



Editorial

Is sponsorship still sponsorship?

Sponsorship remains one of the world's most important forms of marketing communications expenditure, and sport is still the major recipient for the money that corporations commit to sponsorship spending each year. The papers in this edition raise some very important issues with regard to the role of sponsorship and its effects.

By asserting that sponsorship is a form of marketing communications, I have betrayed the once-popular notion that sponsorship is merely an alternative tool to advertising or sales promotion. With that goes the transactional view of sponsorship as an activity that is essentially an exchange of money and rights between sponsor and sponsee, sometimes with little or no contact between the two parties. Clearly some sponsorships do still work in this way, and if both parties are happy with the arrangement, then one has to respect the way they choose to conduct their relationships. However, in recent years sponsorship has shifted from 'media buy' to 'marketing tool' to 'business platform', and practitioners and academics alike are emphasising the relational dimension to the association. Sponsorship is increasingly viewed as a strategic collaboration, where the emphasis is on 'win-win' outcomes for sponsor and sponsee.

Some commentators stress the dyadic and networking contexts within which sponsorship functions and the role that sponsorship plays in relationship marketing. The paper on relationship quality by Bühler et al brings the latter into sharp focus by examining the factors that dictate the success of such relationships; Henseler et al illustrate what sponsorship can achieve in terms of brand equity.

Over a number of decades, most definitions of sponsorship have emphasised exchange and content (consistent with the transactional view). However, the emerging paradigms call these definitions into question. Similarly, the proliferation of commercialism in sport and sponsorship opportunities has resulted in forms of activity that appear to be rather like sponsorship but could actually be something

profoundly different. This requires careful reappraisal by academic writers and researchers. One issue that is unresolved is whether a naming rights deal is sponsorship or something different, with its own features and management challenges. Thus far nobody has produced a compelling argument to justify whether a new view is required. In a similar vein, we might consider whether or not endorsement is a form of sponsorship. The endorsement market is arguably better established than the naming rights market, but clearly there are questions about how well we understand the medium. Kim and Na make a valuable contribution here with their paper on the relationship between endorsements and product attitudes. However, as yet, the sports marketing academic community has not addressed the similarities and differences of associations with a person, a stadium, a shirt or the side of a car.

Margaret Thatcher once called economics the "dismal science", giving her due reason to ignore a lot of what economists had to say. In some ways, I feel we may be in danger of falling into such a view of sponsorship, given the number of unresolved questions that remain, particularly with the relatively slow pace of literature development. Nevertheless, as this edition of the Journal shows, there is much still up for grabs and some sharp thinkers around (call them a tribe if you will – sporting tribes are something Meir et al consider in this issue) addressing the issues that, ultimately, will help to move our understanding of sponsorship forward.

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