

Understanding Sport Brand Associates and their Potential Influence on Communication

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Understanding brand associations has been important to marketers for some time but has perhaps been brought to the fore by Keller's research on consumer based brand equity (1993). Keller based his ideas of brand knowledge on brand awareness and brand image, with brand awareness relating to brand recall and recognition performance by consumers and brand image referring to "the set of associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in memory" (p. 2). Brand associations include all types of perceptions held in memory, for example, attributes, benefits and attitudes-essentially other informational nodes linked to the brand and containing meaning. As sport brands pair with consumer brands via corporate sponsorship and charities through beneficiary sponsorships understanding the communications potential of each partner is key to successful marketing platforms. That brand information held in memory influences all manner of consumer behavior is undisputed. The problem lies in obtaining a meaningful map of what is held in memory and how it is utilized. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand sport brands as stimulus words in a free association task.

A practical distinction might be drawn between brand associations and brand associates. Associations, as discussed in marketing, are concepts such as "high quality service" or "good value" whereas associates, as discussed in the psychology literature, are immediate responses or "free associations." One could say that associates are largely defined by the paradigm since associates are what are generated in free response to a word as a cue. This is a particular kind of association in memory. Thus, all associates are associations but not all associations function like associates in their immediate, unconsidered relationship to a cue. Nelson, McEvoy and Schreiber (1998) have used data from a number of word association studies in order to produce what they describe as "the largest database of free association ever collected in the United States ... More than 6,000 participants produced nearly three-quarters of a million responses to 5,019 stimulus words." The majority of the words in the database are nouns (76%), however, adjectives (13%), verbs (7%) and other parts of speech are also included. While some sports like tennis and terms such as "net" are included in the Nelson database, brands, in the main are not. What then are typical sport brand associates? Knowing what a brand brings to mind would support the development of communications about the sport brand.

METHOD: Participants and Materials- Volunteer participants were recruited at a large state university. Participants were 71 males and 72 females (N = 143) aged 15 to 63 years (M = 23.52, SD =9.51). The materials consisted of a four-page booklet. The first page was a combined information sheet, consent form and demographic questions, age and gender. The remaining three pages of the booklet presented 68 stimulus items, which included 39 brand names and 29 regular words. Procedure- Participants were asked to write the first word (and only one word) that came to mind when they read each stimulus word. Participants were provided with examples: if the term were 'INDY 500,' you might write 'SPEED.'" They were asked to progress quickly through the booklet, without moving backward, however, the task had no time limit. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their effort and given a short debriefing. Results- In many instances a strong link from the brand to the sport was found. For example, in response to WIMBLEDON, TENNIS was supplied as the first associate 75% of the time. Another response profile was to supply a major symbol or component of the sport. For example, in response to KENTUCKY DERBY, most individuals responded with HORSES (79%). Other sport brands, such as FORMULA 1, had split profiles (RACING 31%, CAR 24%). Interestingly, WNBA links to WOMEN (33%) more frequently than to BASKETBALL (24%) whereas LPGA links to GOLF (30%) more frequently than to WOMEN (14%).

Clearly, understanding the sport brand in this way is important for advertising development, logo selections and marketing communications designed to develop or change image. The work to build a memorable sponsorship relationship is reduced when the brands to be combined already share strong associates. That is to say, articulating a link between a sponsor and a sport (Cornwell et al. 2006,) is made easier when they share basic memory building blocks (Cornwell 2008).