Counter-Strategies to Fight Ambush Marketing: The Sponsor Perspective

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As sport sponsorship has been in a state of expansion over the past decades, so too has the practice of ambush marketing. Ambush marketing describes activities of brands aimed to generate the positive effects of sponsorship without an official affiliation with the entity. This means that ambushers associate their brand with entities without possessing official sponsorship rights (Burton & Chadwick, 2008).

While ambush marketing is a serious concern for official sponsors and sponsored entities, its prevention is a challenging task. The establishment of clean zones in and around event venues can protect official sponsors on-site. However, it seems relatively insignificant as the majority of today’s ambush (and sponsorship) activities occur in the media. Legal actions have proven ineffective because there are numerous opportunities for associative advertising beyond illegal activities such as trademark infringement. Another approach to combat ambush marketing is the so-called name and shame campaign. It denounces ambushers in the public and educates the audience about what the ambushers are doing as regards free riding practices. Such campaigns can decrease consumer attitudes toward the ambushers (Mazodier, Quester, & Chandon, 2012), presumably via increasing knowledge and understanding of ambush marketing from the perspective of sponsors (that pay for official and mostly exclusive sponsorship rights). However, the majority of consumers process messages in low-involvement situations, that is, they are not motivated or able to process the messages of name and shame campaigns (as required by central route processing in the elaboration likelihood model; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Also, consumers do not consider ambush marketing as a concern, or threat, to their role as consumers (Portlock & Rose, 2009; Shani & Sandler, 1998). Sponsors have therefore used another strategy to fight ambushers: the use of humorous sponsorship content that refers to the ambushers and takes the peripheral route of persuasion in consumers. Although the use of humorous content is common practice in the area of sponsorship and combat of ambush marketing, there is no empirical research into this topic to date. Therefore, the goal of this study is to compare the effectiveness of the sponsor’s use of humor to fight ambushers, as opposed to the name and shame strategy, as regards influencing consumer attitude toward the sponsor positively (and attitude toward the ambusher negatively).

Two streams of literature provide the conceptual background to this study: research on comparative advertising (Jain & Posavac, 2004) and research on the effects of humor in advertising (Eisend, 2011). Based on these conceptual underpinnings, we derived hypotheses regarding the mechanisms of how the two counter-ambushing strategies that sponsors can use (humorous sponsorship versus name and shame) influence consumer attitudes towards the sponsor and the ambusher. We hypothesized that the humorous counter-ambushing sponsorship will be more believable (i.e., producing less counterarguments) compared to the name and shame counter-ambushing sponsorship (H1). We also hypothesized that the humorous (versus name and shame) counter-ambushing sponsorship will have more positive effects on attitude toward the sponsor via attitude toward the sponsorship campaign (i.e., the emotional route; H2), but that the name and shame (versus humorous) counter-ambushing sponsorship will have stronger effect on derogating consumer attitude toward the ambusher via consumer rejection of ambush marketing practices (i.e., taking the cognitive route; H3).

H1 was tested in a laboratory experiment (Study 1) that manipulated counter-ambushing sponsorship campaigns between participants (n = 113 students). Participants were randomly assigned to either the humorous or the name and shame counter-ambushing sponsorship condition. The study used print advertisements for a fictional golf tournament as stimuli. Participants were shown the advertisement of the ambusher first and the advertisement of the sponsor next before they responded to a survey that included the manipulation check (which was successful), an open-ended question about their thoughts on the advertisements, confounding variables, and sociodemographics. The responses were coded (with satisfying inter-coder reliability) according to their valence (positive versus negative).
The results showed that the humorous (versus name and shame) counter-ambushing sponsorship advertisement produced significantly less counter argumentation relating to both the advertisement content and the sponsor brand. The results therefore support H1.

Study 2 was conducted to test the H2 and H3. Participants (n = 110 students) were randomly assigned to either the humorous or the name and shame counter-ambushing sponsorship condition. The study used print advertisements for a fictional diving event. Instead of real brands (that were used in Study 1), fictitious energy-drink brands were used. Participants were shown the advertisement of the ambusher first and the advertisement of the sponsor next before they responded to a survey that included the manipulation check (which was successful), the latent variables under consideration (multi-item scales with satisfying reliability and discriminant validity), as well as confounds and sociodemographics. The results showed that the humorous (versus name and shame) counter-ambushing sponsorship advertisement increased attitude toward the sponsorship, which mediated positive effects on attitude toward the sponsor brand. The results therefore support H2. However, as hypothesized in H3, the humorous counter-ambushing sponsorship had the undesirable side effect that it also increased attitude toward the ambusher brand. This effect occurs because of lower rejection (i.e., higher acceptance) of ambush marketing.

The results contribute to theory development of how counter-ambushing communications work. They indicate that the effects of different counter-ambushing campaigns are ambivalent and therefore the goals of the sponsors should be taken into account when selecting a strategy. Sponsorship managers who aim to increase the affective associations with their brand via creative sponsorship communication are recommended to use humorous counter-ambushing advertisements. However, they should bear in mind that recipients may have a more positive attitude toward ambushers too (as compared to the name and shame campaign). Therefore, sponsorship managers who aim to increase consumers’ understanding and negative evaluation of ambush marketing practices, and consequently the ambusher brand, might prefer the name and shame campaign even though this strategy does not produce as positive outcomes with regard to influencing attitude toward the sponsor as humorous sponsorship.