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Measuring Sponsorship Effectiveness: Designing an Alternative Approach

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Abstract

This case study presents the challenge of dealing with the complexity associated with the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness. Students are provided a case study of an Ironman triathlon event in which they will be put into a decision-making position with regards to sponsorship evaluation. Students will be asked to answer a series of "what would you do?" questions to mimic a situation where they are asked by a sponsor to provide a tangible sponsorship measurement approach to secure a promising long-term deal from an interested prospect.

Keywords: media exposure, sponsorship recall, measurement challenges, sponsorship objectives

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Corporate sponsorship has evolved from a small-scale promotional activity (Meenaghan, 1998) to a major global industry, over a relatively short period of time, with US $62.7 billion spending in 2017 (International Event Group [IEG], 2018). In its infancy, sponsorship was almost exclusively the domain of sport properties (e.g., sport organizations, events, athletes), while other properties have recently started to attract considerable resources. Yet again, sport continues to command the lion's share, receiving 70% of the total global sponsorship expenditure (IEG, 2017). However, the practice of measuring sponsorship effectiveness has not kept pace with the industry's growing importance (Walraven, Koning, Bijmolt, & Los, 2016). This hypothetical case study presents the demanding and thought-provoking task that faces a corporate sponsorship executive in his effort to fulfill a precondition initiated by a promising title sponsor.

For the past year, Brandt Phillips[1], a corporate sponsorship executive at the World Triathlon Corporation (WTC), has been approaching Fortune 500 companies to secure a title sponsor for his company's newly launched series of Ironman Triathlon races in the United States. Phillips has considerable experience managing a number of sponsorship deals worldwide. Over the years, he has learned that maintaining a long-term relationship with sponsors results in a win-win situation for all the parties involved. A successful relationship he has witnessed is the long-term partnership between the WTC and Japanese carmaker Subaru in Canada. Subaru is the title sponsor for the Ironman Whistler and Ironman Mont Tremblant races and the chief sponsor of grassroots provincial triathlon associations throughout Canada. During its 20-year association with the WTC, Subaru has clearly established and defined objectives that the car company seeks to fulfill each year through its Ironman sponsorship. Phillips also knows from Subaru's internal research that the take-up rate for Canadian triathletes purchasing a Subaru is close to 5%, which is remarkable, considering Subaru sells around 30,000 cars a year in Canada.

In his search for a title sponsor for the newly launched series, Phillips recently had positive discussions with Subaru of America, which is based in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. During these discussions, a corporate sponsorship executive at Subaru of America, Sarah Garrity[2], showed a strong interest in replicating Subaru's success in Canada and going even further. However, before Subaru of America committed itself, Garrity wanted Phillips and his marketing team to show the company how the WTC would measure the return on their sponsorship investment (ROI). She also expressed her deep concern over the two widely practiced measurement approaches—media exposure and recall. She felt that the two approaches did not accurately measure the true return on sponsorship investment. As a result, she strongly emphasized that the WTC needed to create alternative measurement approaches. Having expressed her concerns, Garrity told Phillips to get the sponsorship metrics right. She believed that if the WTC got the sponsorship measurement right and demonstrated the value of its properties, the series of Ironman events would receive Subaru's title sponsorship investment.

[1] pseudonym

[2] pseudonym

To help Phillips and his team come up with viable measurement approaches, Garrity listed seven key goals that she wanted Subaru to achieve from its title sponsorship. These were: increased brand awareness (e.g., signage and banners on the race course), increased brand preference (e.g., through meet-and-greets and autograph sessions with high-profile athletes at the event sites), lead generation (e.g., on-site activation through rebates, showcase new brand vehicles), increased employee morale (e.g., employees in over 620 Subaru retail offices in the US will be provided with an opportunity to take part in the WTC events), rewarding existing customers (e.g., premier parking and access to a hospitality tent to event participants who are driving their cars to the event), increased brand engagement (e.g., test drives), and reaching new audiences (e.g., contests that encourage users to upload images and videos on social media around Subaru's "Love" marketing campaign and arranging prizes for the winners).

As a forward-thinking corporate sponsorship executive, Phillips wanted to ensure his company secured a long-term sponsorship from this blue-chip automobile company. However, he had to first satisfy Subaru's request, and face the challenge of addressing the complexity associated with measuring sponsorship effectiveness and the limitations of the widely used methods that concerned Garrity.

World Triathlon Corporation and its Consumers

From their very humble beginnings with a single race in 1978, WTC Ironman events have grown exponentially across the world (they take place in five continents—North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia), making it a global property that attract thousands of participants every year. In 2015, the WTC and the Ironman brand were acquired by a Chinese conglomerate, the Dalian Wanda Group, for US $650 million. Shortly after this acquisition, the Dalian Wanda Group announced plans to expand the Ironman and 70.3 races throughout the world. As part of its expansion initiative, the WTC considers and evaluates new markets each year from its US World Headquarters office in Tampa, Florida. Their current aim is to expand their five unique Ironman-branded events: Ironman, Ironman 70.3, the 5150 Triathlon Series, Iron Girl, and Ironkids.

Ironman races are long-distance triathlon races that consist of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride and a 26.22-mile run, all completed consecutively. Ironman 70.3 races, also known as half Ironman races, consist of a 1.2-mile swim, a 56-mile bike ride, and a 13.1-mile run. 5150 Triathlon races consist of a 1.5-km swim, 40-km bike and 10-km run. Iron Girl and Ironkids are a series of races for girls and kids, respectively. The WTC's flagship event is the annual professional and age-group World Championship in Kona, Hawaii. In addition to this marquee event, there are more than 36 WTC Ironman Triathlon races throughout the world and other Ironman-branded races held each year.

According to WTC, participation in Ironman events increased 40–50% between 2008 and 2011. Since then, participation continued to grow at a steady rate, between 10 and 20%. The WTC Ironman athletes' demographics breakdown is as follows: average age: 43; gender ratio: male 72% and female 28%; education: post-secondary 75%; and occupation: professional or executive 77%.

Wicker, Hallmann, Prinz and Weimar (2012) claim that triathlon consumers can be divided roughly into three groups in terms of their leisure activities and interests: serious contenders, who are highly invested in the sport, train hard, participate at a high level, and invest money in the sport; sport lovers, who are mostly rookie triathletes interested in all types of sport; and socializers, who enjoy the social aspects of a triathlon.

Background Literature

At the beginning of any of his business projects, Phillips reads research findings on key managerial issues. Typically, he uses his readings to help him make informed decisions, develop adaptive strategies, and establish informed internal communication with members of his sponsorship team. In the same way, he gathered research articles to assess the means of measuring the effectiveness of sponsorship. He outlined background information on the importance of sponsorship measurement and identified the issues and challenges associated with existing sponsorship measurement approaches. Then, he emailed his literature review to his team and asked them to familiarize themselves with the complexity associated with sponsorship measurement. Most importantly, he asked them to come up with viable measurement approaches that could be proposed to Garrity. Phillips felt his young staff members were up to the challenge and would come up with measurement approaches that addressed Garrity's concerns and would secure this title sponsorship.

The Importance of Sponsorship Measurement

Corporate sponsorship, an in-cash or in-kind investment in a property in return for access to the exploitable commercial opportunity associated with that property (Meenaghan, 1998), is one of the fastest growing forms of marketing communication. Companies invest in sponsorship to achieve marketing goals such as exposure, awareness, intent to purchase, sales, increased market shares (Cameron, 2009; Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013; Harvey, Gray, & Despain, 2006), and to associate or connect positive feelings of the sponsored property to their brands (Garland, Charbonneau, & Macpherson, 2008; Madrigal, 2001). As Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2013) indicated, companies also use sponsorship for hospitality, showcasing community responsibility, employee recruitment and retention, and incentives for retailers, dealers, and distributors.

In recent years, sponsorship has exceeded both media advertising and promotions in terms of year-to-year growth in expenditure (IEG, 2018). The growth of sponsorship, both in dollars allocated and in the projection of sponsorship as a legitimate element in the marketing mix, is due in part to the view of sponsorship as a cost-effective alternative to traditional media, such as advertising (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017). With sponsorship spending accelerating, corporate sponsors are increasingly looking for greater precision regarding a return on their increased sponsorship investment (Walraven et al., 2016), and marketers are confronted with the challenge of proving sponsorship as a fair business exchange between properties and sponsors (Delaney, McManus, & Lamminmaki, 2016). The fairness of the exchange process can be demonstrated through the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness, and, unless, this measurement is addressed in a timely fashion, one can argue that sport sponsorship may face a considerable challenge in the future.

The importance of sponsorship measurement can be seen from the perspective of both the sponsor and the property holders. As sponsorship spending increases, the pressure on senior managers to demonstrate accountability for sponsorship spending also intenifies. According to Crompton (2004), in multiple situations, sponsorship agreements get cancelled, not because the investment does not have value, but because its value has not actually been measured and justified with evidence. This is very evident in the case of local events. As Seguin, Teed and O'Reilly (2005) stated, sponsors seem to use a 'gut feeling approach' in investing significant sponsorship money. However, in order to justify sponsorship as a legitimate communication platform and to maximize the relationship between right holders and corporate partners, measurement will be a critical and vital resource for the new era of sponsorship.

For sponsors, measurement metrics provide justification for sponsorship investment in comparison with other communication alternatives (Olson & Mathias, 2009). As such, measurement serves as a guiding tool in making a strategic decision to invest in properties that deliver against objectives (Crompton, 2004). Measurement is also a vital resource that enables businesses to establish accountability over sponsorship for internal constituencies (Cameron, 2009). Finally, it assists with (re)negotiating rights fees and setting activation budgets (Seguin et al., 2005). Moreover, sponsorship measurement provides the justification needed to secure and maintain sponsorships in an uncertain economic environment.

For the rights holders (e.g., sport organizations and events), measurement justifies healthy rights fees for their properties, it helps rights holders better understand the promotional potential of their products, and most importantly, it aids rights holders to successfully renew or sell sponsorship packages (Cameron, 2009). Therefore, in order for sport organizations and events to develop a customized approach that is compatible with sponsors' interests and objectives in the recruitment of sponsors, sport marketers will be required to develop a meaningful measurement tool. This endeavor will also provide an opportunity for corporate sponsors to better appreciate the value of their sponsorship investment and the possible rewards. Considering the significant mutual benefit that sponsorship measurement renders to sponsors and rights holders, the development of alternative measurement approaches will be essential.

Challenges of Sponsorship Effectiveness Measurement

A number of research works have reported that many companies have not found a practical way to measure sponsorship effectiveness (e.g., Crompton, 2004; Delaney et al., 2016; O'Reilly, Nadeau, Seguin, & Harrison, 2007; Walraven et al., 2016). Berrett and Slack (1995), in their over two-decades-old study, reported that most of the companies they studied had no clear idea of the benefits they received from sponsorship expenditures. A more recent study conducted by Nanji (2013) showed that evaluation remains a challenge, with 38% of sponsors reporting that they were not satisfied with sponsorship evaluation, while 42% were somewhat satisfied, and only 20% were satisfied.

Measurement has remained one of the most controversial, and indeed, the most difficult element of sponsorship, partly due to the lack of a clear theoretical framework (Cameron, 2009). At the core of sponsorship measurement challenges is the role that information plays in influencing consumers (Garland et al., 2008). One of the most difficult undertakings in sponsorship is establishing concrete outcomes that are credited to a specific sponsorship package (O'Reilly & Madill, 2007). The fact that sponsors often set multiple objectives in a sponsorship deal, together with the simultaneous use of other communication mix variables, contributes to multiple complications in measuring the value of a sponsorship. In line with this, the fact that sponsorship is regularly leveraged using a number of promotional tools (Abeza, Pegoraro, Naraine, Séguin, & O'Reilly, 2014) further complicates the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness.

It is difficult to separate and measure changes specifically attributable to sponsorship that are distinct from other elements in the marketing mix (O'Reilly et al., 2007). Furthermore, the difficulty of obtaining sufficient data from sponsors, sport entities, intermediaries, and consumers have made the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness challenging (Olson & Mathias, 2009). In spite of its widely formalized practice, for the above reasons, sponsorship measurement remains challenging.

Issues Associated with Existing Sponsorship Measurement Approaches

The most common measurement approaches in sponsorship are media exposure and sponsor recall (O'Reilly & Madill, 2009). Even if these are the most widely used methods in the industry, it is worth mentioning that scholars and practitioners have proposed a number of other sponsorship evaluation methods and metrics (O'Reilly & Madill, 2009). Some models specific to sponsorship measurement have also been proposed, such as O'Reilly and Madill's (2011) process model and Walvaren et al.'s (2016) data driven approach, although both of these require considerable investment of time and expertise to implement. However, as Nanji (2013) reported, 70% of the sponsors they studied used media exposure and/or sponsor recall to measure return on their sponsorship investment.

A number of research works (e.g., Cameron, 2009; Cornwell, Pruitt, & Clark, 2005; Crompton, 2004; Meenaghan, 2005) have drawn conclusions that these two approaches severely fail to effectively communicate the value of return on sponsorship investment. The methods currently in use measure what is easy to calculate rather than what matters. In other words, they measure what a sponsor received (i.e., media exposure/sponsor recall), rather than what the sponsorship actually produced with respect to attitude change, consumer purchase, or any other desired outcomes. For example, reporting that 10,000 people attended or watched a sporting event is an output, but it is the outcome that matters to sponsors. The outcome can focus on questions, such as who were those attendees or viewers, what came out of their experience, and how did their behavior change after the event compared to similar targets who did not attend or view the event?

Measuring Media Exposure. Over the years, sponsors have examined various ways to quantify the value of their investment. One of the first methods presented involved tracking televised sponsor logo air time. This is a method commonly used to evaluate general advertising effectiveness and was subsequently applied to measuring sponsorship effectiveness. This partly evolved from the thought that advertising and sponsorship are comparable elements of an integrated communication approach. The two share similar goals (e.g., increasing brand awareness and enhancing brand image), but the two deliver their messages in different ways. A comparison of advertising and sponsorship in terms of factors such as goodwill, intent-to-persuade, and emotional relationship reveal distinct features of the two.

In terms of the goodwill factor, corporate sponsorship is seen as a generic form of marketing communications that involves a benefit to society (Meenaghan, 2001). It is also seen as offering benefits to a property (e.g., sport team) with which consumers (as fans or audience) have relationships. This feature causes sponsorship to be considered an "advertising plus" (Meenaghan, 2005, p. 245). Advertising, by contrast, is seen as mainly addressing a selfish corporate agenda with no obvious benefit to society. Similarly, in terms of the intent-to-persuade, advertising is a direct, verbal and visual method of communication capable of product demonstration and information provision. Conversely, sponsorship is an indirect, relatively subtle mode of communication that operates through the sponsored property to address sponsors' objectives. For this reason, it is argued that sponsorship involves a disguised intent-to-persuade feature. In a like manner, Meenaghan (2001) positing sponsorship as a three-way relationship (sponsor-property-consumer) showed that sponsorship is a communication means that places a sponsor in an emotional relationship between a consumer (e.g., a fan) and a sponsored activity (e.g., a sport event or team).

Media exposure measures usually involve quantifying the duration of television coverage, the duration of radio mentions, and the extent of press coverage as measured in single column inches, while measuring against paid advertisement rate. In other words, it compares the value of sponsorship-generated media coverage to the cost of equivalent advertising space or time. For instance, one person viewing a sponsor logo at one time is an impression (Cameron, 2009) and 400,000 people viewing the sponsor logo over a period of time would provide 400,000 impressions. The impressions would be ascribed media value equivalent to paid advertising. Hence, a $500,000 sponsorship investment may have an equivalent media value of $2 million.

In fact, in recent years, with improvements in digital technology, the methods of sponsor logo measurement have become more sophisticated, making the accurate measurement of sponsor logos at an event or in broadcast media possible (e.g., see the work of GumGum Sports). However, the use of media exposure measures and equivalences means sponsorship is being defined in terms of traditional advertising, which is inappropriate for the reasons discussed above. At a minimum, media exposure measures just one small aspect of sponsorship impact (e.g., exposure), and presents sponsorship and advertising as complements designed to achieve different and contrary outcomes (O'Reilly et al., 2007).

Sponsorship is much more than media exposure (e.g., sponsor logo placement), and consumer engagement is a key component missing from media exposure measurement (Cameroon, 2009; Meenaghan, 2001). Olson and Mathias (2009), in their empirical study, highlighted the drawbacks of this popular metric, illustrating the flawed conversion of advertising measurement into sponsorship. Simply, media exposure measurement measures what a sponsor got (exposure) rather than what the sponsorship has actually produced (consumer response). For these reasons, it can be claimed that measurement of media exposure represents only a paper justification presented to top management for sponsorship investment (Crompton, 2004) and does not show its complete effectiveness. Yet, such practices of media exposure measures have been widely used perhaps for three practical reasons: (i) they are easy for management to understand, (ii) they are relatively uncomplicated to collect, and (iii) they offer statistical data to show decisions were made on supportive data, which gives peace of mind to decision makers.

Measuring Impact on Awareness. The second widely used sponsorship measurement is sponsor recall or sponsor name awareness. Measuring impact on awareness has considerable corporate popularity. This partly evolved from the assumption that consumer recall exhibits the extent to which a sponsor's association with a property will be remembered. The presumption led brand recall to be regarded as a popular method of the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness (Cameron, 2009). Yet again, awareness or recall is merely an output and not an outcome. For this reason, the sponsor name awareness measure, similar to the media exposure measure, is recognized as a basic level measure of sponsorship impact. These measures do not, by themselves, serve to facilitate understanding of consumer engagement with sponsorship (Meenaghan, 2001).

In connection with this, there is also less agreement as to the level of importance played by sponsor name awareness as it is generally accepted that sponsorship is an effective way to increase brand recall. However, as Garland et al. (2008) reported, there are often immediate improvements in brand awareness for lesser-known brands. At the same time, there is little room for improvement in recall for well-known brands such as Coca-Cola, where sponsorship will have limited upside benefit to their already massive brand awareness. Further, a sponsor recall measure does not show the whole picture of sponsorship. There are a number of other sponsorship goals such as incentivizing retailers, dealers and distributors, increasing sales, driving retail traffic, differentiating the product, improving employee morale, and encouraging product trial. Therefore, sponsor name recall fails to give the full picture of return on sponsorship investment.

For a sponsorship to be effective, consumers have to recall the sponsor's involvement. However, consumers may associate a sponsor with a property based on that sponsor's popularity and not because they remembered their signage on-site. At the same time, image effects could be temporary and depend on integration with other marketing tools. As a result, corporate sponsors who use recall as an evaluation mechanism may potentially either underestimate (e.g., Coca-Cola) or overestimate the effect of their sponsorship (e.g., people mentioning popular brands as sponsors). Hence, it can be argued that awareness measures are incapable of fully measuring sponsorship effects.

An Alternative Measurement Approach–Return on Objectives (ROO)

From the discussion so far, it is evident that the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness is complex and the widely used metrics have drawbacks. As a result, there is a great need for an alternative measurement approach—an approach that provides sponsors and sponsees with feedback on a sponsorship's achievement of specific goals and its performance, relative to other promotional tactics (Cornwell et al., 2005; Crompton, 2004). The recommended alternative approach is measuring sponsorship against clearly defined/established objectives (ROO) that can be agreed upon prior to the commencement of the evaluation program (Cameron, 2009; Cornwell et al., 2005; Crompton, 2004). As Crompton (2004) stated, the worth of an evaluation to a company will be strongly influenced by the original specification of its sponsorship objectives. If the objectives are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-oriented, and Time-bounded), then they give clear direction as to what the evaluation must be designed to measure.

As companies seek different outcomes from their sponsorships (e.g., awareness, image, employee morale, product trial, and product sales), different types of measures and designs will be required for each individual objective attached with quantifiable data (Crompton, 2004). Thus, sponsors should refine and clearly state the expectations they have for their sponsorship investment. But here again, when it is suggested that "identifying objectives helps measurement," it does not mean vague statements such as, "increasing consumers in a given market segment," rather, expectations should be specified as "to increase consumer by 10,000." In this regard, digital media-centered sponsorship effectiveness metrics are receiving attention in the past few years (Wojdynski, Evans, & Hoy, 2018). For instance, a company may launch an audience-engaging promotional campaign on social media using tactics such as, personality quizzes, voting campaigns, meme generators, trivia contests, loyalty programs, and scratch-off games. These, among other metrics, can be quantified using impressions, video views, click-throughs, and downloads. Moreover, sponsorship goals such as employee morale and brand image can be assessed with pre- and post-event surveys.

Phillips Team Task—What Would You Do?

Phillips' young staff members have now learned that measuring sponsorship effectiveness is complex and the commonly used metrics do not reflect the sum total of a sponsorship outcome. Particularly, the staff has learned that (i) there is no "magic bullet" that allows for the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness; (ii) not all objectives can be quantified precisely (e.g., brand image, hospitality, showcasing community responsibility); and (iii) sponsorship is only part of the marketing mix, which contains numerous intangibles. In light of these factors, the staff agrees that there is great need for an alternative measurement approach that provides sponsors (and rights holders) feedback on a sponsorship's achievement of specific goals and its performance relative to other promotional tactics. Phillips has little time to get back to Subaru with a final proposal, but he is waiting for your recommendations on what to do next. Specifically, he wants to present alternative measurement approaches that are based on the seven key goals that Garrity identified and that would address the concerns of Subaru.

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