Towards a Typology of Ambush Marketing Strategies

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Introduction

This paper will present and discuss the initial findings of a study in which the nature, definition and forms of ambush marketing have been examined. The study has been based around the following research question: to what extent has the changing sponsorship environment impacted upon ambush marketing, and what are the managerial implications for sport sponsors? Amongst the main outcomes of the study has been the identification of eleven types of ambush marketing, each of which will be detailed in a presentation of the research findings.

Overview

Within sponsorship literature, ambush marketing research has emerged over the past twenty years as an area of considerable interest, characterized by four predominant themes: (a) an identification of what ambush marketing is, and its aims and objectives (Sandler & Shani, 1989; Meenaghan, 1994; Crompton, 2004; Séguin & O’Reilly, 2008); (b) the use of consumer-based measures of ambush marketing’s impact on sponsorship, such as post-event consumer recall sponsorship studies (Sandler & Shani, 1989; Meenaghan, 1998; McDaniel & Kinney, 1998); (c) the discussion of the ethical concerns surrounding ambush marketing, and the morality of ambush campaigns (Meenaghan, 1994; Payne, 1998; O’Sullivan & Murphy, 1998); and (d) the exploration of the legal implications of ambush marketing efforts, and the relationship between ambush, intellectual property rights, and passing-off (Townley et al., 1998; McKelvey, 2006; McKelvey & Grady, 2008).

Research focus

While the existing research has provided an insight into a range of issues pertaining ambushing, it nevertheless remains a largely underdeveloped field. Furthermore, although the discussion of ambush marketing is rooted in sponsorship research, there is a dearth of work in areas including the impact of ambush marketing, from practical, managerial and strategic perspectives. Finally, there are few current definitions of ambushing in the literature, and no strong consensus amongst researchers about what constitutes ambushing nor how it impacts upon official sponsors. Our current academic understanding of ambush marketing is based on twenty-year old definitions of it, which in turn are based on restricted notions of ambusher aims, motives, and uses of ambush marketing as a marketing communications tool. It is with these limitations in mind that this paper re-conceptualizes ambushing, contributes a definitive understanding of contemporary ambush marketing, and adds to the existing discussion on sponsorship management and protection.

Methodology

Initially, a database of 375+ reported cases was created and analysed using appropriate coding and measurement techniques. Thereafter, a series of semi-structured, explorative interviews (n=15) were conducted with industry practitioners and researchers, representing both those who are engaged in ambushing activity and stakeholders in the official sponsorship framework. These interviews were also coded and analysed, leading to the construction of a typology of ambush marketing strategies. Drawing from the literature on ambush, parasite, guerrilla, and event marketing, the typology of ambushing that was conceptualised and formulated, identifies eleven ambushing strategies including ‘Predatory Ambushing’ – the direct ambushing of a market competitor; and ‘Values Ambushing’ – the adoption by an ambusher of an official event’s stated values or themes in order to imply association.

Implications

The typology, as well as an extensive investigation of the responses to ambush marketing by commercial rights holders over the past twenty-five years, have led to the conceptualisation of an hypothesized conceptual model of
the impact ambush marketing and the changes to sponsorship in recent years has had on sponsorship management, a framework to be further tested in future research. This model, as well as a renewed definition of ambush marketing and the development of an ambush marketing typology, provide the foundations for a re-conceptualization of ambushing. As such, the research and its findings adds both to the academic, conceptual understanding of ambush marketing, as well as to the practical management of it by event owners/managers, and by ambushers themselves.

References


