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Corporate Motives for Sport Sponsorship at Mid-Major Collegiate Athletic Departments

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Sport sponsorship has become an increasingly important part of intercollegiate athletic revenue generation as universities have been forced to seek new and creative ways to fund their programs. The purpose of this study was to explore the benefits, criteria, and company factors that lead local corporations to embark upon sport sponsorship agreements within a specific region of mid-major sized universities. Respondents were corporate decision-makers who had forged sponsorships with three mid-major schools. Results reveal that sponsors have clear motives and preferences when agreeing to sponsor sport. On-site signage and cost were identified as being the most important information listed. Additionally, it was found that sponsorship evaluation was measured by only 55% of those surveyed.

Introduction

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) established the Corporate Partner Program in 1984 in order to generate income, promotions, and savings that would benefit its members. The program's mission is to balance the NCAA's commitment to education, integrity, and quality with its need for financial support for its championships, youth education programs, and membership services (White, 1996). As the NCAA established partnerships, individual schools within the association also began to look for sponsors as well. Increases in college sport sponsorship have continued since the inception of the NCAA Corporate Partner Program (Crompton, 2004).

Since 1987, sponsorship spending growth has outpaced that of any other marketing communication or promotion vehicle (Crompton, 2004; IEG, 2007). As of 2007, North American companies spent an estimated 14.93 billion on sponsorship investment, with over two-thirds of this sponsorship invested in sports (IEG, 2007). As sponsorship has reached throughout the sports industry, it has become a large part of collegiate athletics. According to a study done by

the NCAA, the overall number of sponsored men's collegiate teams increased from 6,746 in 1981-1982 to 8,009 during 2003-2004, an 18.7% increase. During that same time period the number of NCAA sponsored women's collegiate teams increased from 4,279 to 8,948, a 109.1% increase (Bray, 2004). College athletic sponsorship has become a significant part of the genre, as the NCAA itself has sealed deals that showcase the pervasiveness of this marketing tactic. In 2008 alone, corporate sponsored bowl games earned universities over \$210 million (Football Bowl Association, 2007).

As the level of sport sponsorship has grown each year, the reasons for sponsorship partnerships have grown as well. Sponsorship was once seen as involving charity or patronage used to achieve a "tingly feeling" (Kiely, 1993). However, any current definition should distinguish between elements of corporate philanthropy and corporate sponsorship (Arthur, Scott, Woods, & Booker, 1998). Sponsorship is currently based on a mutually beneficial agreement between athletic departments and corporations. This mutual agreement is often reached only after serious considerations by corporations, since sponsorship lacks the direct impact possibilities normally associated with advertising (Crompton, 2004).

College sport sponsorship has become a major issue in today's society, as commercialization finds its way into the academic realm. Much of the existing research on the subject of sport sponsorship fails to address the reasons why corporations agree to partnerships, especially at the collegiate conference level. A study investigating corporate sponsorship objective differences in Division I-A, AA, and AAA was done by Tomasini, Frye, and Stotlar (2004). This study identified known sponsorship objectives by senior marketing administrators, and found some differences across divisions. No research, however, has been found to exist addressing sponsorships specific to non-BCS conference schools—the smaller Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) programs that often depend on sponsorship revenue to even field sports teams. These schools often have operating budgets more similar to their Division II and III counterparts than their BCS schools with which they share an NCAA football classification. The unique sponsorship phenomenon which occurs within these institutions, therefore, may not be appropriately assessed or interpreted through FBS-targeted studies. Further, many studies which have targeted sponsorship objectives have not gathered primary data from the sponsors themselves.

While sponsorship dollars have grown steadily over the past five years (IEG,2007), shaky economic conditions have led many companies to discontinue their sponsorship investments, and there are an increasing number of sponsorship dropouts throughout the industry (Thomaselli, 2008; Macur & Caldwell, 2008). During this time it is critically important to foster sponsorship partnerships through gaining an understanding of the unique needs and desires of niche sponsors. The purpose of this study was to fill this gap. Specifically, this study explores regional sponsors' relationships with three mid-major conference institutions and examines the motives behind these corporations' affiliations with the institutions.

Review of Related Literature

In examining previous research addressing sport sponsorship, two components of interest emerged: Sponsorship Proposals, and Sponsorship Evaluation. These components are outlined below.

Sponsorship Proposals

Once an organization's marketers determine what results they desire from a sponsorship, they must then choose what elements of the sponsorship package are most important in order to reach these results. McCook, Turco, & Riley (1997) interviewed corporate decision-makers and found that most businesses seek the same type of information in a sport sponsorship proposal. This information includes sponsorship costs, length of contract, value-added promotions, and media coverage. They also found that the benefits of sponsorship should be clearly stated within the proposal. The value-added promotions sections of sponsorship proposals encompass a large variety of unique opportunities for corporations. "Sponsorship types range from stadium naming rights, to event entertainment, to product demonstrations at an event. The type of sponsorship selected by a corporation offers varying opportunities to communicate with current, prospective and future customers" (Busser, Benson, & Feinstein, 2002, p.20).

The use of signage in sponsorship communication is a common promotional tool. As signage is used within sport sponsorship several factors determine effectiveness: New information, clutter, ad timing, frequency, content and type of media each held importance in ad recall (Busser et. al., 2002). Kent (1993) found that competing clutter reduces the recall and recognition of ads. This reduction has led to many sponsorship proposals to focus on exclusivity within a product/service category. Sponsors are more likely to agree to long-term relationships when the property provides an offer of exclusivity, which is typically offered to anchor sponsors. Such was the case with the San Antonio Spurs, who opted to have but one telecommunications company as a sponsor (AT&T) and excluded others (Wakefield, 2007). Though signage is a major issue that corporations look for within proposals, the ability to have access to special events is also an important element of sponsorship agreement. Hospitality issues offer an added bonus to sponsorship that other forms of advertising cannot provide. Pope and Voges (1994) found that client entertainment was the biggest day of event issue listed in proposals, more so than signage of naming rights.

Sponsorship Evaluation

When embarking on a sponsorship agreement, goals and objectives should be clearly defined by an organization in order to get the most out of the partnership. Objectives need to be "stated in an unambiguous and measurable form with a stated time period for accomplishment (Kotler, 1988)." In order to reach these established goals and objectives there must be direct evaluation. Hansen and Scotwin (1995) listed four separate levels at which sponsorship could be evaluated: via exposure, via attention, via cognition, and via behavior. In an analysis of major corporate sponsorships in North America, Gross, Traylor, & Shuman (1987) found that only 47% of the corporations engaged in any form of evaluation. With less than half of corporations actually engaging in evaluation, it seems that when evaluation is present, objectives and goals of sponsorship are formed with the ability to evaluate as the main priority. Pope and Voges (1994), suggest that when objectives are formally set, sponsors make use of those evaluative methods. Crompton (2004) found that corporations sometimes cancel sponsorships not because they lack value, but because no one has actually measured that value. Evaluating sponsorship allows corporations to determine what they achieved compared to their original objectives.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the benefits, criteria, and company factors that lead regional corporations to engage in sport sponsorship agreements at three institutions within a mid-major level conference. There is scant research focusing on smaller Division I schools in regard to sport sponsorship, particularly with those institutions not within the BCS conferences. Toward gaining an understanding of the entire sport sponsorship spectrum at this important but often overlooked level of competition, this inquiry was segmented into sponsorship proposal, and sponsorship evaluation. By posing questions related to each section, a better understanding of what drives corporations to partner in sport sponsorship agreements could be established.

Methodology

Using a post-positivist epistemology, this research was conducted through the use of survey. Pursuing the inquiry through a post-positivist epistemology, the researchers sought to uncover the reality of the subject matter of inquiry believing “a reality does exist, but...can only be known imperfectly and probabilistically because of the researcher’s limitations” (Robson, 2002, p. 27; Crotty, 1998). Survey was the methodology chosen because the survey is “advantageous when the research goal is to describe the incidence or prevalence of a phenomenon or when it is to be predictive about certain outcomes” (Yin, 2003, p. 6). The instrument generated for this study was a combined version of two previously designed instruments. This survey was comprised of four sections, with open-ended and quantitative parts in each. Quantitative questions were based on the instrument utilized by McCook, et. al. (1997) in their benchmark study exploring the corporate sponsorship decision-making process. This section used a 5-point Likert scale in order to determine the highest ranking motives of the respondents. The open-ended questions were gleaned from *The Sport Sponsorship Questionnaire* developed by Young & Brown (1999). This section posed questions seeking the most important issues relating to *Sponsorship Proposals, Corporation Factors, and Sponsorship Evaluation*.

The sample was specifically chosen in order to create an in-depth glimpse at the regional sponsor objectives utilized within the Mid American Conference (MAC) of mid-major NCAA institutions. Names and email addresses of regional sponsor contacts were provided by the sponsorship sales directors of all Mid-American Conference (MAC) athletics departments. All thirteen MAC schools were contacted to participate in this study, and four of the 13 programs agreed to participate – those with the strongest ties to the research team. The sponsorship sales directors provided contact information for their corporate sponsors (n=60), and a survey instrument was then sent and completed by those individuals in charge of advertising decisions for their corporations. The initial response rate was 11 (18.3%). After follow-up with each non-respondent, four additional surveys were completed and returned for a final sample of 15 (25%) representing each of the four institutions.

Quantitative data was secured via an online survey. The basis of quantitative research is grounded in natural sciences, and follows the basic doctrine of objectivity (Thomas et al., 2005). A current mixed method approach was utilized wherein two types of data – quantitative and qualitative - were collected and analyzed parallel to one another in order to enhance reliability (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Creswell, 2009)..

Open-ended responses were analyzed to determine common themes within each section. These themes were coded and the researchers independently qualified the data through axial-

coded categories. Inter-rater reliability was 96%. By using an interplay of the categorization and analysis from the qualitative perspective as well as the objective and theory driven framework of quantitative research, this study's reliability and validity were strengthened through the mixed methodology.

Results

Sponsorship Criteria

Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale to identify the types and importance of criteria their corporation seeks to derive when deciding to sponsor a sport organization. Each question included a unique benefit that sport sponsorship can offer. To aid interpretation of these results, descriptive statistics were utilized in order to determine the most important factors that corporations use when making sponsorship decisions. Table 1 displays ranks of the most important factors identified. The ability for sport sponsorship to increase company/brand awareness had the highest mean and lowest standard deviation ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.08$), followed by the ability to increase sales ($M=3.93$, $SD= 1.33$), and the ability to reinforce/establish company image ($M=3.87$, $SD=1.55$).

Table 1 - *Importance of sponsorship criteria*

Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Increase company/ brand awareness	4.20	1.08
2. Increase sales	3.93	1.33
3. Reinforce/ establish image	3.87	1.55
4. Increase new customers	3.73	1.33
5. Event to target spectators	3.13	1.19
6. Success of athletic program	2.93	1.28

Consistency within the open-ended responses support these conclusions. Respondents were asked which criteria they viewed as the most important, and both reinforcing/establishing image of your company and increasing company/brand awareness were identified equally as the most important criteria of sport sponsorship. The importance of establishing the image of the company was emphasized by respondent seven, when he explained that the most important element of sponsorship to his company is "exposure to Univeristy Community that profiles our business both as a supporter of the university, an engaged part of the community, and a viable product/service vendor in the immediate area." Similarly, another respondent emphasized the importance of increasing company/brand awareness when they related the most imortant element of sponsorship to their company was to "build brand awareness with a high profile entity that targets core consumers" (Respondent 4).

Table 2 charts the responses to the open-ended question in relation to the percentage that each theme was represented. Of seven possible categories, only five were identified by the respondents.

Table 2 - "Most Important" Sponsorship Criteria (Open-Ended Responses)

Criteria	Repondents	Percentage
1. Increase company/ brand awareness	4	36%
2. Reinforce/ establish image	4	36%
3. Success of athletic program	2	18%
4. Event to target spectators	1	9%
5. Increase new customers	-	-
6. Increase sales	-	-

After categorizing the responses of the open-ended question it was then possible to show consistency within responses by checking the most common themes in each of the survey methods. Increasing company/brand awareness had the highest average ($M=4.20$, $SD= 1.08$) within the Likert 5-point scale section. Reinforcing/establishing image of company had the third highest average in this section ($M=3.87$, $SD=1.55$), and these were the two most common themes revealed in the open-ended question.

Sponsorship Proposals

Respondents were also asked to indicate their opinions regarding benefits and rights they seek within a sport sponsorship agreement. Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics relative to the sponsorship proposal criterion. Information about on-site signage was revealed as the most important criterion within a sponsorship proposal as it had the highest mean and the lowest standard deviation ($M=4.06$, $SD=1.10$). Exclusivity within product/service came in as the second highest average ($M=3.47$, $SD= 1.51$).

Table 3 - Importance of Sponsorship Proposal Elements

Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. On-site signage	4.06	1.10
2. Exclusivity within product/service	3.47	1.51
3. Opportunity for ownership	2.73	1.39
4. On-site demonstration	2.53	1.30
4. Hospitality	2.53	1.51

Qualitative inquiry addressed the most important factor within a sponsorship proposal. After viewing these results only three final categories emerged: cost, benefits, and other answers. Cost received the most responses as 45% of those surveyed felt that above all else the cost is critical. Benefits received 36% of the remaining responses, as individuals listed various issues (exclusivity, signage, etc.) that they deemed most important. The importance of cost and benefits being included was explained by respondent four when they stated, "cost and benefits need to be in the proposal. I need to know what I will be getting and how much it is going to cost." Table 4 represents answers to the sponsorship proposal open-ended question.

Table 4 - "Most Important" Sponsorship Proposal Elements (Open-Ended Responses)

Elements	Repondents	Percentage
1. Cost	5	55%
2. Benefits	4	44%
3. On-site signage	-	-
3. Exclusivity within product/service	-	-
3. Opportunity for ownership	-	-
3. On-site demonstration	-	-
3. Hospitality	-	-

Respondents focused more on the general idea of cost within the open-ended question, rather than listing specific information which they look for in sponsorship proposals. Reliability was difficult to establish in this section, but the amount of respondent who answered about wanting benefits to be listed does show that on-site signage, exclusivity, and opportunity for ownership are important to clearly list.

Corporation Factors

Respondents also identified factors within their corporations that determine participation in sport sponsorship. It was important to understand not only the external considerations that go into sponsorship decisions, but also the consideration for internal corporation issues. Respondents were asked to choose the answer that best represented their company's belief about the importance of each different criterion. Community relations tie-ins was found to be the most important issue considered when sponsoring sport ($M=3.87$, $SD=1.26$). Corporations use sport sponsorship as a way to connect with the community and show that they are supportive of the hometown team. The cost of sponsorship compared to other advertising options also appears to be an important factor ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.32$). Table 5 lists the response descriptive statistics.

Table 5 - Importance of Corporation Factors

Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Community relations tie-ins	3.87	1.26
2. Cost compared to other options	3.80	1.32
3. Relationship to current advertising	3.20	1.08
4. Motivate employees	2.40	1.24

Within the qualitative section two themes emerged with 5 responses (42%) each: cost and community relations tie-ins. Respondents considered how their corporation could gain a community connection through sponsorship, and also focused on what it would cost to make such a connection. The importance of cost compared to other options was the biggest issue for respondent one, as they stated simply, "money is our biggest concern." Community relations tie-ins was also a strong issue, as respondent nine pointed out that factors within their company that led to sponsorship were, "loyalties, community relations and our ability to establish a

relationship with the sporting community at the university.” Table 6 lists the four categories which received responses within the open-ended question.

Table 6 - “Most Important” Corporation Factors (Open-Ended Responses)

Factors	Repondents	Percentage
1. Cost compared to other options	5	45%
2. Community relations tie-ins	5	45%
3. Relationship to current advertising	1	9%
4. Motivate employees	-	-

Respondents also identified what corporation factors determine sponsorship decisions. Within the 5-point Likert scale section, community relations tie-ins ($M=3.87$) and cost compared to other advertising options ($M=3.80$) were found to be the most important issues. The open-ended question also revealed the same issues that were identified the most by those surveyed.

Sponsorship Evaluation

Finally, respondents answered questions pertaining to the evaluation of sport sponsorships by corporations. They were asked two questions that dealt directly with their ability to measure the effects of sport sponsorship. The ability of corporations to evaluate sponsorship agreements was questioned, both in general terms as well as name/logo exposure. Table 7 displays the results of these questions. Each question within this section was not answered by all 15 respondents: Q1, $n = 14$, and Q2, $n=13$. The ability to measure name/logo exposure through sponsorship ($M=3.54$, $SD= 1.13$) was more highly identified and had a smaller standard deviation than the more general ability to quantify and measure the impact of the sponsorship ($M=3.00$, $SD= 1.41$).

Table 7

Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Logo/name exposure	3.54	1.13
2. Ability to measure impact	3.00	1.41

Results within the qualitative portion suggest that evaluation is not easily accomplished after completion of a sport sponsorship. Of the eleven responses, six (55%) included answers which involved some general sort of evaluation. The other five answers simply stated that the corporation had no specific way of evaluating sport sponsorship at all. Those who did evaluate their sponsorships had to find creative ways to accomplish this evaluation. Respondent five said, “We do take a guest card for everyone who comes to our office to track marketing mediums.” Table 8 demonstrates the quantity of those who evaluated their sponsorship to those who did not.

Table 8 - *Sponsorship Evaluation (Open-Ended Responses)*

Evaluation	Repondents	Percentage
1. Some form of measurement	6	55%
2. No measurement	5	45%

Discussion

Sponsorship Criteria

The results of this study show that increasing awareness and image enhancement were the most important criterion to those surveyed. These results actually mirrored the study completed by McCally (1993), as increasing awareness and image enhancement were the two most valued criteria of sponsorship. These findings show a consistent corporation mindset despite these studies being completed 15 years apart. Also, the quantitative result of increasing awareness (M= 4.2) and image enhancement (M=3.87) and the qualitative result of each receiving 31% of responses shows equality in importance. This is consistent with Arthur et al. (1998) stating that sponsors approach is to realize multiple objectives through sponsorship.

Sponsorship Proposals

Sport Sponsorship can offer many perks for corporations, but this study's quantitative portion revealed that on-site signage was important above other benefits. Cost was also identified as an essential portion of a proposal within the qualitative responses, as corporations need to know what it will cost them to be a sponsor. McCook et al. (1997) found that corporations want benefits and other criteria (cost included) clearly stated within the proposal. The qualitative section of this study showed that 45% of those surveyed viewed cost as the most important part of a sponsorship proposal, and mandated that it is clearly stated within the proposal. Benefits being clearly stated received 36% of responses within this same section.

Interestingly, hospitality issues were the lowest rated within the quantitative portion (M=2.53) as respondents were not as concerned with event bonuses as they were with other issues. This finding differed from that of the study by Pope et al. (1994), which saw hospitality issues as the largest day of event information needed within a proposal. This survey showed that Mid-American Conference respondents prefer on-site signage and exclusivity, rather than free admission to events.

Corporation Factors

Findings showed two highly important internal issues that effect sponsorship decisions: community relations tie-ins and cost. Those surveyed use a strong consideration for possible community relations tie-ins that sponsorship offers. Due to the high level of fan identification with the team, sport teams can build fan communities in ways that few other brands can (Wakefield, 2007). Corporations realize that they can piggyback off of this fan identification by showing a connection to a local school.

Cost was also identified in both sections, quantitative ($M=3.80$) and qualitative 42% of the total responses, as a huge consideration within corporations. These findings are similar to those of McCook et al. (1997), which found budget constraints to be the most important internal issue when looking at the potential to sponsor sport. Corporations must decide if their motives of increasing brand awareness and enhancing image are worth the monetary level of sponsorship.

Sponsorship Evaluation

The ability to truly measure the impact of sport sponsorship is often difficult for corporations. This held true within this study as only 55% of those surveyed had any form of evaluation to use following a sponsorship. This number is relatively small, but actually exceeded the number in the Gross et al. (1987) study, which found only 47% of corporations to engage in evaluation. Within the quantitative portion of this section, logo/name exposure had the highest average ($M=3.53$). This exposure importance correlates with findings in the *Sponsorship Proposal* section which identified on-site signage as most important. Evaluating sponsorship effectiveness can be completed by corporation asking their customers how they had heard of the business, a measureable impact of sponsorship.

Conclusion

Sport sponsorship has increased within intercollegiate athletics, as corporations seek a unique form of advertisement. This study focused specifically on the Mid-American Conference and its corporate sponsors, but has wide reaching implications. Results show clear information about what motives effect sponsorship decisions. Corporations have a great deal to consider when approached about the possibility to sponsor sport, but must sort through the perks to find if it will truly benefit their company. This study focused on the entire sponsorship process from formation to evaluation. Corporation's motives found were the wish to increase brand awareness and enhance image. Before achieving these needs, corporations must find a price that suits their budget. Cost was ultimately the biggest issue in sport sponsorship expressed by those who sponsor Mid-American Conference teams. While perks and other hospitality issues can provide added incentives to sponsor, there is no substitute for a cost effective proposal. The other purpose this study pursued was the knowledge of how these corporations evaluate sponsorship. Though more than half of those surveyed (55%) had some form of evaluation, a large percent of those paying for these sponsorships had no way of evaluating the impact that this form of advertising had made. As one respondent (R#11) said, "This is very difficult to measure. We can only judge effectiveness based on the stability of our long-term relationship with the athletic program." A plan for evaluation should be considered by corporations before making a decision. Though some respondents view sponsorship as just a way to support their favorite team/school, if a corporation is to spend money on this form of advertising they should know how it has impacted their business.

Implications & Future Research

This study explored specifically targeted corporations in several ways. First, respondents were sponsors for athletics within a small geographic region. These respondents also sponsored schools within a specific organization, the Mid-American Conference, which is considered a

non-BCS conference. Future research involving sport sponsorship must take these specifics into consideration. For this reason, additional research focusing on BCS versus non-BCS conference schools may provide different motives that corporations express. Also, geographic location must be considered in other studies as well.

The monetary level of corporations surveyed can also have future consideration. This study focused on corporation at all monetary levels of sponsorship, but it would be interesting to determine if those who paid higher amounts of money (i.e. >\$10,000) had differing opinions about expectations compared to those who spent smaller amount (i.e. < \$1,000). It may not be as important to evaluate sponsorship for those who do not have as much monetarily at stake.

This study used a survey to collect all information. Though this was deemed most appropriate for this particular study based on the purpose, future research may want to consider an interview device. Interviewing corporate decision-makers may uncover unexpected results. This research template can be effectively used to investigate this timely, important topic and provide a significant contribution to the literature.

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