

Rising Above the Clutter: Brand Awareness of Sponsorships

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This past March, I purchased tickets to attend the PGA Tour's Valspar Championship in Palm Harbor, Florida. While on Ticketmaster, I wondered out loud, "What is Valspar and why are they sponsoring golf?" As a sport marketing researcher who has spent the last 11 years focused on understanding how companies can be most effective in promoting their brands via advertising and sponsorships, I was curious about the title sponsorship. A fundamental desired outcome of sponsorships is brand awareness and I had no awareness of Valspar. The sponsorship was activated throughout the tournament—on site, on television commercials, in hardware stores, and on the product labels themselves. Upon entering Innisbrook Resort's Copperhead Golf Course, I quickly realized Valspar was a paint company. Valspar paint buckets served as tee box markers. The caddies wore Valspar hats and brightly colored bibs reflecting the many shades of Valspar paint. The Valspar chameleon mascot was evident on signs. We sat in a beach themed spectator area, on brightly colored Adirondack chairs in the sand and watched players putt on hole three in an area known as the Chameleon Cove. The beach also featured a large 50-ton, 20-foot tall chameleon sand sculpture. The Valspar Food Truck Rally and Valspar Color Experience 18th Green Expo had fan activities. Valspar brand ambassadors handed out coupons and Valspar branded sunscreen that featured the wording "Save the color for the walls" with paint swatches, such as Copperhead red (a nod to the Copperhead course), on the bottle. After a day on the course, it seemed Valspar had creatively made paint fit at a golf event and increased my brand awareness. I was not the only one impacted; according to an ESP Sponsorship Report (2016), Valspar noticed a 10-point increase in awareness for their sponsorship of the 2016 event. This was enough to convince Valspar to renew its four-year contract a year early. In the ever-changing field of sponsorship, brand awareness remains an important metric for companies and

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affiliated media or event managers. Yet, the vast number of opportunities to advertise or sponsor in the sport, entertainment, and event industry presents the question of how can a brand differentiate, stand out, and rise above the clutter? Based on my research, interactions with industry, and observations, in this review, I discuss the current sponsorship climate, continued importance of brand awareness, and submit six tips for corporations aiming to maximize brand awareness through sponsorship activation.

The Sponsorship Climate and the Importance of Brand Awareness

Corporate sponsorships are not new to the sport or entertainment environment, but are consistently increasing in number and costs, eliciting the attention of both industry and academia. The ESP Sponsorship Report (2016) showed that \$60.1 billion was spent on global sponsorships, including sports, entertainment, causes, arts, festivals, fairs, and association/membership organizations. Of this, \$22.3 billion was in the United States alone. The top two projected sponsorship categories for 2017 were sports (70%) and entertainment (10%). A steady increase in sponsorship spending over the last five years suggests that sports and events remain a preferred and viable opportunity for corporations to market their brands to targeted audiences. It also means when we attend a concert, art festival, sporting event, or most any other local, regional, or national event, we are often bombarded with sponsorships in the forms of numerous brand logos — on signs both static and digital, within rows of tents of activations or promotional giveaways, or with the event itself “presented by” a company listed on the ticket. *With so many brands, do we even notice?*

For those involved in developing or executing sponsorship partnerships, it is widely recognized that a desired outcome of sponsorship is consumer brand awareness. Brand awareness can be defined as an impact on the cognitive domain, where a consumer is able to recall or recognize a brand from memory because of the exposure of the brand as a sponsor of the event. The Valspar example showcases how creative, engaging, and repetitive event activation can help foster brand awareness.

Over the years, my colleagues and I have studied the effectiveness of different advertising and sponsorship forms, focusing on measuring the ability of consumers to recognize sponsor brands. In 2006, a team of colleagues including Gregg Bennett, Yosuke Tsuji, and I worked on a pair of experimental design studies exploring the effectiveness of virtual advertising in televised sport when that was a cutting-edge technology. I moved into comparing the different promotional forms of televised commercials, signage, and athlete endorsements in another experimental inquiry with James Zhang in 2006. Then, with the rise of sport video

games, such as the Madden and FIFA series, I explored that genre with Zhang, Galen Trail, and Richard Lutz. Sport video games feature in-game advertisements within the games that are fulfilled as sponsorships, such as uniform logo sponsors, on-screen sponsors, game segment sponsors (e.g., coin toss or halftime sponsors), and venue signage sponsors seen in the background providing a realistic view of the game. In a series of studies, we found sponsorship recognition to be high. An unanticipated result of one experimental study found people even recognized video game sponsors when playing a control group game that did not have sponsors, showing that their previous experience with the version with sponsors led them to believe they saw brands in the study, even though there were none. This speaks to the power of involvement and repetition on brand awareness. We also examined gamers’ motives to play sport video games and how those influence the effectiveness of the sponsorships. Taking a cue from gaming, the ideas can be applied to the sport or entertainment industry.

In all of the studies, we focused on examining the way awareness impacts attitude toward the brand/event and consumption of the brand/event, or the effectiveness of creating brand awareness. Repeatedly, we noticed that cognition (brand awareness) is a critical component in the sponsorship mix because of its relationship with influencing an individual’s attitudes, likes, or preferences (affective domain) and intention to consume or consumption (conative domain). In the 2013 sport video game study, we found brand awareness led to brand attitude, which in turn led to brand purchase intentions. This affirms the importance of generating brand awareness and the time companies spend on analyzing awareness metrics, such as impressions and click rates.

With brand awareness being an important part of the communication process in general, study participants were not always precise in recognizing sponsors and were often confused about which brands were sponsors. In some settings, we found that participants recalled sponsoring brands at high rates, showcasing the benefits of repetition and authenticity of the sponsorships. However, in other platforms, such as when Kendra Bayne and I studied social media in 2013, receiving Facebook posts did not garner high recognition rates about events, likely because it resides in a platform that has multiple messages and limited opportunity to differentiate from the crowd.

Sponsorship clutter can be defined as the “excessive number of other messages that interfere with the message of the sponsors and lead to the perception of over-commercialization” (Masterman, 2012, p. 57). Because corporate sponsorships are a revenue stream for events, sometimes the philosophy is “the more the merrier.” Yet, the increasing number of event sponsors creates more clutter for attendees/spectators. Not surprisingly, many researchers discovered clutter can impact the effectiveness of the sponsorships, especially in terms of brand awareness, and this should be a concern.

Most recently in 2017, Jensen and Cornwell even contend that clutter is a significant predictor in corporate partners ending their sponsorship contracts. Given the prominence and challenge of clutter, let's address how corporate sponsors can rise above it.

As Dees and Cianfrone noted in a 2014 special issue commentary on sponsorship effectiveness, determining effectiveness and devising strategies for sport and event advertising and sponsorships is a constant area of discovery. In utilizing the unique framework of past research on sport video games for a fresh look at sponsorship, I identify six tips for corporations aiming to maximize brand awareness through sponsorship activation: (1) be authentic, (2) create competition, (3) capitalize on nostalgia, (4) get personal, (5) go digital, and (6) explore new domains.

Six Tips for Increasing Brand Awareness

- 1. Be Authentic.** Within sport video games, simply having corporate brands within the games enhances the gamer experience in adding realism because signage on the walls of the FIFA game or a GMC Never Say Never Moment in Madden replicates a televised sporting event. While brands within the games are beneficial to the experience, recently Hwang and et.al. investigated if the types of brands would influence awareness levels within a sport video game, specifically the effects of brand congruency on awareness. Brand congruency is the concept of similar or aligned products (in this case, sport related for a sport video game) may illicit higher awareness than non-congruent brands (non-sport related). However, they found brand congruency with the game did not affect gamers' ability to recall or recognize the brands. If we consider entertainment or sports, congruency or brand 'fit' may make it easier to create brand awareness, but it is likely most event sponsors are not congruent with the event. The Mizuno Glove Experience is a well-executed sponsorship between the glove company and the Atlanta Braves, where fans can borrow a glove to catch balls during the game and return it afterwards. The congruence between the two is clear. Yet, even if a sponsoring company does not fit an event like a glove, they can still enhance the experience creating a link in the mind of the spectator. The activation of the beach atmosphere and Adirondack chairs at the Valspar sponsored golf event enhanced the guest experience of the event and made it seem like the sponsor fit, even though paint has no tie-in to the game of golf. A corporate sponsor can find ways to be authentic, adding to the experience.
- 2. Create Competition.** In a 2013 study on sport video gamer motives, Zhang and I found that among the reasons gamers played sport video games was to apply

their sport knowledge and fulfill their need to compete. The motives then influenced their ability to recognize brands for in-game brand awareness. Outside the sport video game environment, sponsors can create an opportunity for competition among event attendees to foster brand awareness. People are inclined to remember the sponsor activation with competition because they engage with it. Advergaming is a method to create this engagement opportunity. Home Depot and its partnership with ESPN Game Day in the fall of 2017 serves as an example of this activation. The ESPN Game Day "Home Depot Know Your Stuff Trivia Challenge" was an online contest set up on iPads at the Home Depot booth at every ESPN Game Day. They produced a trivia game that featured videos of the game day crew—like Desmond Howard—asking a college football question, then responding, "you know your stuff" if answered correctly. Fans individually answered 10 college football questions as fast as they could for the chance to be the best-timed answers. During the season, the fastest time and number correct won a behind-the-scenes experience, while the website version provided a trip to The Home Depot College Football Awards Show. Although this is an elaborate example of competition and adver-gaming, and it may not be feasible for all companies, the competition concepts still apply. Event sponsors offer onsite activities like corn hole challenges, free throw or putting contests, or other games of skill to fulfill the need for competition. When contests are tied to a sponsor it can aid in creating brand awareness.

- 3. Capitalize on Nostalgia.** In an effort to be remembered and create a cognitive and affective connection even after an event is over, corporate sponsors can consider the sentiment that events bring to individuals. Promotional giveaways are common—often cheap trinkets with the brand logo—and discarded after events. A sponsor can consider creating promotional items that resemble memorabilia to provide patrons with something they may keep. Cianfrone, Zhang, Trail, & Lutz (2008) sport video game research showed that repetition/exposure to the brand generates awareness. Thus, keepsake brand giveaways will prove to be more effective in creating awareness. A giveaway that serves as a commemorative piece to the event may be more likely to stand the test of time, help people remember the event, and the fond times associated with it. For example, a guitar pick with the artist and event sponsor, a commemorative branded ticket holder lanyard (for a physical ticket event), or even branded apparel like sunglasses from an outdoor festival or a towel from a hot outdoor country venue are promotional items that sponsors can give away to capitalize on nostalgia and create repetition and exposure to the brand for future use.

4. **Get Personal.** When playing a sport video game, the user is able to create their own team name, adjust player rosters, and personalize the experience including selecting brands of equipment, in the case of a golf or tennis game. To personalize the event experience, sponsors can provide opportunities for the patron to receive a personalized promotional item. In an effort to stand out among the other giveaways, sponsors should consider personalization. The classic photo booth with framed photos that include the brand and event title works in providing a personalized keepsake of the event. A unique example of personalization was executed by Carvana, the auto sales company. At events, they parked an old DeLorean, as featured in *Back to the Future* movies, next to their tent allowing patrons to sit inside the winged vehicle. A Carvana staff member took a digital photo of the individual in the driver's seat and it was processed 5 minutes later into a takeaway photo magnet that prominently displayed the Carvana logo and name around the person inside the iconic 80s car. The patron leaves the event with a photo magnet keepsake branded with the Carvana logo, generating awareness over time and repeated exposure. Similarly, in the selfie age, sponsors need only create a unique art piece or background with the event name and company logo to create a photo opportunity for patron personalization..
5. **Go Digital.** Consumers desire digital content and can serve as an inadvertent brand ambassadors through social media. Companies can increase brand recognition through digital content such as photos, GIFs or video clips that consumers share digitally; such activations can also drive social media trends through hashtags, and generate awareness to a new audience. A recent Keiser Permanente (KP) Corporate Wellness Race in Atlanta executed a digital sponsorship activation when participants reached the KP booth. While waiting in line, they entered an email address and phone number on an iPad, then were recorded on video doing any action for 5 seconds in front of a KP backdrop. They immediately received a text of the animated GIF that could then be shared on social media that linked from the sponsor's website. In addition to being sent to the participant, the GIFs were displayed on large screens throughout the event space. Sponsors who can capitalize on the digital space, gain engagement beyond the event, and capture a new online space with potential consumers.
6. **Explore New Domains.** Finally, in examining sport video games, we saw that the games were platforms where brands could rise above the clutter and provide corporate partners access to different, but focused markets. Likewise, corporations can be on the lookout for opportunities to partner with niche events that have avid followers, as supported by Greenhalgh and Greenwell's 2013 research on understanding goals of niche

sponsors. One such area garnering attention is sponsorships with eSports, either through jersey sponsorships, team sponsors, or brand placement within the games. The advantage of this new marketplace is the audience size, focused attention on the screen, and repetition. In November 2017, *Forbes* reported more than 600 new sponsors were acquired in the eSports space between January 2016 and November 2017. In that new space, brand congruence is seen as the early point of focus as sponsors include energy drinks, snack foods, and technology companies leading the way. Additionally, other new domains to explore are virtual spaces, such as augmented or virtual reality to maximize brand exposure.

Conclusion

Brand activation can utilize many of the recommended strategies in an effort to reach the sponsorship goal of brand awareness. One final example that displayed all six tips was Octagon's 2017 activation of Mastercard's sponsorship at the Champions League Final in Milan. In the #MadnessorPriceless hashtag activation, they set out to showcase the madness that is flaunted by football fans by setting up a barbershop where fans showed off their team pride with a complimentary freestyle haircut. It was authentic in using the Priceless tag that is true to Mastercard and in capturing the "madness" of football fans. This provided personalization for the fan brave enough to get a haircut. It also provided a nostalgic memory, as the fan had a true takeaway to talk about for a while (or at least until their hair grew back). Mastercard went digital with a virtual haircut, so fans could see themselves and share the passion. They integrated digital with social media and a competition of #MadnessorPriceless, letting fans decide online where the haircut fell on the spectrum. Octagon reported that it created discussion by 3.5 billion consumers and optimized brand exposure, eventually leading to awareness.

The sponsorship landscape is ever-changing and companies are investing in sponsorships of festivals, entertainment, concerts, and sporting events in hopes of creating a return on their investments. Companies seeking to maximize the effectiveness of sponsorships in reaching desired outcomes, such as brand awareness, may consider the challenges of the current climate of clutter. This review sought to identify six tips for cutting through clutter in sponsorship strategy, as it is an exciting time to create sponsorship partnerships for concerts, festivals, and sporting events.

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