THE CONTRIBUTION OF SPORTS SPONSORSHIP TO CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the recent growth in sponsorship investment, the sponsorship literature still lags behind that of the more established communications vehicles such as advertising. This quantitative study uses the consumer-based brand equity framework to examine the contribution of sports sponsorship to brand equity. Results from a survey conducted at an international indoor athletics event held in the UK in February 2007 are examined to consider the differential impact of sports sponsorship on consumers. The primary objectives of this paper are to contribute to the growing body of research on sponsorship effectiveness and to empirically apply the consumer-based brand equity construct in a sports sponsorship context.

Sports sponsorship expenditure has demonstrated exponential growth over the last 15 years, with 2006 global expenditure of $33.7 billion (SportBusiness, 2007) compared to $10 billion (Ukman, 2004) in 1994. Many studies examine elements of sponsorship effectiveness, such as awareness (e.g. Lardinoit and Derbaix, 2001), image (e.g. Gwinner and Eaton, 1999) or purchase intention (Pope and Voges, 2000). It is recognized that sponsorship can help to build brand image through the process of image transfer (Gwinner, 1997) yet so far no attempt has been made at a holistic, consumer-focused study of the effects of sponsorship on a brand.

Aaker (1991) views consumer-based brand equity as a multidimensional construct composed of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets. This study uses the Aaker (1996) brand equity model as it offers a comprehensive and clearly defined measurement tool. The model has been subsequently validated through several studies (e.g. Yoo and Donthu, 2001). The brand equity concept is applied in the context of sports to assess the contribution of sponsorship to brand awareness, associations (including quality) and loyalty.

METHODS

Two questionnaires were administered: one (face-to-face) to spectators at a UK sporting event (n=134) and one (postal) to a randomly selected sample of adults (n=121) from a voluntary organisation of which the author is a member. Both sample groups were asked to complete a questionnaire about the title sponsor of the event. The use of a comparison group, not exposed to the event sponsorship, acts as a control for previous brand exposure as it can reasonably be assumed that both groups had equal opportunity to view/hear other marketing communications from the sponsoring brand. Therefore, in comparing the differences in response between the two groups, the effect of sponsorship is isolated.

Brand awareness was measured through a dichotomous question of whether respondents were aware of the brand. The other 3 components of brand equity were assessed on Likert scales from totally agree to totally disagree, in line with Aaker's (1996) brand equity measurement tool as follows: brand associations (trust, differentiation, reasons to buy, personality, value for money and user image), perceived quality (quality, respect, leadership, popularity and innovation) and brand loyalty (loyalty, satisfaction, recommendation, purchase intention, price premium and brand consideration). The individual ratings were then summed to produce an overall score for each dimension. A series of two-tailed independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the scores between samples on each dimension.

RESULTS

The results indicate that sponsorship is effective in building consumer-based brand equity. A significant difference was found between the mean scores for brand associations (mean difference=1.64, t=3.364, $p<0.001$), perceived quality (mean difference=1.01, t=1.992, $p<0.05$) and brand loyalty (mean difference=1.79, t=3.025, $p<0.003$) given by event spectators and those given by the comparison group. No significant difference was found in brand awareness ($\chi^2=0.450$, $p<0.51$) with both groups demonstrating very high awareness (event spectators = 99%, comparison group=98%). This is unsurprising given that the sponsor is an established market leader. Awareness of the sponsorship was substantially higher among event spectators (93%) than the comparison group (34%). Therefore, assuming a similar base level of brand knowledge between the two groups, it is reasonable to suggest that awareness of the sponsorship contributed to the higher mean brand equity scores among event spectators.

DISCUSSION

It is clear from the results that sponsorship can have a positive impact on brand equity. The dimension of brand associations demonstrated the greatest difference between groups, which supports the use of sponsorship as a means of transferring desired images from the sport to the sponsor. Although significant, the smallest difference in scores was recorded for perceived quality. However, the mean scores on this dimension were higher for both groups than those for either associations or brand loyalty. It is likely that consumers already perceived the brand as representing high quality, either through prior experience or other marketing communications. Brand loyalty obtained the lowest scores among both groups, however as a higher-order element of brand equity, loyalty represent the highest level of attachment to a brand.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical support for the use of sports sponsorship to build brand equity. However, further validation of findings through application of the same techniques to other sports is needed. This study took an established marketing concept and applied it, for the first time, to the domain of sponsorship, thus adding to the growing body of research into the effects of sponsorship on consumers.

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