

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

Sponsorship of a College Sports Fan Website

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Communication

Thursday, May 30, 2013

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)**

Abstract 2013-079

4:40 PM

(Room 406)

Sport specific message boards continue to increase in popularity among sport consumers (Clavio, 2008; Frederick, Clavio, Burch & Zimmerman, 2012). Online communities have become a common way for individuals from around the globe to stay connected (Cuellar, 2011), and serve “as a source of knowledge and a repository of information from which members draw on their real-life experiences” (p. 206). In North America, 17 million sports fans are online on average 14 hours a week (Deveau, 2012). With the evolution of mobile technology, over 50% of devoted sports fans claim to use tablets or smartphones to access sports content while also watching sports on television (Laird, 2012).

The continued popularity of these communication mediums has led to the monetization of the platforms via memberships and sponsorships. The revenue produced, via sponsorships and advertising, by such communication mediums continues to increase. Internet ad revenues increased more than \$25 million over the past ten years, totaling \$31.7 million in 2011 (IAB Revenue Report, 2012).

Despite increases in usage, popularity and revenue there is a relative paucity of original research on these communications mediums. Investigations assessing sponsorship and advertising effectiveness as they relate to the sport specific message boards is especially lacking. Consistent with the notion of sponsorship effectiveness, it is important that brand managers involved in sponsorships of Internet-based communication mediums evaluate whether their marketing efforts are reaching and/or influencing the intended and targeted audience.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of one firm’s sponsorship of a fan website devoted to a BCS University’s athletic programs. Meenaghan’s (2001) model of sponsorship effects serves as the framework for this investigation. The sponsorship effects of goodwill, fan identification, favorable disposition toward the sponsoring firm, and purchase intentions described by Meenaghan (2001) as vital to effective sponsorship communications will be analyzed via this investigation. An underlying premise of this inquiry is that sponsorship as a positioning strategy can enhance brand preference among specific, targeted consumer groups. Given that exposure to sponsorship takes place, the degree to which targeted groups are associated with the consumption of sponsoring brands indicates how well the sponsorship efforts enhanced brand use among the targeted group.

A survey, designed to assess the constructs in Meenaghan’s (2001) model, has been constructed for this investigation. The survey was developed using Qualtrics software so that it can be taken by respondents online. Conducting the study online seems especially appropriate or warranted given the nature of the study. Questionnaire items were selected based upon Meenaghan’s (2001) work along with additional studies focusing on sponsorship effects. The effectiveness of the firms sponsorship of the fan website will be measured through responses to a series of statements rated on a 7-point Likert-scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly agree. Demographic data and media usage habits will be collected on the respondents.

Owners of the fan website will post the Qualtrics survey on the site with a message encouraging its members and users to participate in the study. No incentives will be provided to obtain responses, participation in the study will be voluntary. No identifying information will be collected, responses will be anonymous. After organizing and analyzing the data from the survey responses, we will compare the data obtained to previous sponsorship effectiveness studies. Demographics and media usage habits will be described in regard to any differences the data indicate as noteworthy. Much of the discussion, however, will focus on the effectiveness of the sponsorship for the sponsoring firm.

This study will add to the extant literature on sponsorship of websites, revenue production via sports fan websites

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and sponsorship effectiveness. This investigation will make a specific contribution to the sport marketing literature by providing a better understanding of the role sponsorship can play in positioning a sponsoring brand to users of sport fan websites. It will likewise add to the literature on message board users and fan websites. Results will be discussed in light of prior work on each of the constructs. Marketing and managerial implications will be discussed along with future research directions based upon the results of the investigation.