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American Male and Female Consumer Attitudes Regarding Corporate Sponsorship of Sporting Events

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ABSTRACT

Sport sponsorship is a multi-billion dollar international business, yet little is known about how males and females may differ on their views of sports marketing. The results of an American national telephone survey are reported (n = 400). Male and female attitudes are then compared on the appropriateness of sponsors at the collegiate and professional levels, alcohol and tobacco brands as sports event sponsors and the quality of goods and services offered by sports event sponsor brands. Males and females do not differ in their support of sponsorship, but females are significantly opposed to alcohol and tobacco brands in sporting realms.

Sport sponsorship has matured into a multi-billion dollar international business. An extensive body of interdisciplinary research is accumulating outlining how sports sponsorships serve brands as part of an integrated marketing communication program (Cornwell and Maignan 1998). While much research and insight is available from the brand marketer’s perspective, less attention has been paid to the recipients of these communication efforts --- sports fans. This is in marked contrast to more conventional consumer advertising attitudes (Shavitt, Lowrey & Haefner 1997). Sponsoring companies may also conduct proprietary, managerial research. Perhaps what is needed in the burgeoning world of sport sponsorship is a review of consumer attitudes concerning sports event sponsorship activities. Providing this type of review is the objective of this research.

Since consumer antipathy can develop for different types of marketing communication, savvy managers will be attuned to those tactics most favored by consumers (Gaski & Etzel 1986). Event sponsorship raises several unique, important questions for consideration from a consumer’s viewpoint. For example, do consumers consider it appropriate to introduce brand communication messages into what the consumer may consider his/her leisure activity? Some consumers may resent the intrusion of corporate marketing activities into sports, feeling sports are somehow tainted by corporate involvement. This may be especially true for controversial product categories, such as alcohol and tobacco.

An area of special interest for potential sponsors is how sponsoring brands are perceived by consumers. Are consumers more interested in sponsoring brands? Do consumers
welcome sponsors and appreciate sponsor contributions to staging events that are important to the consumer? Event organizers and sponsoring companies may perceive the sponsorship as helping stage the event and contributing to the sporting experience. Consumers may be irritated as arenas and television screens become cluttered with logos, signage and other brand messages. Critics are increasingly vocal about what might be perceived as the over-commercialization of sports (Real 1996), especially as it relates to collegiate or other amateur events (McAllister 1998).

In the following sections, a definition of sports event sponsorship is offered, along with a brief review of the scope of the industry and common consumer and organizational objectives associated with this strategy. Research questions about consumer attitudes toward several aspects of sports event sponsorship are offered. Next, the results of an American national telephone survey (n = 400) are reported. Results are then discussed in terms of the research questions. Lastly, other event sponsorship issues are identified for additional research effort.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sport Sponsorship

Sport sponsorship, sometimes known as event marketing, may be defined as "a cash and or in-kind fee paid to a property in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property" (Ukman 1995, p. 1). Recent estimates note the phenomenal growth of event sponsorship as a marketing strategy; worldwide expenditures across all types of events, including sports, cultural and other events, are estimated at $24.1 billion for 2001 (International Events Group 1998). This staggering figure illustrates why event sponsorship is one of the fastest growing areas of marketing communication.

Sports events are used by brand marketers to achieve any of several consumer objectives, such as increasing brand awareness, building brand image or developing promotional tie-ins or product sampling at events (Cunningham and Taylor 1995; Levin 1993; Schreiber 1994; Shanklin and Kuzma 1992). Event sponsorship strategies are also noted for an ability to associate sponsors with particular usage situations and cut through the clutter associated with other marketing communication techniques. By carefully selecting events, marketers can gain exposure to difficult to reach target markets and demonstrate a commitment to supporting the target's lifestyle and interests (Jensen 1994; Schreiber 1994). Sandler and Shani (1993) note that other objectives can be served, including corporate image building or media exposure. Sponsorship is noted to operate differently from conventional advertising in that event title sponsorship, such as the Nokia Sugar Bowl (a collegiate, American-style football event) provides little opportunity to deliver a copy-based selling message. Brief brand exposures, such as arena signage viewed at the event or via television, limit the brand's ability to deliver a strong selling message (Hastings 1984; Ukman 1995). Often, sponsoring brands support sponsorship efforts with other marketing communication strategies and tactics. The more tactical support the sponsorship receives, the more likely consumers are to make the event/brand link (Crimmins and Horn 1996).

Ultimately, marketers strive to impact brand sales performance via consumer sponsorship strategies. However, unless the marketer undertakes a relevant, trackable promotion tie-in, sales impact
can be difficult to assess. It is more likely that event sponsorship success will be evaluated in terms of intervening variables, including brand preference or other attitudinal measures. Marketing communication strategists at Visa USA report noticeable increases in brand perception resulting from event sponsorship, but Visa spends lavishly to tout its sponsorship efforts (Petrecca 1999).

Yet another type of assessment is comparing brand exposure generated by the event association with the cost of purchasing equivalent advertising visibility. If a sponsorship requires a $500,000 commitment and produces $3 million of advertising exposure, the sponsorship may be considered a success, depending upon the sponsor's objective. The development of more sophisticated quantification techniques is the primary challenge facing marketers wishing to undertake event sponsorship as well as event marketers themselves (Friedman 1999).

Alcohol and tobacco brands are long-standing sponsors of many events, but the inclusion of these brands is being questioned on several fronts. Some critics suggest alcohol and tobacco sports event promotions influence children, while others note the discrepancy between alcohol/tobacco use and sports excellence. Alcohol’s association with motor sports, along with cigarettes and tennis, are but two examples (Basil et al. 1991; Hoek et al. 1993; Ledwith 1984; Pollay 1993; Warner et al. 1986). The international nature of many sports events allows alcohol and tobacco marketers to gain visibility where national or local laws would prohibit such presence. This has been termed “the sponsorship loophole” (Cornwell and Maignan 1998).

Men, Women and Sports Sponsorship

Until recently, sports viewing and participation at the professional or amateur level was thought to be an almost exclusively male activity. However, women are becoming increasingly involved with sports as both viewers and participants, suggesting that women are increasingly important targets for sports event sponsorship (Gantz and Wenner 1991; Shani, Sandler and Long 1992). NBC, an American commercial television network, conducted extensive research on females’ sports viewing preferences and produced Olympics coverage to satisfy female viewers. The result was dramatically improved ratings among women 18 – 54 years old, as compared to the previous two Olympics broadcasts (Brown, 1996).

Despite break-out performances by several individual female athletes, such as Serena and Venus Williams in professional women’s tennis, or gold medal performances by American women in Olympics hockey, track and field, gymnastics and softball events, women are still less likely to be featured in sports event advertising. A recent content analysis (Kinney et al. 2001), noted that solo female athletes appeared in only 16% of a recent sample of sports sponsorship advertising. In contrast, male athletes-only spots accounted for 50% of the observed advertising which depicted an athlete.

There is sparse information concerning the attitudes of males and/or females on important sports sponsorship issues, yet the little information available suggests intriguing gender differences. As noted earlier, alcohol and tobacco brands are frequent sports event sponsors. Burnet et al. (1993) report that, generally, females are more likely than males to support the removal of beer and tobacco brand advertising from television. This suggests that females might be more opposed to alcohol brand sports

Men, Women and Sports Sponsorship
sponsorships, yet no empirical evidence is available to confirm this. Women are also reported to demonstrate more positive support for firms incorporating socially conscious values into the firm’s marketing communication efforts (Meyers-Levy 1988; Ross, Patterson & Stutts 1992). In a sporting context, this might translate into more general female support for sport sponsorship as it helps underwrite the costs of important leisure activities and sports television programming. More supportive female attitudes might be demonstrated by a reported willingness to purchase the goods and services of sponsor brands. Females might also think sponsor brands offer better quality goods and services than non-sponsor brands. This speculation leads to the following research questions that are explored in the remainder of this research report.

Research Questions

Given the small amount of available research into American public attitudes regarding sports sponsorship activities, an investigation of several areas could have timely managerial and regulatory implications. The research reported here poses the following research questions:

RQ1: Do American male and female consumers differ in their support of sports event sponsorship as a marketing communication strategy?

RQ2: Do American male and female consumers differ in their attitudes regarding tobacco and alcohol sponsorship of college and professional sports events?

RQ3: Do American male and female consumers think sponsor involvement decreases sports event ticket prices?

RQ4: Do American male and female consumers seek sponsor brands when purchasing goods and services?

RQ5: Do American male and female consumers differ in their assessment of the quality of goods and services offered by brands that sponsor sports events? A preliminary understanding of these questions will serve event marketers as they approach potential sponsors. Firms considering a sports event strategy would also have some insight into how the public perceives this type of marketing communication. Lastly, those concerned with alcohol and tobacco sponsorship issues will have some insight into how American consumers perceive the questions surrounding regulation of these brands.

METHOD

A two-week, national telephone survey was conducted during October, 1998, from the research institute of a large southeastern university in the United States. Calls were made primarily in the evenings by a trained calling staff. A commercial research firm generated a universe of residential phone numbers with a random digit dialing technique. Using this method, local prefixes (excluding commercial prefixes) were used intact. Random digits were then selected to complete the seven-number sequence. Phone numbers were generated for the continental United States stratified by state to reflect proportionate representation. (Alaska and Hawaii were excluded.) Calls resulted in a response rate of 56%, for a total of 400 completed interviews.

The sport sponsorship questions reported here were included as a portion of a larger general public attitude survey. Other sections of the survey addressed attitudes on a variety of advertising and other marketing issues. A demographic section was included at
the end of the survey with queries about the respondent's age, race, sex, income level and education.

The general nature of the phone survey necessitated that all questions be brief and easily interpreted by the respondent. Therefore, the sports event questions were limited to the most general, yet important, issues facing sports event managers and potential sports event sponsors. Of special interest were male and female American consumer acceptance of event sponsors, issues surrounding controversial product categories and the relative suitability of professional sports event sponsorship as compared to college sports event sponsorship.

The sports event sponsorship section of the survey consisted of eight items rated on Likert-type, five-point scales. Survey items can be viewed in Table 1. To establish a common meaning for "corporate sports event sponsorship," respondents were provided with examples for the early sports event survey items; "Many companies sponsor college sporting events, such as the Federal Express Orange Bowl." Similarly, the Buick Challenge (professional golf) was used to illustrate professional sports event sponsorship.

Respondents were presented with survey items by the phone survey representative. The respondent then reported his or her level of agreement or disagreement with the statement on a Likert-type scale. The following survey item is offered as an example: "In general, how do you feel about corporate sponsorship of college sports? Would you say you strongly disagree/disagree/ neither agree nor disagree/agree/strongly agree with this business practice. All survey items assessed in this report, along with percentages at each level, can be reviewed in Table 1. Sex of the respondent was determined with a single item asked by the survey representative during the survey’s demographics section.

RESULTS

Respondent demographics are detailed in Table 1. Just over three-quarters (78.5%) of these respondents are younger than 65 years of age. This sample over represents females at 59.3% (estimated at 51% of the U. S. population), while under representing non-whites (estimated at 18% of the U. S. population) (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The median sample age of 43.0 years is also older than the general median age of 36.3 years (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The overwhelming majority has at least a high school education (87.8%), with 69.5% earning $20,001 or more.

For each of the survey items presented in Table 2, male responses were aggregated and a mean reported attitude score for the item was computed. This same procedure was used to determine a mean female score for each attitude item. These means were than tested for significant differences using the two-tailed t-test routine in the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program. A significant finding is defined as a mean difference observed at p ≤ .05.

The first two survey items addressed the appropriateness of corporate sponsorship of sports events at the collegiate and professional levels. As for college, males report a mean support level of 3.31 (sd = 1.13), with females reporting a mean level of 3.41 (sd = .92). There appears to be no significant difference in the mean level of support for corporate sponsorship of college sporting events (t = -1.04; df = 387, p = .20). Similarly, American men and women do not differ in their attitudes
toward corporate sponsorship of professional sports events. In fact, the means for professional support are slightly higher than the reported means for college support (mean \( m = 3.67 \), (sd = 1.05); mean \( f = 3.61 \) (sd = .79); \( t = .63 \), df = 386, \( p = .53 \)).

As noted earlier, females have reported significant support for removing alcohol and tobacco brand advertising from television (Burnet et al. 1993). It appears that this tendency carries over into sports event sponsorship, as well. When queried about the appropriateness of prohibiting tobacco brands as sponsors of professional sports events, females are significantly more likely to support such a prohibition (mean \( m = 2.93 \) (sd = 1.25); mean \( f = 3.43 \) (sd = 1.23); \( t = -3.87 \), df = 382, \( p < .000 \)). As of this writing, tobacco brands are prohibited from sponsoring college sports events by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Therefore, data were not collected on attitudes regarding tobacco brands as college sports event sponsors.

As with tobacco, females are more supportive of excluding alcohol brands from professional sports events (mean \( m = 2.67 \) (sd = 1.18); mean \( f = 3.16 \) (sd = 1.21); \( t = -3.94 \), df = 382, \( p < .000 \) and college sports events (mean \( m = 3.10 \) (sd = 1.25); mean \( f = 3.31 \) (sd = 1.21); \( t = -1.65 \), df = 384, \( p < .09 \)).

Also noted earlier, research findings suggest females are more supportive of brands demonstrating social concerns in company marketing communication efforts (Meyers-Levy 1988; Ross, Patterson & Stutts 1992), leading us to speculate that females might be more responsive to brands sponsoring sports events. However, this does not appear to be the case. Females are no more likely to seek sponsor brands than males (mean \( m = 2.32 \) (sd = .96); mean \( f = 2.42 \) (sd = 1.01); \( t = .96 \), df = 383, \( p = .34 \)), nor do females think sport sponsor brands are superior to competing, non-sponsor brands (mean \( m = 2.16 \) (sd = .84); mean \( f = 2.23 \) (sd = .86); \( t = -.74 \), df = 380, \( p = .46 \)). Females do report that they think sports sponsorship helps reduce the ticket prices charged to attend sporting events (mean \( m = 2.89 \) (sd = 1.10); mean \( f = 3.10 \) (sd = 1.01); \( t = -1.92 \), df = 383; \( p < .05 \)).

DISCUSSION

The research reported here must be interpreted in terms of several limitations. Two states, Alaska and Hawaii, were not included in this phone survey. Consumer attitudes in these areas are not represented. Specific sponsorship opportunities are not assessed here. Similar research questions for specific events, such as the Olympic Games, Super Bowl or World Cup Soccer, might produce different results. Also, this survey is limited to American respondents. Consumer attitudes in other countries may differ from American consumer attitudes.

The findings reported here should be interpreted as tentative. As noted earlier, this sample is somewhat older, whiter and more female than the general American population. Also, caution should always be used when assessing attitudes with single-item indicators, as validity cannot be ascertained. Replication must be undertaken to verify these findings against other academic research in similar areas. Lastly, public attitudes concerning sports event sponsorship may be dynamic. The cross-sectional survey reported here will not capture the dynamics of attitude change in the sports event sponsorship area. The authors also note that even when significant differences are observed, the differences are very modest. For most items, male and female subjects responded near the mid-point of the
scale. We found no items where males and females clustered at opposite ends of the opinion spectrum.

This survey of American male and female consumer attitudes offers interesting findings for brands considering sports event sponsorship opportunities and sports event managers. Results concerning the acceptability of corporate sponsorship of sports events suggest that while American consumers support sponsorship of college events, they are somewhat more comfortable with sponsorship in the professional arena. Managers considering college level sponsorship might consider if similar targets and objectives can be reached using professional sports events. Future research should investigate attitudes underlying the college/professional sports split: Why do American consumers consider professional sports events more acceptable for corporate sponsorship?

As for alcohol and tobacco brand sponsorship of professional and collegiate sports events, there is significant opposition from females. These data suggest females support the policy decisions of the NCAA and sports events restricting or refusing to accept alcohol and tobacco brands as event sponsors (Naughton 1998; National Hockey League). Clearly, marketers of tobacco and alcohol brands should consider strategies other than sports event sponsorship, if reaching female consumers is a prime objective. Groups advocating regulation or policies limiting alcohol and tobacco brand marketing communication strategies might enlist support from American females, according to the data provided by these survey respondents. Future research should also address the origin of this difference: Why are females more opposed to tobacco and alcohol marketing efforts than men?

As for consumer advantages from sports event sponsorship, these American respondents clearly do not consider sponsor brands to be superior, nor do they report any intention to seek out sponsor brands. Taken together, these findings suggest that event sponsors should consider alternatives to consumer-based sponsorship objectives, if developing an image of corporate responsibility, quality or social concern is the strategic objective. Sponsoring brands might also try to leverage the sports event in other ways. For example, a sponsor brand could request a sponsor support program from the event producer outlining the sponsor's contribution to staging the event. As another strategy, a sponsor might also consider product sampling or sales at the event, thereby exposing potential consumers to the brand via use at the event. Other on-site tactics are outlined by Nicholls et al. (1994).

Future Research Areas

There are many areas to be investigated regarding event sponsorship. The research reported here deals only with American public perceptions of sports events and how these perceptions differ between male and female consumers. Clearly, more research into other types of events, including civic, cultural and musical events, is required. Consumers’ sponsorship attitudes may vary by event type.

Further demographic and psychographic analysis might produce more specialized attitudinal profiles. American consumers may consider some sports or other events more appropriate for sponsorship, and some potential target markets may be more receptive to event sponsorship. Event producers and potential event sponsors could then...
investigate sports events in terms of more refined demographic and psychographic profiles as media planners currently do with more conventional advertising media. There is some support in the academic literature suggesting variability based on sports interest and involvement (Burnet, Menon and Smart 1993).

Potentially controversial sponsorships also need more research consideration. While tobacco and alcohol in an American sports context are addressed here, other product categories should also be investigated, such as firearms, casinos, lotteries and other gambling activities. Future research in this area will allow event mangers to develop sponsorship policies consistent with general public attitudes or targeted event attendees and viewers. Marketers of potentially controversial brands might then be able to clearly identify and sponsor events where the brand’s participation is welcomed by the event’s producers, attendees and viewers.

REFERENCES


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1 Percentages may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.
2 NA = No answer/refused.