

Sponsorship Awareness in Professional Soccer: An Examination of Recall and Recognition Among Team Fans

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Introduction

The practice of sponsoring professional soccer teams represents a key marketing strategy used by firms to communicate with mass audiences (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2004), and the awareness of a sponsor is a vital indicator for understanding the value of a sponsorship deal (Walsh, Kim, & Ross, 2008). Past research suggests that seeing a sponsor's name associated with an event on a regular basis reinforces the impression of the product-sports relationship in the consumers' mind (Yang, Sparks, & Li, 2008). In addition, consumers who are more knowledgeable about the teams (e.g., season-ticket holders) tend to become more aware of the sponsors than those who are less knowledgeable (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010). However, soccer fans are exposed to multiple sponsors during matches between the team and their opponents, suggesting that sponsors face competition among several competing brands (Chavanat, Martinent, & Ferrand, 2009). Given this consideration, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, we examine the awareness of multiple sponsors of a professional soccer team among their fans. Second, this study compares sponsorship awareness among season-ticket holders and casual spectators of the team matches.

Method

The study sample consisted of fans from a Portuguese professional soccer team. In consultation with the club's marketing personnel, a mail survey was sent to 4000 fans randomly selected from the club's database. A total of 2068 surveys were returned. After data screening, 1834 responses were deemed usable for data analysis. Established recall and recognition measures were used to assess sponsorship awareness (Walsh et al., 2008). To assess recall, participants were asked to name, without any cues, the sponsors of the team. The recognition measure was assessed using a list of twelve brands containing six true sponsors and six non-sponsors. At the time of data collection, the team had twelve official sponsors, but due to proprietary information both the team and its sponsors are referred to here anonymously. The true sponsors included in the list were brands from the following product-category and activation strategies: TV services (team shirt and stadium stands); beer (team shirt and stadium stands); sportswear (team shirt); non-alcoholic beverage (stadium stands); gas (discounts for club members); bank (naming rights on team training facility). The non-sponsors were all rival brands with other soccer sponsorship deals: TV services (sponsor of the league); beer, sportswear, and non-alcoholic beverage (sponsors of two rival teams); gas (sponsor of the national team); bank (former sponsor of the team, and current sponsor of the most famous Portuguese player). Data were analyzed with SPSS 20.0, with the frequencies being used to determine recall and recognition rates among participants. In order to obtain recall and recognition scores, the number of incorrect responses was subtracted from the total brands recalled and recognized. Subsequently, ANOVA tests were performed to assess differences in the recall and recognition between season-ticket holders and casual spectators.

Results

The brands with the highest recall rates were those visible on the team shirt and/or in the stadium stands (beer=85.1%; non-alcoholic beverage=79.3%; TV services=75.5%; sportswear=55.4%). The brands with other activation strategies were recalled by less than one-third of the respondents (gas=29.8%; bank=20.0%), while the non-sponsors from the list were almost never mentioned as sponsors of the team. The recognition rates of the sponsors were considerably higher than the recall rates, and ranged from 82.5% (bank) to 98.2% (brands of TV

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services and beer). The non-sponsor brands of beer, sportswear, non-alcoholic beverage, and gas, were all recognized incorrectly as team sponsors by less than one-tenth of the fans. However, the non-sponsor brand of TV services was recognized incorrectly by 23.0% of the fans. Similarly, 51.2% mentioned incorrectly that the non-sponsor bank was a current sponsor of the team. The ANOVA results indicated significant differences among season-ticket holders and casual spectators in both the recall and recognition scores (Wilk's Lambda=.983, $p<.001$). The number of sponsors recalled correctly by the season-ticket holders was significantly higher than for the casual spectators ($F=15.37$, $p<.001$). Consistently, the group of fans with season-ticket recognized a significant higher number of sponsors, as opposed to casual spectators without season-ticket ($F=23.25$, $p<.001$).

Discussion and Implications

The findings support the idea that soccer sponsorship is a good strategy for enhancing brand awareness (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2004), which is particularly evident among those sponsors visible in the team shirt and the stadium's stands. The higher levels of recognition, when compared with recall, suggest that fans are more effective in recognizing sponsors in a scenario with several brands, as opposed to when the task involves more mental processing such as recall (Lardinoix & Derbaix, 2001). Interestingly, the non-sponsor brands of bank and TV services were recognized incorrectly as team sponsors by a substantial amount of respondents. This suggests that these brands' strong engagement in soccer environments and the fact they do not sponsor other teams, may lead respondents to recognize them incorrectly as team sponsors. Thus, brands engaged in sport sponsorship should strive to emphasize the characteristics of their products and highlight the legitimacy with the teams. Finally, the higher levels of recall and recognition among the season-ticket holders suggest that firms will obtain more benefits by sponsoring teams with a strong base of regular consumers (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010), while the clubs should work at increasing the attendance levels in order to become better assets for investors. The findings from this study provide numerous opportunities to continue advancing our knowledge of sport sponsorship.

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