

# **From Customers to Partners: Criteria of Relationship Quality Between Sponsor and Sponsee**

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## **Aim**

For most sport organisations, sponsorship fees represent a substantial source of income that they rely on to maintain and excel with their operations. However, the modern-day sport sponsorship market is mostly saturated and very competitive. Hence, sponsees are increasingly directing their attention towards measures that can assist with maintaining their current sponsors. At this, the understanding of sponsorship relationships is becoming increasingly important as a high level of perceived relationship quality is regarded as a main indicator for the success of a business relationship (Hennig-Thurau, 2000). At the same time, knowledge about the underlying criteria that play a vital role in the assessment of relationship quality is still sparse (Farrelly & Quester, 2005). As sponsees have a great interest in long-term sponsorship deals, a deeper understanding of these criteria is of high value for their sponsorship managers. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to contribute to the detailed understanding of criteria that are used by sponsors to assess the quality of the sponsorship business relationship.

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Relationship quality, the perception of a relationship across all transactions, represents a key concept within Relationship Marketing. It is based on the customer's assessment of individual components and factors of influence that relate to the quality of a business relationship. Therefore, it is fundamental to identify the context-specific characteristics of these factors. Whereas the amount of research with regards to relationship marketing is growing within the sport sponsoring literature, most studies focus on the relationship between sponsor and fan or sponsee and fan. Thus, the business-to-business relationship between sponsor and sponsee maintains considerably more unobserved. Several past studies addressed factors for successful sport sponsorship relationships (Farrelly & Quester, 2005; Reisenhofer, 2010; Nufer & Bühler, 2011), e.g. trust, mutual understanding, long-term perspective, communication, and cooperation. Yet, relationship quality itself is considered to be a multi-dimensional construct that is not clearly defined and delimited. Especially within the context of sport sponsorship relationships the underlying criteria are not investigated in detail. In consequence, this research focuses on context-specific criteria.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

A qualitative study was conducted to explore criteria of relationship quality as it relates to the sponsors point of view. Following a ten-step process proposed by Kaiser (2014), semi-structured expert interviews were conducted. To qualify as an expert, participants had to have longstanding experience within the field of sponsoring. Furthermore, the expert group was supposed to cover the decisive business parties that are involved in a sponsorship deal: representatives of corporations (sponsors), clubs/leagues (sponsees), and sport marketing agencies (working on behalf of the sponsor or sponsee). The twelve experts that ultimately took part in the study were mainly but not exclusively managers of clubs or associations at the highest professional level as well as their corresponding sponsors and intermediaries. All participants were instructed to assume the point of view of sponsors during the in-depth

interviews. The results were analysed through qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2007). At this, 17 categories showed sufficient levels of inter-coder reliability (Cohen's kappa).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The research goal of this explorative study was to contribute to a deeper understanding of criteria that play a vital role in the assessment of the business relationship quality between a sponsor and a sponsee. In doing so, the perspective of sponsors was adopted and only those criteria were investigated that go beyond the simple fulfilment of contents of contract. This means that the comprehensive fulfilment of everything that a sponsee is contractually obligated to was disregarded in this study and assumed as a given criteria for relationship quality. For the greater part, the 17 separate categories this research could reveal (which need to be validated through a future quantitative study) can also be similarly found in general business literature as components of business relationships. However, some criteria are new to the context of sponsorships and are more specific and more detailed than those presented by previous authors (e.g. Nufer & Bühler, 2011). The results of this study can be of value to sponsorship professionals, especially for representatives of sponsees, to further understand how sponsors assess the quality of their business-to-business relationship. By addressing these criteria, sponsees can enhance the relationship with their sponsors and increase the chance to reach the goal of long-lasting sponsorships.

### **References**

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