

Obesity and Fast/Pseudo Food Sponsorship of Sporting Events: A Moral Dilemma

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Considerable research has been conducted on tobacco and alcohol sponsorship of sporting events, including the appropriateness or lack thereof of this type of sponsorship (Crompton, 1993; Danylchuk, 2000; Dewhirst, 2004; Sparks, 1997; Turco, 1999). Many people, such as health advocates and activists, are opposed to tobacco and alcohol sponsorship of sporting events citing the hypocrisy of linking the health benefits promoted through sport and the detrimental effects of smoking and drinking (Danylchuk, 2000; Dewhirst, 2004; Geekie, 1985; Turco, 1999). Furthermore, there is an added concern that youth are often exposed to the sponsorship promotions, thereby providing a connection between exposure and consumption (Danylchuk, 2000; Sparks, 1997). Sport event organizers, however, relish this type of sponsorship because positive association with powerful brands brings attention to their event. As well, they argue that the banning of this type of sponsorship will lead to the loss of these events and the economic benefits derived (Danylchuk, 2000; Sparks, 1997).

Tobacco is the most commonly restricted sponsor category, and in some countries this type of sponsorship has been discontinued due to legislation (Danylchuk, 2000). Spirits companies and beer/wine sponsors follow tobacco in regard to restrictions, but the documented benefits of moderate alcohol consumption make it more socially acceptable as a form of sponsorship than tobacco (Crompton, 1993; L'Huillier & Hirons, 1997; McAllister, 1995). It is rare, however, to find any sporting event organizers opposed to food and non-alcoholic beverage sponsors. In light of the current obesity issue, which the World Health Organization has called a global epidemic, one might question whether it is morally or ethically responsible for sporting events to involve sponsors that promote products that are considered non-nutritional, and that are linked to the obesity issue, namely "fast" or "pseudo" food and beverage. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to solicit public opinion towards tobacco, alcohol, food, and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship of sporting events, with a particular focus on food and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship.

There were two phases to this study. The first phase involved a quantitative approach consisting of a written survey designed to attain the perceptions of a diverse group of participants regarding the appropriateness of various forms of sport sponsorship and to determine whether there were any differences according to the demographics of gender, age, educational background, as well as smoking, eating, and exercise habits. The second phase utilized a qualitative focus group approach and constitutes the focus of this presentation. Its purpose was to elaborate on the perceptions of various forms of sponsorship, but to also determine the thought process involved when making decisions about sponsorship. Two one-hour focus group sessions of six participants per group were conducted (N = 12) and included a variety of constituents—students (philosophy, sport marketing), professors (sport nutrition, health promotion, and ethics experts), coaches, athlete, personal trainer, hospital administrator, primary care and sport medicine physician, event coordinator, marketing coordinator, and sponsor. Four questions formed the basis of the discussion.

The first question asked the participants to reflect how they would make a decision on the type of sponsor if they were in charge of soliciting sponsorship for a sporting event. The second question asked them on what basis they would make a decision about the suitability of sponsors for a sporting event. The third question asked their opinion about appropriate and inappropriate sponsors. The final question asked whether government should become involved in legislation regarding types of sponsorship. The focus group sessions were tape-recorded and detailed notes were taken by the research team.

Participants indicated that when seeking a potential sponsor for their event, it was necessary to understand which companies could financially afford to sponsor, and which companies were appropriate matches for the event itself. Further consideration was given to the role of personal ethics in decision making, the sponsoring company's image, ethical practices, and ability to promote a healthy message. Participants noted that concerns will arise according to the audience in attendance at the event and the athletes participating. For instance, participants felt a sense of responsibility to deliver an appropriate sponsor according to key demographic variables such as age (i.e., college sports versus pro sports). Hence, the influence of a younger audience was a key consideration for participants when deciding upon an appropriate sport sponsor. Participants noted that sport is celebrated for its positive message on a person's health, and that sport sponsors should have the ability to promote a similar message through the sporting event. As a result of this belief, many felt that assessing the degree of harm of the potential sponsoring organization's product or services was critical. Participants agreed that sponsoring organizations promoting health would be most appropriate for their event (i.e., governing agencies, health foods, and health clubs). The opinions of participants were mixed as to whether government should be allowed to make laws preventing certain forms of sponsorship. Yet, participants were in agreement that something needs to be done to curb the obesity epidemic, and that more research should be undertaken

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before any legislation could take place.

The results of this study confirmed that having sponsorship support to run an event, league, or team was critical to their success, but assessing the degree of harm should be carefully considered by event organizers. Close attention must be paid to the type and fit of sponsors, especially in light of the ethical dilemma of using tobacco, alcohol, and fast food sponsorship. For sport marketers looking to secure sponsorships and send the proper message, the removal of the big three (tobacco, alcohol, and fast food) from the sponsorship equation makes the task much more difficult.