Do We Know What They Want and How to Provide it to Them? An Analysis of Professional Niche Sport Sponsorship Objectives and Perceived Performance in Achieving Sponsor Objectives.

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Corporate sponsorship support is critical to many sport organizations, especially niche sports (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). Funding from corporate sponsors is often viewed as vital capital for niche sport operations (Lough & Irwin, 2001) and the corporate support provided to niche sports often determines survival of that sport league, team, or event (Sutton, 2009). Exacerbating this challenge is the fact most niche sports are in direct competition for a finite number of sponsorship dollars with the likes of mainstream professional and collegiate programs (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). Furthermore, many corporations are inundated with sponsorship proposals from a variety of organizations. Coca-Cola and United Airlines have reported receiving thousands of sponsorship proposals per year (The Coca-Cola Company, 2015; United, 2015) and JP Morgan stated they receive so many proposals they look for ways to not accept them (Leighton, 2014).

If niche sports were to look to the academy for guidance in how to best attract and retain corporate sponsors they would be significantly underwhelmed (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998). Sport sponsorship outcomes (i.e., measuring sponsorship effectiveness) has been examined from numerous angles by a variety of researchers (cf., Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, 2013; Demirgil & Ergodmus, 2014; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Speed & Thompson, 2000). However, from a pragmatic perspective, those sport properties unable to attract and secure sponsors have little need for a study focused on the outcomes of sponsorship relationships. It has been well established that many corporations aim to achieve marketing, communications, public relations, and/or promotional objectives via sport sponsorship (Abratt, Clayton, & Pitt, 1987). There have been studies investigating the objectives corporations aim to achieve through sport sponsorship. Irwin and Asimakopoulos (1992) wrote the seminal article on sponsorship objectives when they created the Sport Sponsorship Proposal Evaluation Model. However, the majority of research focusing on sponsorship objectives has targeted mainstream professional sport, major intercollegiate sport, and mega-events (e.g., the Olympic Games) (Wartella, 2009).

Hope is not lost as unique factors about niche sports may allow them to provide sponsors with attractive features not provided by mainstream sport properties. These unique factors may include a more targeted fan base, which can allow sponsors to find a niche sport attracting a fan base closely resembling their target market (Greenwald & Fernandez-Balboa, 1998; Stotlar, 2009; Tripodi, 2001). Furthermore, sponsors of professional niche sport were found to consider the following very important when evaluating a sponsorship proposal from a professional niche sport: increase target market awareness, increase sales/market share, increase public awareness, enhance company image, and become involved with the community (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). While the work of Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2013) provided initial insights into the objectives niche sport sponsors deem important they did not evaluate if the sponsors believed that niche sports were helping their sponsors achieve their sought after objectives. The immense competition for corporate sponsorship support coupled with the financial fragility of niche sports indicates that these sport properties cannot afford to lose sponsors they have secured. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to investigate the importance niche sports sponsors place on a variety of sponsorship objectives, the level of performance a niche sport organization had in achieving sponsorship objectives, and how the reported importance and performance on specific objectives impact sponsors’ perceived satisfaction of the sponsorship relationship. The following research questions were formulated to help guide the study:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference between the level of importance sponsors placed on the twelve sponsorship objectives and sponsors’ perceived performance in achieving those objectives on sponsors overall satisfaction?

RQ2: Based on the level of performance sponsors’ believe each objective was achieved, what objectives best predict satisfaction?
RQ3: Based on the importance placed on each objective, what sponsorship objectives best predict sponsorship satisfaction?

Method
An electronic survey created with FormSite was sent to 318 corporations who sponsor one of two professional niche sport organizations in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The corporate partnership manager for the teams under investigation emailed the survey link to the sponsorship decision-maker at each of the sponsors included in the study. The instrument included six sections measuring: sponsors’ overall satisfaction with the sponsorship relationship, the importance the sponsor placed on each of the twelve sponsorship objectives adapted from Irwin and Asimakopolous (1992), the level of performance the sponsor believed the team achieved in attaining each of the twelve objectives, the target market of the sponsors’ consumers, the sponsors’ industry, company size and scope, as well as the number of sponsorship proposals they receive each year and they different types of sport sponsorship relationships they have engaged. Data is currently being collected at the time of this submission and is expected to be completed by the end of November, 2015. Data analysis will take place December, 2015 allow for ample time to analyze and interpret the data prior to the commencement of NASSM 2016.

Analysis
All analyses will be conducted using SPSS 23. A MANCOVA will be utilized to assess RQ1 where aggregate sponsorship objective importance and performance will serve as the independent variables, company size and scope acting as covariates, and overall satisfaction will serve as the dependent variable. Two separate linear regressions will be used to assess RQ2 and RQ3. Each of the twelve objective importance scores will be predictor variable with overall sponsorship satisfaction being the outcome variable to assess RQ2. The overall sponsorship satisfaction score will again serve as the outcome variable and the twelve objective performance scores will serve as predictor variable to assess RQ3. Finally, a plot crosshair will be created where x-axis will represent objective importance and the y-axis will represent objective performance each axis will be bisected at the median score of 3.5 (as all measurements are done on a 7 point Likert-type scale). The cross hair will create four quadrants: low importance/low performance, low importance/high performance, high importance/low performance, high importance/high performance. This will be done for each team separately.

Discussion
Findings from the current study should help advance the youthful, but growing, body of literature focusing on niche sports. The further this area is explored the more confident researchers can become in understanding how these types of sport properties resemble or differ from other types of sport organizations (e.g., mainstream professional and major collegiate). The greatest strength of the current study is the pragmatic value afforded to niche sport marketers and managers. Results should provide insight into the objectives which lead to overall sponsorship satisfaction as well as differences in the importance and performance ratings sponsors provide. Niche sport marketers should be able to directly implement and focus or re-focus their efforts on specific objectives in order to enhance the overall satisfaction of their sponsors.

References


