The Effect of Sponsorship Activation Via Integrated Marketing Communications at Collegiate Baseball Games

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Unlike the general pool of products available for sale to a consumer, sports offer a unique set of circumstances. For example, if a consumer does not like the outcome of the game or the outcome was not what he or she expected, they can’t simply return the product. This research is the second portion of a comprehensive study to determine the most cost-effective and beneficial form of sport sponsorship as it pertains to a Division I athletic department and their contracted marketing partner. By identifying the effectiveness of various forms of in-game advertising the potential of sport sponsorships can be maximized.

This study was designed to measure the effectiveness of field-sponsorship stimuli at collegiate baseball games by measuring brand recognition both before and after the game itself. More specifically, this experiment will test the posit by Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) that stated, "The manner in which sponsors leveraged or activated their respective sponsorship may have influenced recall and recognition rates (p.152)." This particularly pertains to the integrated marketing communication mix at collegiate baseball events that included specific public-address-activated promotions corresponding to specific field sponsors. At the university’s baseball park there are 27 sponsors whose signage appears on the portion of the outfield wall that is visible to spectators. In addition to simple signage, Smoothie King employs the use of in-game public address announcements and promotional items to further represent the brand. When a player from the home team hits a homerun over the Smoothie King sign in left field, everyone in the stadium receives a free smoothie upon going to the store to redeem their prize.

This research is important in order to recognize and understand the perception and response aspects of sponsorship activation as they apply to sport sponsorship. Further, this study will move away from the general mass communication theory (Olkkonen, Tikkanen, & Alajoutsijarvi, 2000) and strive to define new standards and practices that will prove pertinent to corporate sponsors and advertisers as they strategize, develop, and execute brand sponsorship advertisements to be placed in a stadium setting. For purposes of this study, only in-stadium field sponsorships will be considered. Field sponsorships refer to the placement of "sponsored messages, usually involving a name or logo on sports equipment and billboards located around the event arena (Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001, p.168)." Pham and Vanhuele (1997) also note that field sponsorship stimuli are "messages that are limited to the brand name or to a few words summarizing the brand’s positioning platform (p.407)." These stimuli don’t interrupt the observation by spectators of the event being sponsored. This type of sponsorship seeks a response through communicating to the audience the association of the sponsoring brand or brands with the event (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

For this communication to take place the consumer has to receive the message, in this case the association between the brand and event, interpret it, and ultimately absorb it. However, interpretation and absorption are very difficult to accomplish, let alone measure, especially given the atmosphere of a stadium environment. Crompton (2004) notes that noise plays a significant factor in the communication process. In the stadium setting, noise comes in many forms and is most defective between the "message channel" and "reception" stages of the communication process. In such a case, selective perception occurs. Level of involvement in an event also has an effect on consumer memory and sponsorship effectiveness (Pham, 1992). Spectators with low levels of involvement in an event tend to have a general disinterest in the event as a whole, including any and all sponsorship stimuli. Further, McDaniel (1999) posits that according to the Match-up Hypothesis, "advertising response is influenced by a perceived match (or similarity) between an endorser’s image attributes, brand image attributes, and/or the function of a product (p.167)." The correlation among these theories infers that in terms of sponsorship recall, a product or service whose message conveys its function positions itself as having a high brand value and thus establishes a match with the consumer. Therefore the advertised functionality of a product allows for it to break into the selective retention of the target consumer by associating its capabilities with the needs of the target consumer.

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In terms of financial implications of sponsorship, the measurement of brand recognition, recall, and awareness are well-established methods for examining consumer awareness of sponsorships, which ultimately parlay into sales (Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Stotlar & Johnson, 1989). According to Miloch and Lambrecht (2006), sponsors who activated their sponsorship received mean recognition and recall rates that were twice as high as those who did not. This also relates to the finding of Pitts (1998), who found that promotional merchandise and on-site demonstrations increased awareness as well.

The instrument used in this study utilized a 5-point Likert scale to measure respondents’ brand recognition regarding eight separate food-related brands that currently purchase advertising space on the outfield wall at the baseball stadium. Of the eight sponsors, Smoothie King is the only one that also utilizes in-game public address advertising to compliment its placement on the outfield wall. Respondents were asked to identify their recognition of each of the listed brands prior to and after the game. A convenience sample of 152 attendees at three different games was utilized for the study.

Data was initially analyzed using a paired-samples t-test to determine the significance of respondents’ brand recognition after the game, as opposed to before the game. Brand recognition was significantly higher for each sponsor after the game. The data was then analyzed using a one-way ANOVA to determine whether or not there was a significant difference in brand recognition for Smoothie King versus the other sponsors. No significant difference was found in this test. However, it should be noted that when the data was analyzed from one game in which a homerun was hit there was a positive significant difference in brand recognition for Smoothie King.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not the addition of a costly promotion on the part of Smoothie King is statistically worth the investment in terms of brand recognition. Though there were conflicting results, further evaluation of the data analysis revealed that the extra amount spent by Smoothie King on integrated marketing communications (i.e. the free smoothie promotion administered via in-game public address announcements) is not cost-effective as far as brand recognition is concerned unless a homerun is hit during the game.