Creating Images and the Psychology of Marketing Communication

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LEA
2006
LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS
Mahwah, New Jersey
London

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers
10 Industrial Avenue
Mahwah, New Jersey 07430
www.erlbaum.com

Cover design by Tomai Maridou

CIP information for this volume may be obtained by contacting the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-8058-5216-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

Books published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates are printed on acid-free paper, and their bindings are chosen for strength and durability.

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Conceptualizing Sponsorship: An Item and Relational Information Account

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In recent years commercial sponsorship has grown to become commonplace at sporting events, both small and large, and is also prevalent at many cause-related and arts events (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Gwinner, 1997; Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Marshall & Cook, 1992; Meenaghan, 2001b; Roy & Cornwell, 2004). It has been estimated that in 2004, sponsorship spending will reach $28 billion worldwide (International Events Group, 2003). Although many organizations appear to have a high level of acceptance and even dependence on sponsorship, a review of the literature suggests that this is not based on sponsorship being a conceptually understood or even theoretically validated business tool. Rather than basing decisions to invest in sponsorship on a sound understanding of its strategic potential, it appears that many organizations have simply followed the trend of adding sponsorship to their marketing programs in an attempt to mirror the apparent success others have reportedly experienced. Undoubtedly, this situation has been perpetuated by researchers failing to provide clear theory-based conceptualizations of sponsorship and its effects.

Although there have been attempts in the literature to conceptualize sponsorship, few studies have gone so far as to provide comprehensive psychological explanations of how sponsorship works to affect its audiences. It is the purpose of this chapter to outline a theoretical framework of how sponsorship operates when used to achieve image-related and awareness objectives and to provide guidance for enhancing sponsorship practices based on this framework.

DEFINING SPONSORSHIP

In one of the earliest managerial conceptualizations of commercial sponsorship, Gardner and Shuman (1987, 1988) explained that sponsorship can be used to support both corporate and marketing objectives. Corporate objectives are those aimed at enhancing or altering the image of a company, whereas marketing objectives are aimed at increasing brand or product awareness. Cornwell (1995) described sponsorship as "... investing in causes and/or events to support overall corporate objectives and/or marketing objectives" (p. 15) and went on to note that the realization of sponsorship objectives may be dependent on related marketing efforts. She defined sponsorship-linked marketing as the "... orchestration and implementation of marketing activities for the purpose of building and communicating an association (link) to a sponsorship" (p. 15).

Although sponsorship may share similarities with some forms of advertising, for example celebrity-endorser advertising (Gwinner, 1997; Keller, 1993; McDaniel, 1999), it differs both conceptually and operationally from traditional message-based advertising (Meenaghan, 1991). Message-based advertising seeks to promote some organizational or product attribute directly in a well controlled and explicit manner and often assumes that the audience is fully attending to the information presented (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; McDaniel, 1999). In contrast, sponsorship takes an indirect approach toward promoting the organization or product, often with the sponsor having less control over the information uptake process, and is assumed to operate at much lower attentional levels (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Meenaghan, 2001a, 2001b; McDaniel, 1999). Thus, although both advertising and sponsorship aim to persuade consumers, advertising often attempts to do this quite overtly, whereas sponsorship is usually more subtle (Meenaghan, 2001a, 2001b). Because of these conceptual and operational differences, the theoretical frameworks used in advertising research may not always be applicable to sponsorship, and a theoretical framework of how sponsorship operates is needed.

SPONSORSHIP RESEARCH

In accordance with the growth in sponsorship activity over the last two to three decades, research in the area has also become more prevalent (Cornwell, 1999; Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; McDaniel, 1999; Meenaghan, 2001a, 2001b; Roy & Cornwell, 2004; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Despite this, however, only a small number of studies have directly sought to identify the conceptual basis of how sponsorship works. In one such study, Johar and Pham (1999) found that consumers tended to identify event sponsors, either correctly or incorrectly, as those organizations with greater perceived market share and for which there was a semantic relation, or congruence, between the sponsor and the event. Pham and Johar (2001) found in a subsequent experimental study that these biases were more evident when sponsorship information was difficult to learn, such as when it was not made salient

through related marketing efforts. Based on these findings, Pham and Johar proposed that consumer memory for sponsorship information may be an inherently constructive process, particularly when sponsors fail to promote adequately or to make salient their presence as event sponsor.

Other researchers (e.g., Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Meenaghan, 2001b; Speed & Thompson, 2000) have proposed that sponsorship operates primarily through promoting associations between sponsor and event in such a way that a sponsor takes on the favorable attributes of an event. Speed and Thompson (2000) examined sponsorship using a classical conditioning framework but did not go so far as to describe sponsorship as classical conditioning per se. They found that positive attitudes and favorable perceptions relating to an event were more likely to be associated with a sponsor if the sponsor was not previously perceived negatively, if the sponsor–event match was semantically congruent, and if the sponsor did not support a large number of events simultaneously. Although such studies have provided insight into processes relating to sponsorship, lacking in the literature is a comprehensive explanation of the psychological underpinnings of sponsorship.

As a way of summarizing existing understanding on the topic of sponsorship and to provide a basis for future research, Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy (2005) offered a model of consumer-focused sponsorship-linked marketing communications. The model is a synthesis of research from the area of sponsorship, considering work done in relation to information processing mechanics, individual and group level factors, market factors, and management factors, and discusses research on various theorized sponsorship outcomes. Such a model is particularly useful for highlighting processes that researchers have shown to be relevant to sponsorship contexts while illustrating that theoretical understanding in the area remains limited.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to developing an item and relational information conceptualization of how sponsorship works to influence its audiences. Based on this theoretical perspective, strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of sponsorships, such as drawing attention to overall sponsor–sponsee relationships and to the individual components of such relationships, are outlined. The use of sponsorship as part of an integrated marketing communications program is also addressed.

ITEM AND RELATIONAL INFORMATION

In regard to the marketing goals of increasing brand or product awareness and the corporate goals of enhancing or altering brand image (Cornwell, 1995; Gwinner, 1997; Marshall & Cook, 1992; Meenaghan, 1991), sponsorship has traditionally been seen as important in two main respects. Firstly, sponsorship is said to increase brand or product awareness by serving as an exposure medium for core brand or product information such as name or logo (Pham & Vanhuele, 1997). This exposure, whether consciously processed or not, is assumed to affect consumer memory and subsequent purchase behavior by increasing familiarity and preference for that

brand or product (Bennett, 1999; Janiszewski, 1993; Olson & Thjomoe, 2003). Zajonc's (1980) mere exposure effect, where preference is said to develop unconsciously as a result of repeated exposure, is often used as an explanation for this effect. Secondly, sponsorship may enhance or alter brand image by creating an association between the sponsor and sponsee, such that various attributes of one become associated with the other (Gwinner, 1997; Keller, 1993; Javalgi, Traylor, Gross, & Lampman, 1994). Further, this association may also assist in brand or product awareness in that once associated, exposure to the sponsee may prompt memory or additional thought about the sponsor, or vice versa (Keller, 1993). It is useful to bear these ideas in mind when reviewing the following sections on item and relational information processing.

In explaining memory phenomena, researchers have found it useful to distinguish between item and relational information. Item information can be described as that which is utilized when remembering a specific object or event (Humphreys, 1976, 1978; Hunt & Einstein, 1981; Kelley & Wixted, 2001; Murdock, 1974). Relational information, on the other hand, is used to remember the relation between objects or events (Humphreys, 1976, 1978; Hunt & Einstein, 1981; Kelley & Wixted, 2001; Murdock, 1974). A great deal of empirical research supports the distinction between these two types of information and, in particular, with respect to differential encoding and retrieval processes (e.g., Bain & Humphreys, 1988; Clark, 1992; Clark & Shiffrin, 1992; Gronlund & Ratcliff, 1989; Hockley, 1994; Hockley & Cristi, 1996; McGee, 1980; Yonelinas, 1997). Clark and Gronlund (1996) offer a detailed review of research in this area.

Although often distinguished on the basis of arguments that they involve differential recognition and recall processes, item and relational information have also been conceptualized as differing in how they are encoded (e.g., Bain & Humphreys, 1988; Begg, 1978; Einstein & Hunt, 1980; Hockley & Cristi, 1996; Hunt & Einstein, 1981; McGee, 1980). In developing an understanding of how sponsorship may operate in terms of item and relational information, Einstein and Hunt's (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) findings are particularly useful. In the early 1980s these researchers sought convergence between two streams of memory research that had traditionally been viewed as incompatible. They integrated organizational memory theory and levels-of-processing theory, using the framework of item and relational information, to produce a general explanation of how optimal memory performance may function.

Organizational Memory Perspective

Early organizational memory theorists (e.g., Bower, 1970; Mandler, 1967; Puff, 1979) claimed that good memory performance requires an episode be encoded in an organized manner, based on similarities across items of information. If a memory representation can be thought of as a set of encoded features, organizational theorists would argue that similar features across various items produce overlap

across representations in memory. Such overlap results in the various related items within an episode being encoded as a single, organized, and integrated holistic representation. This type of storage is assumed to facilitate retrieval by reducing the necessary search process in that, given some type of environmental memory cue, overlapping or related memory representations are activated. Because only related representations have been activated, the search process is essentially limited to just a particular class or category of relevant information, and so retrieval is more efficient. Without such a class activation process, each time memory for a particular event is sought, all stored memory traces would need to be searched, resulting in an extensive and inefficient retrieval process.

Levels-of-Processing Perspective

In contrast to organizational memory theorists, levels-of-processing theorists (e.g., Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975; Lockhart, Craik, & Jacoby, 1976; Nelson, 1979) claimed that good memory performance results from attending to the differences across items of information in an episode. Each item is encoded as a discrete representation, with attention being given to encoding the distinctive features of each item. Items are stored as unique representations in memory, identifiable through a lack of overlapping features or lack of integration across representations. This lack of overlap assists retrieval, with the distinctiveness of a particular representation serving a discriminatory function, allowing it to be distinguished from all other stored traces. Without encoding being based on differences across pieces of information, identification of the appropriate memory representation at retrieval would not be possible, due to a lack of ability to differentiate between similar representations.

Integration of Perspectives

Whereas organizational memory theorists claimed that memory involves encoding similarities between items, levels-of-processing theorists argued that it is instead based on encoding differences. Although these seem to be competing perspectives, somewhat paradoxically, both organizational and levels-of-processing memory theories have been empirically supported (e.g., Bower, 1970; Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975; Lockhart et al., 1976; Mandler, 1967; Nelson, 1979; Puff, 1979). Einstein and Hunt (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) proposed that these contrasting operations may actually function together, such that optimal memory performance occurs when both forms of processing occur at encoding and are used in conjunction at retrieval.

Reconsidering these theories from an item and relational memory perspective, Einstein and Hunt (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) argued that distinctiveness encoding, as suggested by levels-of-processing theorists, may apply to the processing of item information, whereas similarity encoding, as suggested by organizational

theorists, may apply to the processing of relational information. It was proposed that relational information serves primarily a generative function by activating the general class or category to which a specific stimulus belongs. Item information may then be used to search within this limited group of representations, with the discriminatory function enabling the correct representation to be distinguished from other related information. In this way Einstein and Hunt proposed that relational and item information each contribute to memory retrieval processes but in different ways.

To illustrate with a practical example, if someone is asked the question, "Which brand is the major sponsor of tennis player Lleyton Hewitt?" both relational and item processing may be used to provide an answer. Relational processing is required to activate those memory representations that relate to the category of "Lleyton Hewitt." This information alone, however, may not be enough to enable the person to provide a precise response, and so the use of item processing is also required. Item processing would be used to discriminate among all those activated representations in the "Lleyton Hewitt" category to identify the one encoded with the distinctive feature of "major sponsor." Thus, although either relational or item processing alone might be used to retrieve relevant information from memory, their conjunctive use can facilitate retrieval in terms of efficiency and precision.

Although this example outlines how item and relational processes may occur when memory is explicitly cued, these processes can also operate at an implicit level (Hunt & McDaniel, 1993). For example, consider the situation in which a person has just been watching a swimming race where the winner was sponsored by Speedo. If that person then had to make some value judgment about various swimwear products, say in a purchase-decision environment, relational and item information may again come into play. When confronted with the Speedo brand, relational information would be used to activate at an implicit level various attributes relating to Speedo. Item information would then be used to discriminate among all Speedo-related memory traces to identify just those relevant to the decision, namely representations that had been encoded with features such as quality, speed, or success. Although occurring at an implicit level, relational and item information processing have nonetheless been used to affect the person's judgment. In this way Einstein and Hunt (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) were able to integrate, using an item and relational information framework, two seemingly competing theories of memory and to put forward an explanation of optimal memory performance.

Determinants of the Processing of Item and Relational Information

An important point that Einstein and Hunt (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) made in their research was that for item and relational information to be utilized at retrieval, both must have been earlier encoded. They explained that the encoding of each type

of information is dependent on two influences: semantic relatedness and orientation toward encoding. Semantic relatedness refers to how obviously related the items of information in the episode are, or the extent to which they are perceived to share common attributes. Einstein and Hunt argued that when an episode involves obviously related items, where similarities between items are salient, then relational information will be encoded automatically. For episodes with seemingly unrelated items, however, where differences are more salient then similarities, item information will be encoded automatically. This aspect of encoding is both automatic and obligatory in that, depending on the semantic relatedness between items, either relational or item information will always be processed.

Orientation toward encoding refers to the way in which the person, at encoding, is induced to attend to either the relatedness or the distinctiveness of the items involved (Einstein & Hunt, 1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981; Hunt & McDaniel, 1993). If a person is induced to attend to similarities between items in an episode, then relational information will be encoded. If they are induced to attend to differences between items, however, then item information will be encoded. This nonautomatic aspect of encoding is in addition to the automatic semantic relatedness encoding and ultimately is the determinant of whether the person encodes an episode as just one type of information or as both (Hunt & McDaniel, 1993). Thus, although Hunt and Einstein proposed that optimal memory retrieval results from a combination of the generative functions of relational processing and the discriminative functions of item processing, the encoding of both types of information so that they are available at retrieval does not always occur. As is often the case, only the automatic processing of semantic relatedness may occur, resulting in the encoding of just one type of information.

Empirical Support

In developing their arguments, Einstein and Hunt (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) used research findings from a number of earlier studies, such as those by Bellezza, Cheesman, and Reddy (1977), Begg (1978), and Epstein, Phillips, and Johnson (1975). Bellezza et al. gave participants a list of semantically unrelated words (which should be automatically encoded as item information) and instructed half to generate a distinct and separate sentence for each word (which should orient participants toward encoding further item information) and the other half to generate a sentence for each word but to make the sentences form a general storyline (which should orient participants toward encoding relational information). Those participants forming distinct and separate sentences for each word should thus encode only item information, whereas those forming sentences as part of a general storyline should encode both item and relational information. Results showed that recall was typically higher for those participants who formed sentences as part of a general storyline than for those who formed discrete sentences. Thus, in accordance with Einstein and Hunt's encoding arguments, those participants who were

oriented toward encoding relational information, in addition to the automatically encoded item information, showed better memory performance than those who were oriented toward encoding further item information.

Using a different experimental technique, Begg (1978) showed that conceptually related word pairs were better remembered if participants were instructed to attend to differences between the words. In contrast, conceptually unrelated word pairs were better remembered when participants were instructed to attend to similarities between the words. Thus, while related words would automatically be encoded using relational processing, the induction of additional item processing through making differences salient, facilitated memory. Similarly, for unrelated word pairs that would automatically be encoded using item processing, the induction of relational processing through making similarities salient improved memory performance. When the automatic encoding resulting from semantic relatedness was congruent with the nonautomatic encoding induced through instructions (i.e., when the semantic relatedness and orientation toward encoding involved the processing of the same type of information), there was little improvement in memory performance. Similar findings were reported by Epstein et al. (1975).

Studies employing encoding techniques involving the use of mental imagery have also shown supporting results (e.g., Bain & Humphreys, 1988; Hockley & Cristi, 1996; McGee, 1980). Typically, when participants are instructed to encode semantically unrelated word pairs by forming separate mental images for each one, subsequent recognition of the individual items is good, but recognition for the word pairs is poor. When instructed to form an image incorporating both unrelated words from the pair, however, recognition of the individual items remains good, and pair recognition improves significantly. Thus, in accordance with Einstein and Hunt (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981), research has typically shown that when unrelated word pairs are encoded using mental imagery tasks that promote either item or relational processing, item information is generally available at retrieval. Relational information, however, is more readily available for the unrelated items only following the relational processing task.

Einstein and Hunt's (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) series of studies provide perhaps the most direct support for their integrated theory perspective and demonstrates the separate influences of semantic relatedness and orientation toward encoding. In these studies, participants were exposed to lists of words from either five obvious categories (e.g., animals, fruits, etc.) or five obscure categories (e.g., things that make noise, things that women wear, etc.). Words in the obvious category list were assumed to be encoded automatically as relational information, and words in the obscure category list were assumed to be encoded automatically as item information. An incidental learning technique was used, with half the participants instructed to rate each word in the list for pleasantness (to induce item processing) and half instructed to sort the items into categories (to induce relational processing). Results showed that words in the obvious category list were better recalled when rated for pleasantness than when sorted into categories, whereas words

in the obscure category list were better recalled when sorted into categories than when rated for pleasantness. Thus, in line with the findings of other researchers and in support of their own propositions, Einstein and Hunt found that retrieval of related items was better when encoding involved item processing, whereas retrieval of unrelated items was better when encoding involved relational processing. Further support for the influences of semantic relatedness and orientation toward encoding on item and relational processing can be found in subsequent work by Hunt and colleagues (e.g., Hunt & Seta, 1984) and can also be inferred from more recent research (e.g., Prior & Bentin, 2003).

Summary

A brief summary of the key elements of Einstein and Hunt's (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) relational and item theory follows.

Relational Information. The encoding of relational information is suggested as being based around similarities and relations among items, such that overlapping features across items form a well organized, highly integrated, holistic representation in memory. At retrieval, this integration and organization facilitates the search process by enabling the generation of a limited category or class of related information from which an appropriate response can be drawn. In this way, relational information serves a generative recall-like function (Hunt & McDaniel, 1993).

Item Information. The encoding of item information is suggested as being based on differences among items, with each item encoded as a set of distinctive features. At retrieval, this distinctiveness serves a discriminatory function, enabling the appropriate representation to be distinguished from all others stored in memory. Here, item information plays a discriminative recognition-like role (Hunt & McDaniel, 1993).

Encoding. Encoding of relational and/or item information is dependent on two influences, one automatic and the other nonautomatic. First, the apparent semantic relatedness between items determines whether relational or item information will be automatically encoded. Related items are encoded using relational information because of obvious similarities among the items, whereas unrelated items are encoded using item information because of salient differences among the items (Einstein & Hunt, 1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981; Hunt & McDaniel, 1993). Second, if an individual is oriented to attend to similarities or differences among items, further encoding may occur, which is in addition to the automatic semantic relatedness encoding. If attention is drawn to similarities or relations among items, then relational processing will be induced. If attention is drawn to distinctive features or differences across the items, then item processing will be induced. Although any given episode may be encoded with just one type of information, if the

semantic relatedness of items within that episode and the person's orientation toward encoding the items promote the processing of different types of information, then both item and relational information will be encoded.

Retrieval. Provided that the automatic and nonautomatic encoding processes have led to both item and relational information being processed, then memory retrieval will be facilitated. In such an instance, given some memory cue, relational information will serve to generate the class or category of representations stored in memory relating to that cue. Item information will then enable precise discrimination within the generated set of representations to identify the appropriate trace. If, however, only automatic encoding based on semantic relatedness has occurred, or if both automatic and nonautomatic elements of encoding have resulted in only one type of information being encoded, then memory retrieval will be less reliable. Although either item or relational processing alone may be sufficient for memory to operate, performance is enhanced in terms of efficiency and precision when both item and relational information are processed at encoding and used in conjunction at retrieval (Hunt & McDaniel, 1993).

CONCEPTUALIZING SPONSORSHIP AS ITEM AND RELATIONAL INFORMATION

Whereas a great deal of research has been conducted to investigate item and relational information, theoretical research in the area of commercial sponsorship has been less extensive. Despite this, across these two areas there are a number of correspondences that provide support for conceptualizing sponsorship as item and relational information. The following sections outline how sponsorship can be viewed within such a framework and describe similarities across the two research paradigms.

As noted earlier, organizations can use sponsorship to fulfill a variety of awareness and image-related objectives (Cornwell, 1995; Gwinner, 1997; Marshall & Cook, 1992; Meenaghan, 1991). Sponsorship can increase brand or product awareness by serving as an exposure medium for core brand or product information such as name or logo (Pham & Vanhuele, 1997). It can enhance or alter brand image by creating an association between the sponsor and sponsee, such that various attributes of one become associated with the other (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Javalgi et al., 1994) and where memory for one may prompt memory for the other (Keller, 1993). Using an item and relational information framework, it is proposed that the capacity of a sponsorship to achieve these objectives rests in part with how audiences encode information at the time of exposure. As will become evident, Einstein and Hunt's (1980; Hunt & Einstein, 1981) suggestions about semantic relatedness and orientation toward encoding are particularly relevant to sponsorship.

Increasing Brand or Product Awareness

If the goal of an organization is to promote brand or product awareness, then typically the organization seeks to increase levels of exposure of the brand or product (Aaker, 1991; Gwinner, 1997). Many researchers have argued that such increases in exposure, whether consciously attended to or not, may promote levels of familiarity with the presented information, which may enhance preference for that information (e.g., Bennett, 1999; Janiszewski, 1993; Olson & Thjomoe, 2003; Zajonc, 1980). Such reasoning is usually justified in terms of the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1980). Thinking about sponsorship within an item and relational information framework, however, suggests that there is more to promoting brand or product awareness, and preference, than just mere exposure.

If the relationship between a sponsor and sponsee is perceived as one that is seemingly unnatural or illogical (i.e., semantically unrelated), as might be the case when a financial institution sponsors a football team, then it can be assumed that audiences will process these two entities using item information. If the sponsor can articulate a relationship, however, or draw attention to the similarities between the two entities, then the audience may also be oriented to process relational information (i.e., via orientation toward encoding). Alternatively, if the relationship between a sponsor and sponsee is perceived as more natural or logical, such as may be the case with an athletics shoe manufacturer sponsoring a track and field squad, relational information will be automatically encoded. Here the sponsor may benefit by drawing attention to each entity within this relationship, inducing additional item processing, which will help to differentiate both entities from other related items (e.g., other brands and events). In this way, both types of information will have been processed, and when confronted with a situation in which memory for the brand or product is required, retrieval of this information will be facilitated.

The processing of both relational and item information, in regard to promoting brand or product awareness, may be particularly important in combating the effects of ambush marketing and in developing a sponsorship into a distinctive competence for the sponsor. Ambush marketing occurs when some nonsponsor rival organization conducts a marketing campaign aimed at developing an association with an event and at obtaining those benefits assumed to come from sponsorship (Crow & Hoek, 2003; Meenaghan, 1994, 1998; O'Sullivan & Murphy, 1998). If a sponsor is able to establish a clear link between itself and its sponsee, such that the two are perceived as strongly related (i.e., relational information) and such that the sponsor is clearly distinguished from other similar information such as competing brands (i.e., item information), then audiences will be better able to identify the true sponsor from nonsponsors. In this way, the sponsorship can be developed into a distinctive competence for the sponsoring organization and can promote brand differentiation (Amis, Slack, & Berrett, 1999; Cornwell, Roy, & Steinard, 2001). This may also be relevant in reducing the prominence bias reported by Pham and Johar (2001), where those brands perceived to be prominent in the marketplace are

said to be miscredited with sponsorships. Brand or product awareness, although traditionally sought through attempts at gaining greater exposure for brand or product information, can clearly benefit through ensuring that audiences process sponsorships as both item and relational information.

Enhancing or Altering Brand Image

Although the goal of enhancing or altering brand image differs from that of increasing brand or product awareness, in that a transfer of valence from event to sponsor is intended (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), the concepts of item and relational processing are still pertinent. If sponsors, whether obviously related to the sponsee or otherwise, are able to encourage both item and relational processing, then not only will the attributes of the event be encoded in an holistic representation with those of the sponsor (i.e., relational information) but at the same time, the sponsor will be seen as a distinct entity in its own right (i.e., item information). Consider again the situation of a financial institution sponsoring a football team. If both item and relational information are processed, then not only will audiences encode the perceived similarities between the institution and the football team, such as the attributes of determination, fair play, and competitiveness (i.e., relational information), but the financial institution will be distinguished from other football-related information such as additional sponsors, having a sports orientation, and so forth (i.e., item information). Thus, while the financial institution will benefit by being associated with those image attributes of the football team that are made salient as similarities, it will also be clearly identifiable in the minds of consumers as a financial institution and sponsor.

Conceptualizing sponsorship in terms of item and relational information provides a clear explanation of how goals such as increasing product or brand awareness and enhancing or altering brand image may be achieved. Specifically, consideration must be given to the way in which audiences perceive the relationship between the sponsor and sponsee (i.e., semantic relatedness) and the way in which audiences are oriented to attend to aspects of the relationship (i.e., orientation toward encoding). This framework suggests that for a sponsorship to be most effective, both item and relational information must be encoded, so as to be available at retrieval. Sponsors who fail to promote the processing of both types of information ultimately leave their sponsorship at a disadvantage.

CORRESPONDENCES ACROSS PARADIGMS

Parallel notions to Einstein and Hunt's (1980, Hunt & Einstein, 1981) semantic relatedness and orientation toward encoding have been developed independently in the sponsorship literature. Many researchers in this field have argued that the effectiveness of a sponsorship is dependent on the perceived congruence between the sponsor and sponsee (e.g., Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Johar & Pham,

1999; McDaniel, 1999) and the way in which audiences are encouraged to perceive this relationship (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Dean, 1999). These correspondences across paradigms are highly supportive of an item and relational information conceptualization of sponsorship.

Researchers such as Gwinner (1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; McDaniel, 1999) and Johar and Pham (1999) have claimed that semantic relatedness between a sponsor and sponsee can enhance the association between the two and can augment the transfer of valence from the sponsee to the sponsor. This is often referred to as a congruence or match-up effect (Johar & Pham, 1999; McDaniel, 1999). Varying explanations for how congruence or match-up enhances sponsorship effectiveness have been proposed in the sponsorship literature. For example it has been suggested that congruent relationships can be anchored better in the minds of consumers (Gwinner, 1997) and that matching relationships fit better with existing schemas of the sponsor or sponsee (McDaniel, 1999). Although the concept of semantic relatedness in the sponsorship literature was developed independently of that in the item and relational information literature, there is a clear correspondence between the two.

Sponsorship research has also addressed the item and relational information issue of orientation toward encoding, with several studies indicating that unrelated sponsor–sponsee pairings benefit when consumers are led to attend to some meaningful rationale for the pair (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Dean, 1999). Although they were prescribing managerial sponsorship tactics rather than ways in which information encoding could be enhanced, Crimmins and Horn explained that when the relationship between a sponsor and sponsee is not obvious, sponsors benefit by using additional communications to explicitly "interpret" the relationship on behalf of the consumer. Experimental research by Dean led to a similar conclusion.

Although little sponsorship literature directly notes that a highly related sponsor–sponsee pairing may benefit from drawing attention to the specific entities within the relationship, this might be inferred from ambush marketing research (Meenaghan, 1994, 1998) and from Pham and Johar's (2001) prominence and relatedness biases work. When sponsor-specific item information encoding is induced, audiences should be more able to discriminate accurately between possible sponsors (e.g., those firms using an ambushing strategy, or which are prominent in the marketplace) and the actual sponsor because of the distinctive information stored in memory. Thus, in accordance with Einstein and Hunt's (1980, Hunt & Einstein, 1981) claims about orientation toward encoding, sponsorship researchers have noted similar issues.

Further empirical support for the semantic relatedness and orientation toward encoding notions, in a sponsorship context, have been provided in preliminary work by Cornwell, Humphreys, Maguire, and Tellegen (2003). Sponsor recall was improved for semantically unrelated or incongruent sponsor–event pairings when a relationship was explicitly articulated in the form of a press release. Recall remained unchanged however, for semantically related or congruent sponsor–event

pairings when the same articulation manipulation was used. Thus, in support of the theoretical ideas of Einstein and Hunt (1980, Hunt & Einstein, 1981), Cornwell et al. (2003) have shown, using realistic sponsorship stimuli, that by inducing relational processing, memory for sponsor–sponsee pairings can be enhanced, but only for those where this information would not have automatically been encoded otherwise (i.e., incongruent pairings). In sum, clear correspondences appear across the item and relational memory literature and the sponsorship literature, providing strong support for the current conceptualization of sponsorship.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: ENSURING ITEM AND RELATIONAL PROCESSING

The presentation of sponsorship information can take many forms. For example, in a sporting context, sponsorship information may be presented as background material with brand names or logos displayed on perimeter fences, team uniforms, on features such as scoreboards, set amid seating, and so forth. Further exposure can be gained through such media as press releases detailing sponsorship information, Internet sites, point-of-purchase displays, thematically linked advertisements, and a number of other integrated marketing communications (Keller, 2001). Most interesting, however, is that the way in which such sponsorship information is encoded by audiences (i.e., as item information, relational information, or both) ultimately depends on how semantically related (or congruent) a sponsor and sponsee relationship is perceived to be and on how a sponsor uses its marketing communications efforts to articulate linkages between itself and its sponsee. As established previously, the way this information is encoded has repercussions for the subsequent effectiveness of retrieval.

Perhaps the most important implication of an item and relational information conceptualization of sponsorship for practitioners is that it provides an explanation of how sponsorships can be used to achieve corporate and marketing objectives. Not only is memory for the overall sponsorship enhanced through the processing of both item and relational information, but the processing of item information also promotes product and brand awareness and brand differentiation through increasing distinctiveness. The processing of relational information enables the sponsor to take on various attributes of the sponsee, enhancing brand image, and allowing one to prompt memory for the other.

Optimal sponsorship effectiveness can be expected when practitioners promote the processing of both item and relational information. For seemingly natural or logical sponsor–sponsee relationships, additional emphasis should be placed on promoting sponsor- and sponsee-specific information. This is not to say that the relationship between the sponsor and sponsee should be ignored or receive no promotional attention, however, because the relationship needs to remain salient to the audience. For seemingly unnatural or illogical sponsor–sponsee relationships, audiences should be made aware of some meaningful relationship. This awareness

could be accomplished through integrated marketing communications efforts such as media advertising, direct and interactive advertising, point-of-purchase displays, trade promotions, consumer promotions, public relations efforts, and so forth (Keller, 2001). With such a diverse range of marketing communications tools available, practitioners have ample opportunity to promote or make salient the desired components of their sponsorships.

In a sponsorship involving strong semantic relatedness (i.e., congruence), such as would be the case with Nissan sponsoring a NASCAR (National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing) driver, marketing communications such as print or television advertising may help to promote item-specific sponsorship information. An advertisement, while drawing attention to the high semantic relatedness of the sponsorship, may seek to promote Nissan-specific information by denoting Nissan dealership locations, specific deals that the company is offering, and so forth. It is important that the Nissan–NASCAR relationship still remains salient, however, because ignoring it may impair the automatic processing of relational information. By promoting a sponsorship with strong semantic relatedness (where relational processing should be automatic) together with additional sponsor-specific information (where item processing is induced), memory for the sponsorship and the specific sponsor will be facilitated.

For weakly related (i.e., incongruent) sponsorships, such as may be the case if Kellogg's was to sponsor a NASCAR driver, integrated marketing communications efforts could be used to draw audience attention to some relationship between the two. For example, advertising or billboards may depict the driver eating Kellogg's breakfast cereals and snack products. Thus, integrated marketing communications programs, if used wisely and purposefully, can greatly assist in achieving the brand image and awareness objectives of sponsorship investments.

THE NEED FOR FURTHER EMPIRICAL WORK

One issue that must be addressed if the current theoretical framework is to be validated concerns the way sponsorship typically operates at low attentional levels. In the absence of integrated marketing communications, sponsorship information may be given very little conscious attention by consumers, particularly, for example, if presented simply as venue signage, logo displays, or brief press-release statements (Nebenzahl & Hornik, 1985; Pham & Vanhuele, 1997). Although empirical evidence supports the view that information processed at low levels of attention is still encoded and may be retrieved at a later time (Hasher & Zacks, 1984; Kausler, 1990; Kausler & Lichty, 1984; Kausler & Puckett, 1980; Kausler, Wright, & Hakami, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983), the extent to which this applies to both item and relational information has yet to be demonstrated.

Research has shown that information such as frequency of occurrence, spatial location, and temporal location are encoded automatically, with little conscious ef-

fort, under conditions of both incidental and intentional learning (Hasher & Zacks, 1979, 1984; Kausler, 1990; Kausler & Lichty, 1984; Kausler & Puckett, 1980; Kausler et al., 1981). Although this type of research has primarily examined these variables in terms of item information, the findings may be generalizable to relational information if it is assumed that relational information is encoded as integrated and holistic representations. Studies employing incidental learning conditions such as those of Einstein and Hunt (1980, Hunt & Einstein, 1981) and Prior and Bentin (2003) have already demonstrated that relational information may be encoded in the absence of intention to learn, so this issue may be less problematic than it first appears.

Although any information learned under low levels of attention is likely to be poorer than if it were learned under higher levels of attention, relational information may suffer to a greater extent than item information, given that it involves the encoding and storage of more complex representations. Future research should investigate the extent to which this is the case and whether it can be overcome by such manipulations as repetition of exposure or variation in exposure context. This type of research will prove critical in supporting the current theoretical framework.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Although commercial sponsorship has grown dramatically in recent years, a conceptual understanding of how sponsorship works has not been clearly established in the literature. This chapter has sought to provide one such conceptual framework using item and relational memory theory from the psychological literature. This framework not only provides a basis for making predictions about sponsorship effectiveness but can also be used to guide sponsorship practices. Depending on the perceived semantic relatedness between the sponsor and sponsee and how audiences are led to understand either item-specific or relational aspects of this relationship, sponsorship effectiveness may vary. When both item and relational information about the sponsorship are processed, sponsorships should be more effective in achieving awareness and image-related objectives. Because relationships between sponsors and sponsees vary, as do audience perceptions, integrated marketing communications can be used to promote those aspects of the relationship desired by the sponsor.

As might be expected, the conceptualization provided here is not without its limitations. At a theoretical level, and as has been noted in the item and relational literature, is the issue of how distinct item and relational information really are (e.g., Hunt & Einstein, 1981). For example, is it feasible to assume that a strong semantic relationship does not involve the encoding of the individual items within that relationship? If not, how then is the strength of that relationship initially determined? Similarly, is it feasible to assume that a weak semantic relationship is processed primarily as item information, with little encoding of relational information? If so, then how is the context in which that information is set, which may be considered a

form of relational information, excluded from the encoding process? At a sponsorship-specific level are the concerns regarding the way in which sponsorship information is processed at low levels of attention and how this may affect encoding and storage operations.

Despite these concerns, a psychologically-based, theoretical conceptualization of sponsorship has been lacking in the literature, and this chapter has gone some way to address this situation. Conceptualizing sponsorship as item and relational information offers a strong theoretical framework on which to build future research and to guide practical efforts. With sponsorship expected to continue to grow in future years, the provision of such frameworks will be useful in providing directions for future research and in ensuring that organizations have a sound basis for making tactical decisions regarding their sponsorship-linked marketing efforts.

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