

NASCAR: A Preliminary Exploration of the Sponsorship Match-Up Process

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NASCAR's continued ascendance into the upper echelon of professional American sports has brought into focus two important, if not interrelated, trends in the sports industry. First, research has shown that NASCAR, perhaps more so than any other American sport, has been successful in translating 'fan loyalty' (for the sport, a team, or a driver) into significant 'brand loyalty' (for the sport's sponsors). As such, studies have shown that "hardcore and moderate" fans are much more likely to purchase products from NASCAR sponsors (Amato, Peters, & Shao, 2005). With the emergence of NASCAR as one of the most popular sports in America today, sponsors are pairing up with teams and drivers to promote products ranging from cellular phones to chewing tobacco. A second, equally important trend brought forth by the 'NASCAR way,' is the strategic creation of 'driver-celebrities' as embodiments of particular consumer sensibilities. To such an end, NASCAR has successfully grafted a universe of stars, each of whom represents a different aspect of consumer culture (Derbyshire, 2003; Mahanan, 2004; Spanu, 2002).

Interestingly, there is a gap in academic research with regard to evaluating the connection between the two: NASCAR's sponsor-endorser 'Match-Up.' Although a number of researchers have examined the effectiveness of sponsorships in NASCAR in general terms (e.g., Lapio & Speter, 2000; Pruitt, Cornwell, & Clark, 2004), none have fully examined the relationship between the sponsor, the product, the target market(s), and the driver-endorsers celebrity persona. Other research has demonstrated that endorsements or sponsorships are generally most effective when the characteristics of the celebrity-athlete and the product's brand identity are congruent (e.g., Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1989, 1990; Kanungo & Pang, 1973; Lynch & Schuler, 1994; Peterson & Kerin, 1977). As such, we propose to add to the bodies of research on NASCAR and sponsorship more generally by examining these relationships in terms of their effectiveness from the ground up (i.e., beginning with the team/individual athlete/sponsor prior to the consumer). A number of inquiries yet to be canvassed include: Do sponsors consider team/driver image when selecting teams/drivers? Do teams/drivers consider sponsor image when selecting sponsors? Do the entities involved in the relationship (i.e., driver/team/sponsor) believe that they are effective? Are the better "matched" relationships more effective? If 'fit' does lead to effectiveness, is there a theoretical framework that can lead to a procedure to increase the chances of having a "best fit" or "matched" relationship?

As a result of the number of questions yet to be answered, the overriding purpose of this project is to offer a preliminary examination with regard to the effectiveness of NASCAR sponsorships based on athlete-endorser match-up. This research has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the adapted Scale of Athletic Star Power can be used to further examine/expand a model created to examine the effectiveness of athlete-endorser match-up (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005). Ultimately, this project has the potential to reexamine the Match-Up Hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985) and apply it in an empirical context, extracting the theory from its legacy of speculation without appropriate application (particularly in sport). Once this process is reevaluated and validated, it can provide sport marketers with a device to measure the effectiveness of sport sponsorships in a much less obscure way than that with which they are currently being observed. From a practical perspective, the scale that is to be reexamined through the research can be used/adapted to answer the questions stated above. With sponsorship dollars drastically increasing each year, organizations are looking for the greatest potential return on their investment. A scale that can help to decrease the number of 'wrong' choices that an organization makes may be quite valuable in the long-run.