

## **Sport Sponsorship as Engagement Platform**

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### **Aim**

Sponsorship is a major communication tool for companies and has paramount importance in financing clubs or events in sport. Corporate objectives for sport sponsorship from practitioners' viewpoints indicate that relationships to other stakeholders (i.e. employees, opinion leaders or other sponsors) gain in importance (Nielsen Sports, 2017). This development is also recognized in sport management literature as perspectives of sponsorship change to an interaction approach (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p. 1145). In order to understand interactions that exceed a dyadic relationship between sponsor and sponsee to a broader network of actors, we conduct a study that investigates sport sponsorship as engagement platform. Therefore, we try to answer the question how relationships among sponsors can be described, what contributions are made by sponsors on the sponsee's platform and how these contributions generate benefit to others.

### **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Sport events are regarded as platforms where actors collaborate in a service-for-service exchange (Woratschek, Horbel & Popp, 2014, p. 20). Within that platform special relationships occur in sponsorship networks. The relationship approach of sport sponsorship considers alliances of sponsor and sponsee as part of the interaction where resources are exchanged (Demir & Söderman, 2015, p. 276). Expanding this dyadic perspective to a broader business network also means taking more actors into account. These actors are other sponsors, their customers and employees, media, politicians and also further. The sport event hosting institution or sport clubs thereby represents a mediator for the set of nodes and a set of ties representing relations in the business network (Brass et al., 2004, p. 795). Consequently it serves as provider for an engagement platform that is defined as "[...] or virtual touch points designed to provide structural support for the exchange and integration of resources, and thereby co-creation of value between actors [...]" (Breidbach, Brodie & Hollebeek, 2014, p. 594). In this paper we follow the definition of engagement as behavior by van Doorn et al. (2010). This implies that sponsor engagement, how we consider it, is driven by sponsors' motivation to integrate resources. Networks not only occur in hospitality areas or partner events but also in an online context where sponsors interact on social media channels. We define sponsor engagement as integration of sponsors' resources into a sponsee's network. Furthermore, we define the sponsee's network enabling infrastructure as engagement platform.

### **Research Design**

In order to get answers to the three research questions above we conduct an empirical qualitative study using the Delphi method. Subsequently, a three-staged process will be used to gather insights into business networks with 60 experts from sport sponsorship. In the first round semi structured interviews will be gathered and analyzed qualitatively. For the second and third round data is edited accordingly with structured results. Experts of the first round provide feedback on edited data to validate results of previous rounds. Experts are divided into four categories of sponsors using a global or regional platform and sponsees using a global or a regional platform.

## Results

The first round of the three-stated Delphi study is executed, second and third round will be finished July 2018. The study will give insights into sponsors' and sponsees' engagement practices. To make an example, a sponsor in the first round engaged beyond the contract agreements by providing wind tunnels to improve performance of a sailing team. Another sponsor could generate business contracts by activating sponsee's network. Results of the first round show that we can expect insights in relationships exceeding a dyadic relationship between a sponsor and a sponsee. We describe relationships among sponsors and sponsees, their contributions and how these contributions generate benefit to others on that engagement platform.

The empirical results contribute to a broader understanding of sport sponsorship as engagement platform, a perspective that is considered underdeveloped in the discourse about sport sponsorship (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p. 1146).

## Implications

Given the importance of business interaction in sport sponsorship networks, it is essential to be aware that sport sponsorship value is derived beyond a dyadic relationship. If sport sponsorship is regarded as an engagement platform business, sport managers do not only focus on the exchange of financial or in kind performance for provision of sponsorship rights, they can better explore value capture of sponsorship engagement. On one hand, this enables sponsors to derive better strategies. On the other hand, sponsees can strive for additional monetary and non-monetary value, by deeper understanding their role as provider of a platform business.

Sport managers better know how to attract resource-integrating actors and develop a business network that is valuable to existing partners as well as for potential new ones. Therefore, they necessarily need to understand the connections in their network. From there on, they can build on the interactive engagement patterns and demands of actors.

## References

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