bejou *et al.*, 1996; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Woo and Ennew, 2004). After reviewing more than 30 studies on RQ, commitment, trust and satisfaction have been identified as the most important determinants of relationship quality. The study therefore examines the impact of commitment, trust and satisfaction on relationship quality in the context of professional soccer sponsorships.

Methods

The English Premier League as well as the German Bundesliga serve as the context of research owing to their extraordinary reputation in commercial terms compared to other European soccer leagues. Following a comprehensive analysis of clubs' websites and televised soccer games a total of 460 sponsors were identified and incorporated in a quantitative survey. After a preliminary qualitative research phase incorporating seventeen in-depth interviews with representatives of English and German clubs/sponsors as well as sponsorship experts, a structured questionnaire was developed and pilot tested. The final questionnaire incorporated a ten-item commitment scale adopted from Anderson and Weitz (1992), a seven-item trust scale adopted from Farrelly and Quester (2005), a three-item satisfaction scale adopted from Lages *et al.* (2004) and a newly developed single-item scale measuring overall relationship quality. All items were measured by the means of a seven-point Likert scale. The impact of the three independent variables commitment, trust and satisfaction on the dependent variable relationship quality was measured by the means of a multiple regression analysis as used in previous RQ studies (e.g. Wray *et al.*, 1994; Wong and Sohal, 2002; Wong, 2004).

Results

The overall response rate was 22.8% and therefore satisfactory. All scales showed a good reliability with Cronbach Alpha's exceeding the 0.7-mark. All assumptions necessary to carry out a multiple regression analysis were met. The overall fit of the model was a good one with a R^2 value of .684 and an adjusted R^2 value of 0.676. According to the results of the multiple regression analysis, trust and satisfaction both make a significant unique contribution to the prediction of relationship quality. However, the regression model fails to prove a positive impact of commitment on relationship quality.

Discussion

The confirmation of trust as a crucial dimension of RQ in the football sponsorship dyad makes sense, as with a lack of trust the relationship is unlikely to be a happy one. A look at the actual wording of the trust-items used for this study implies that sponsorship partners should be knowledgeable about the sponsorship, understand each other's position, care for each other's welfare and be fair and open in dealing with each other. This is in line with the relevant literature (e.g. Achrol, 1991; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Roberts *et al.*, 2003) pointing out that a belief in each other's reliability and integrity makes relationships work. Satisfaction as an important dimension of RQ is confirmed by previous studies (e.g. Bejou *et al.*, 1998; Hsieh and Hiang, 2004; Farrelly and Quester, 2005). The quality of the sponsorship relationship is unlikely to be a good one if one (or both) of the partners are not satisfied with the sponsorship, as the actual wording of the satisfaction items implies. In this respect, sponsorship partners should try to meet each other's expectations and objectives in order to make the relationship work.

The obvious lack of commitment being a determinant of RQ in the context of professional soccer sponsorship may be explained by the notion of some sponsors to see sponsorship only as a short-term investment in order to achieve short-term objectives.

Some caution should be taken because of the limitations of the study. For example, the study employed a cross-sectional research design and therefore reflects the situation of the English Premier League and the German Bundesliga during the 2004/05 season only. Another limitation of this study stems from the small sample size, a problem which is experienced in other studies on sports sponsorship and in the area of professional football as well. As a consequence, results might not be as generalisable. However, the study contributes to a further establishment of the relational aspects of (sports) sponsorship and gains a deeper understanding of the concept of relationship quality in the context of professional soccer sponsorship.

References

- Achrol, R. (1991) 'Evolution of the Marketing Organization: New Forms for Turbulent Environments', *Journal of Marketing*, 55 (4), pp. 77-93
- Anderson, E. and Weitz, B. (1992) 'The Use of Pledges to Build and Sustain Commitment in Distribution Channels', *Journal of Marketing Research*, 29, pp. 18-34
- Bejou, D., Wray, B. and Ingram, T.N. (1996) 'Determinants of Relationship Quality: An Artificial Neural Network Analysis', *Journal of Business Research*, 36, pp. 137-143
- Bejou, D., Ennew, C.T. and Palmer, A. (1998) 'Trust, ethics and relationship satisfaction', *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 16 (4), pp. 170-175
- Chadwick, S. (2004) *Determinants of commitment in the professional football club/shirt sponsorship dyad*, unpublished thesis, University of Leeds
- Cornwell, T.B. and Maignan, I. (1998) 'An International Review of Sponsorship' in *Journal of Advertising*, 26 (2), pp. 1-21

- Deloitte (2005) *Annual Review of Football Finance - 2005*, Manchester, Sports Business Group at Deloitte
- Farrelly, F. and Quester, P. (2003) 'The effects of market orientation on trust and commitment: The case of the sponsorship business-to-business relationship' in *European Journal of Marketing*, 37 (3/4), pp. 530-553
- Farrelly, F. and Quester, P. (2005) 'Examining important relationship constructs of the focal sponsorship exchange' in *Industrial Marketing Management*, 34 (3), pp. 211-219
- Hennig-Thurau, T. (2000) 'Relationship marketing success through investments in customers', in Hennig-Thurau, T. and Hansen, U. (eds), *Relationship Marketing: Gaining Competitive Advantage Through Customer Satisfaction and Customer Retention*, Berlin, Springer, pp. 127-46
- Hsieh, Y.-C. and Hiang, S.-T. (2004) 'A Study of the Impacts of Service Quality on Relationship Quality in Search-Experience-Credence Services', *Total Quality Management*, 15 (1), pp. 43-58
- Lages, C., Lages, C.R., and Lages, L.F. (2005) 'The RELQUAL scale: a measure of relationship quality in export market ventures', *Journal of Business Research*, 58, pp. 1040-1048
- Lee, D.-J. and Wong, J.H.P. (2001) 'A model of close business relationships in China (guanxi)', *European Journal of Marketing*, 35 (1/2), pp. 51-69
- Meenaghan, J.A. (1983) 'Commercial Sponsorship', *European Journal of Marketing*, 17 (7), pp. 5-73
- Morgan, R.M. and Hunt, S.D. (1994) 'The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing', *Journal of Marketing*, 58, pp. 20-38
- Roberts, K., Varki, S. and Brodie, R. (2003) 'Measuring the quality of relationships in consumer services: an empirical study', *European Journal of Marketing*, pp. 169-196
- Sleight, S. (1989) *Sponsorship: what it is and how to use it*, Maidenhead, McGraw Hill
- Sport + Markt (2005) *Jersey Report 2005*, Köln, Sport + Markt AG
- Walliser, B. (2003) 'An international review of sponsorship research: extension and update', *International Journal of Advertising*, 22 (1), pp. 5-40
- Wong, A. and Sohal, A. (2002) 'Customers' perspectives on service quality and relationship quality in retail encounters', *Managing Service Quality*, 12 (6), pp. 424-433
- Woo, K. and Ennew, C.T. (2004) 'Business-to-business relationship quality' in *European Journal of Marketing*, 38 (9/10), pp. 1252-1271
- Wray, B., Palmer, A. and Bejou, D. (1994) 'Using neural network analysis to evaluate buyerseller relationships', *European Journal of Marketing*, 28 (10), pp. 32-48

E-mail: andre@football-and-business.com