Sport League Website: An Effective Marketing Communication Tool for Corporate Sponsors

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With the meteoric rise of the Internet, online sponsorships are now regarded as a necessary marketing communication tool for corporations. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), Internet sponsorship revenues increased from $383 million in 2009 to $845 million in 2011 (IAB, 2013). Many sport organizations have capitalized on their web presence to court and attract sponsors by selling banner ads, online commercials, and ‘click through’ website links. In spite of this trend in sport, a lack of research has been conducted on the psychological aspects of web users and Internet sponsorships. Based on this observation, the purpose of this study was to explore three main sponsorship effects: (1) perceived website interactivity (Wu, 2006), (2) website fit to the sponsor (Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson, 2009), and (3) website credibility (Rodgers, 2004), in relation to the outcomes of attitude toward the Internet ad, willingness to click on the banner ad, attitude toward the sponsoring brand, and purchase intentions for the sponsor product. In addition, pre-existing credibility of the sponsoring brand (Lafferty, 2007) was chosen as a control variable.

Whether viewing a live game on television or website, National Basketball Association (NBA) fans are forced to watch sponsored commercials. While the argument may arise that these two media are similar, there are two sweeping differences. First, compared with traditional commercials, an online video will almost always be accompanied by a subsequent banner ad. This banner ad is hyperlinked to the sponsor’s website providing a ‘clickable’ mechanism for consumers to navigate to the sponsor’s web page, which according to Goldsmith and Lafferty (2002) can improve brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This is a critical function of the online environment since visitors to corporate websites have the ability to access online content without being restricted by time and place (Berthon, Pitt, & Watson, 1996; Brown, 2003). Based on this, website advertising provides a more interactive way for sponsors to connect with consumers, over and above traditional television sponsorships. Second, website users are more easily and accurately tracked in the online environment with regards to the products and services they search for and purchase (Evans & Smith, 2004). This aspect of the Internet helps organizations like the NBA better align with their target market by sorting their traffic into demographic piles. For example, several studies found that targeted ads can be effective even when the targeted group is a numeric majority (Appiah & Liu, 2009; Grier & Deshpande, 2001). Therefore, the dollars allocated to an analytic web environment can provide a greater return on investment for the parent organization and its sponsors if they align with the core demographics for a given product/service (Hur, Ko, & Claussen, 2011). Such demographic features of online users are different from the physical fan base in the NBA (Jensen, 1995). For instance, a 2010 profile of NBA fans found that 60% were male, 32% were aged 18 to 34 years, 77% were white, 80% spent between one and twenty hours per week on the Internet, and 29% regularly checked game results and watched highlight videos (Scarborough Sports Marketing, 2010). These data inform the NBA’s decisions to solicit sponsors interested in capturing these particular demographics.

In order to examine Internet sponsor effectiveness, Sprint, one of the official sponsors for the NBA, was selected for the study. This company accounts for the majority of sponsorship dollars allocated to the NBA and sponsors an ancillary NBA event, which includes, for example, the Sprint Halftime Report. Furthermore, the brand name of this sponsor is frequently exposed on the NBA website, while regularly presenting its commercial and banner ad before and during game highlight videos. In order to present a commercial and banner ad of the sponsor, a mock NBA website was developed as an exact copy of the original but allowed the researchers to control the commercial and banner ad. The first page of the website (i.e., the main page of the NBA website) was comprised of six NBA video clips. The second page included a 30-second commercial and banner ad of the corporate sponsor. The third page was created in the same manner, except for substituting a three-minute NBA highlight video for the commercial. In
order to control for any team biasing effects, a general weekly highlight video, comprised of all league action, was used. Each participant received instructions to navigate the NBA website in a planned way. After navigating the website, each person responded to the questionnaire. Existing scales were adapted to measure perceived interactivity (Wu, 1999), sponsorship fit (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008), website credibility (Haley, 1996), corporate credibility (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006), attitude toward the ad (Cho, 1999), attitude toward the sponsoring brand (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008), and purchase intentions (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). Finally, a single-item ‘willingness to click on the banner ad’ measure was created for the study. All measures demonstrated adequate internal consistency (i.e., Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from .70 → .91).

Data were collected from N=120 students at a large public university in the southern United States. The appropriateness of using student samples was supported by the Pew Internet and American life project (2009). The project reported that 89% of people ranging from 18 → 24 years old use the Internet to search for product and service information, which comprises the highest proportional percentage of all Internet users. Furthermore, these demographic data are also consistent with the NBA fan-base (see Scarborough Sports Marketing, 2010). For the manipulation check, all the subjects correctly recalled the name of the sponsor. The results of individual coefficients indicated statistical significance for perceived interactivity on respondents’ attitude toward the ad ($\beta=.48$, $p<.001$) and willingness to click on the banner ad ($\beta=.30$, $p<.01$), and website sponsorship fit on attitude toward the ad ($\beta=.29$, $p<.001$). In sum, the results show that perceived interactivity significantly influenced consumers’ attitude toward the online ad and willingness to click on the banner ad. Furthermore, website fit predicted attitude toward the ad. On the other hand, the study showed that the negative relationship between perceived interactivity and purchase intentions exists, which was not expected. In addition, sponsor credibility influenced willingness to click on the banner ad, attitude toward the banner ad, and purchase intentions.

The results suggest that in order to maximize online sponsorship outcomes, sport organizations should enter partnerships with companies who are perceived as credible. On the other hand, companies should consider online sport sponsorships which provide a website that fits with their core product and represents interactive features for corporate sponsors to effectively deliver their intended message to a target consumer group. Although the primary purpose of high-profile sport league website users is not to view the commercial and banner ad of a corporate sponsor, they are likely to become interested in the corporate ads and seek further information on sponsor products, while these fans are interacting with the site via hyperlinks. As such, the interactivity between the web users and the site should be regarded as a key factor that enables the success of online sponsorships and distinguishes it from traditional sponsorship types. In order to better generalize the results to current corporate sponsors, national studies should be conducted to collect data from NBA fans who actually watch highlight videos on the website.