A primary goal of sponsorship activity is to increase the awareness of companies, brands or products (Abratt, Clayton & Pitt, 1987; Irwin & Sutton, 1994; Thwaites, 1994). Without awareness, higher-level objectives such as brand positioning cannot be achieved. Modern sport organizations rely on sponsorship for funding and financial viability, but increasingly are asked to provide return-on-investment evidence to their sponsors. Sponsorship impact has proven to be a difficult thing to assess (Hoek, 1999; Walliser, 2003) and empirical evidence of sponsorship effectiveness remains limited (Stotlar, 2004).

There are four stages at which the visibility and effectiveness of sponsorship can be measured - exposure, attention, cognition and behavior (Hansen & Scotwin, 1996). The current research focuses on the second of these stages, which is measured in terms of brand or sponsor awareness. Sponsor recall and recognition are both common methods of measuring consumer awareness and reaction towards advertising or sponsorship messages (Pitts & Slattery, 2004). Recall, where respondents are not prompted as to the identity of the sponsor is a more stringent measure of awareness than recognition (where sponsors are identified from an existing list).

Four factors have been found to impact the ability of consumers or the public to recall sponsors. The first two relate to the sponsoring organization, with relatedness to the sporting property and prominence of the sponsoring company within its industry or consumer market shown to influence the achieved level of recall and recognition (Johar & Pham, 1999; Wakefield, Becker-Olsen & Cornwell, 2007). In addition, the level of the sponsorship (e.g. major sponsors opposed to minor sponsors) was also identified as a factor of influence (Quester & Farell, 1998; Wakefield et. al, 2007). Finally, exposure to individuals has been considered in multiple studies, with correlations found between recall and game attendance (Alvarado, n.d.), media exposure (Cornwell, Relyea, Irwin & Madrigal, 2000) and sponsor awareness over time (e.g., pre and post season, see Pitts & Slattery, 2004, Shilbury & Berrigan, 1996).

While the impact of time on sponsor recall has been previously considered in sporting team settings, studies have been primarily restricted to looking at the same sponsors using pre and post season single year measures (Pitts & Slattery, 2004; Shilbury & Berrigan, 1996; Slattery & Pitts, 2002), rather than across multiple years where sponsors of a sporting property may have changed. An exception is Quester and Farell (1998) who looked at the sponsorship of an annual event and influencing factors on awareness over a period of four years. Given the paucity of research into recall rates over extended periods, past studies have encouraged the testing of sponsorship awareness levels over time in order to study effectiveness (Pitts & Slattery, 2004). It is suggested that one shot or single year studies are limited in providing understanding of the lasting effects of awareness for a sponsor, and hence the enduring, or residual effectiveness of extended sponsorship contracts. The research presented here supports and extends previous investigations of sponsor awareness by considering recall rates of sporting club sponsors over multiple years.

Here, recall data was collected from season ticket holders (STH) of a single club in the Australian Football League (AFL). The subject club had five major (between one and three concurrently), eleven minor and three apparel sponsors over the seven year period of investigation. As such, in addition to analysis of multiple levels of sponsorships, the dataset provided multiple cases of sponsors who began sponsorship and many sponsors who ceased sponsorship during the period examined, allowing examination of growth and decay rates in recall.

The AFL is a sixteen team national competition. There are national sponsors of the entire competition (e.g., Toyota) but each club also has a tiered range of major and minor sponsors, varying by expenditure and exposure. Respondents were subject to a blind (unaided) recall question as part of an online, end of year STH study conducted at the conclusion of each of seven consecutive years. An embedded email survey was distributed to each STH with a valid email address, with between 1195 and 4578 respondents obtained for each year. This represented response rates of between 31% and 36% of those invited to participate in each year of the survey. The sponsor recall
questions asked respondents to name, unaided, up to five club sponsors from the current year in the order of which they could be recalled and enter them into separate open text boxes. Over 22,500 individual sets of responses were coded and collated manually in MS Excel and SPSS to determine total recall percentages for each sponsor for each year. Incorrect responses or respondents who noted former club sponsors were also collated and calculated. In all, sponsor recall data was collected and reported for 19 club sponsors over the seven year period. Managers from the club were interviewed to provide detail on the context and situation regarding trends and outliers in the dataset.

A clear relationship between recall and the level of sponsorship was evident, with recall levels aligning very closely with expenditure. While studies have supported a link between brand or sponsor exposure and recall (for example, Quester & Farelly, 1998), explicit findings related to recall for tiers of sponsors have been limited. One example is Wakefield et al.'s (2007) single year sponsor recognition study, which found enhanced overall sponsorship recognition for higher tiers of sponsors. We support this across multiple years with major sponsors gaining an average recall of 90.6% compared with minor sponsors, who reached a maximum of 44.1% and an average of 21.5%. Major sponsors also grew recall more quickly than minor sponsors. The consistency of this finding over multiple years of data suggests that this is not a function of sponsor age or lifecycle, although length of tenure was also correlated with recall within the major and minor sponsor tiers.

In contrast to Quester and Farelly’s (1998) event based research, sponsor recall increased consistently with the number of years the sponsor was involved with the club. Where sponsorships had ended, residual recall rates in the year following exit ranged vastly from 6.1% to 22.3% of sponsors peak recall levels (the average was 14.9% of peak recall level). They fell further to an average of 5.3% of peak recall in the second year following termination. Similar to current sponsorships, strength of residual recall or carry over awareness for non-continuing sponsors correlated with sponsorship length. Media publicity surrounding the company’s termination of the sponsorship was thought by management of this club to have impacted the decay rate of recall of some sponsors.

Overall, findings suggest recall is associated most closely with the level of sponsorship, but also with the length of sponsorship. Very high levels of recall are possible but although they can be quickly gained, they can also decay rapidly. It is realistic from the cases reported, and supported by club managers, that the length of sponsorship, exit strategy and related media coverage around departing sponsors can play a role in influencing both the continued awareness of non-sponsors, as well as the image of the exiting sponsor. Results provide support to clubs and sponsors who engage in prominent, long term, strategic partnerships, providing evidence that awareness increases for high profile sponsors of longer years. This growing nature of awareness, combined with the high loyalty and involvement of club STH presents evidence of a highly desirable situation for sponsors.


