Consumer Inference of Multiple Team Sponsorship and Its Effect on Sponsorship Outcomes

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Marketing Abstract 2010-160
25-minute oral presentation
11:00 AM
Cormorant

General Motors has sponsored a number of major league baseball teams including the New York Yankees, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Chicago Cubs, and the San Diego Padres. Some companies sponsor a large number of properties concurrently. Multiple team sponsorship (MTS) is based on strategies such as establishing a marketing platform in all key market areas and developing business relations with major local business partners. Even though MTS appears to be a sound marketing strategy, there may be a concern. Consumers, particularly fans, of a team may believe that the sponsor does not have any true interest in their team or the fans because of the multiple sponsorships.

Scholars (e.g., Bailey & Cole, 2004; Mowen & Brown, 1981) have used the ANOVA principle proposed by Kelley (1967) to predict how consumers attribute multiple product endorsement. Attribution in these studies was predicted by the distinctiveness dimension of the ANOVA model. Distinctiveness refers to whether an actor relates to one object in the same way as he does to other objects (Ross & Fletcher, 1985). In the context of MTS, low distinctiveness refers to a company relating to multiple teams in the same way that it relates to the focal team. In this case, co-variation between the company and the focal team becomes weak; this in turn increases the likelihood that consumers will attribute the cause of behavior to the actor and not to the object. It is hypothesized that a company sponsoring multiple teams, in contrast with a company sponsoring a single team, will be evaluated by consumers (fans) as lacking a genuine interest in the team and its fans. Sincerity perception is expected to have a profound effect on sponsor evaluation. Meenaghan (2001) has noted that goodwill has a cascading effect on various sponsorship outcomes. Goodwill is derived largely from an appreciation of a sponsor’s provision of benefits to the property they care for. This appreciation is not a function solely of the instrumentality of financial support. Goodwill can also be contingent on consumer perception of sponsor intents or dispositions (e.g., sincerity). As Meenaghan has noted that “the nature of caring displayed toward the activity and its fans” and “the level of overt sponsor commitment” influence contingent goodwill (Meenaghan, 2001, p. 109). Even though several determinants of contingent goodwill have been postulated (e.g., Meenaghan, 2001), no studies have yet empirically tested the proposed factors. This study will examine whether consumer attribution of MTS has a significant effect on contingent goodwill.

Past research has shown that highly identified fans are more likely to evaluate sponsors positively (e.g., Madrigal, 2000; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Highly identified fans have been found to be more sensitive to information about group membership—in-group versus out-group (Brown & Ross, 1982 as cited in Gwinner, 2005). Gwinner (2006) reasoned that highly identified fans are more likely to pay more attention to event sponsors because sponsors can be categorized as in-group members. In the current study, it is posited that that highly identified fans (compared to less identified fans) are more likely to draw negative inference from a multiple team sponsor (compared to a single team sponsor) because they fail to identify the sponsor as their in-group member.

The proposed study will employ a 2 (single vs. multiple) x 2 (high ID vs. Low ID) factorial, between subjects, randomized experimental design. The three dependent variables are perceived sincerity, attitude toward the sponsor, and purchase intention. Perceived sincerity herein is a surrogate measure of contingent goodwill toward a sponsor, being comprised of two items—“sponsor [name] has genuine interest in [name] football team” and “sponsor [name] care about the fans of [name] football team,”—adopted from the study of Dees, Bennett, and Villegas (2008) and one—“sponsor [name] cares more about its promotion than the success of the [name] football,”—from Alexandris, Tsaousi, and James (2007). The subjects in the study will be undergraduate students enrolled in sport management courses at a large Southeastern university. The effect of treatments (single vs. multiple) on three dependent variables will be analyzed by a factorial MANCOVA (covariate: the pretest measure of sponsor attitude). A separate SEM multiple group analysis will examine whether there is any significant difference between high or low identified people in terms of structural relations between the dependent variables.
It is expected that consumers will make negative dispositional inferences about a company sponsoring multiple teams, which will result in reduced positivity in the perception of goodwill and sponsor evaluations. Highly identified fans are, compared with less identified fans, expected to be more sensitive to information about MTS and more derogatory about such an act. The structural relations between dependent variables will be analyzed a posteriori. It will be interesting to see how sincerity attribution relates to attitude toward sponsor between highly involved versus less involved fans. Does negative attribution lead to negative evaluation of a sponsor? Are highly involved fans still likely to evaluate a sponsor positively in spite of negative attribution simply because the company is still the sponsor of the team? The theoretical framework used for this study will stimulate further studies investigating the effect of various sponsor actions, strategies, and decision making on consumer inferences.