

Sponsorship Marketing: A Framework For Evaluating Opportunity (originally published in Bacon's *ExpertPR*)

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Sponsorship marketing is a gray area for many marketers. Those who've focused on traditional advertising and publicity channels may be reluctant to delve into sponsorship activities or unsure how to find opportunities that fit. Evaluating teams, athletes, events and the benefits associated with sponsorship exposure can be cumbersome, particularly if you don't have your requirements and guidelines clearly defined ahead of time.

Effective use of sponsorship marketing requires careful consideration of qualitative and quantitative information. While pure exposure may be one of the benefits you're looking for, the evaluation of your options should not be based solely on the numbers of impressions your brand will receive. The focus should instead be on the quality of those impressions. For example, a brand that claims to make your car go faster would obviously benefit from being associated with a top-performing motor sports team. Compare this to a sponsorship of the last place race team on the same circuit: The number of direct impressions is the same, but are you sending the same message?

Evaluating sponsorship opportunities against defined guidelines and objectives helps you avoid sending mixed messages to your consumer and allows you to identify opportunities that reinforce your traditional brand messaging. The creation of internal

sponsorship activity guidelines should consider the brand objective, budget and distribution constraints and the target audience.

- **Objective.** What is the primary objective of your overall marketing strategy? What are the weak areas of your brand and its image in the marketplace? Sponsorships can be used as tuck-in programs that address specific objectives under the umbrella of a larger marketing plan. Do you need to change or enhance your image with your existing customers? Are you trying to gain credibility with a new consumer group? Do you need to educate a particular consumer group about the benefits of your product? Perhaps you are launching a line extension or new brand and you need to let your existing customers know about it? Are you countering a competitor's aggressive marketing?

Sponsorship opportunities may last one day, a weekend, a year or indefinitely. The timeframe appropriate for your brand will be defined by the objective. For example, pre-launch activities have a definite endpoint, while consumer relationship building is an ongoing process. Articulating specific objectives allows for more focused implementation and easier assessment of results.

- **Budget.** Define how much you can set aside early in the process. Budget considerations will greatly reduce the number of programs you'll have to evaluate in detail. If, for example, you have only \$100,000 to spend, sponsoring an entire

men's soccer team won't be an option.

- **Distribution.** Is your product available locally, regionally, nationally or globally?

Nationally televised events will cost more than local ones. It doesn't make sense to pay for the opportunity to promote your product to a large audience when that audience can't get your product.

Further, sponsorship should not be an isolated marketing activity. It should support and be supported by traditional advertising and publicity efforts. There should be a very good reason why you would choose to create sponsorship exposure in areas that are not supported by your advertising.

- **Audience.** The identification of your objective will define the audience you need to reach. Most sponsorship pitches will provide you with a demographic analysis of the audience; compare this to your target. If you are seeking sponsorships but aren't sure where to look, spend some time researching the types of activities the target audience enjoys. Consumers typically respond well to brands that they perceive as supportive and respectful of their lifestyle.

- **Level of Involvement: Event, Series or Competitor?** Once you have selected an activity, you may have the choice of sponsoring an event, series of events or a competitor who participates in that event. Each comes with its own advantages. Again, having a stated objective will help clarify the appropriate choice.

Sponsoring an event or series of events usually generates more exposure, because your brand will likely be included in event advertising. You may also value the benefits of being associated with a high quality group of brands that jointly sponsor the activity. Event sponsors often receive additional features for their support, such as the ability to set up an on-site display. The cost of these additional features is built into the sponsorship investment. Make sure you will use these features or select another, more appropriate opportunity. It's simply inefficient to pay for booth space when you don't have the necessary resources or desire to set up a mobile marketing display.

The decision to sponsor an event versus a series of events is generally based on your timeline, budget and manpower.

There are also specific benefits (and risks) to sponsoring a competitor. The competitor sponsorship gives you access to a live personality and endorsement to use in your advertising. If the sponsored competitor is successful, you can piggy-back that success to associate your brand with winning qualities – performance, quality, durability, etc., as appropriate to the brand's positioning.

The risks of sponsoring a competitor are related to the target audience's perception of that personality. If the competitor is not considered credible by the audience, the endorsement to your brand isn't worth much. Volatile personalities

can fall out of favor with their fans as quickly as they came in. A controversial personality may work for brands positioned as edgy and raw, but will probably weaken brands with more mainstream reputations. Basically, the personality you select to endorse your brand must be respectful of and consistent with the brand's image. Otherwise, you will send mixed messages to the consumer.

Every marketer feels the pressure of trying to increase the efficiency of the overall marketing investment. Sponsorship marketing provides another avenue to reach your consumer and sell your brand. Approached with care, sponsorships can be valuable tools to maximize marketing efficiency and reinforce the impact of your brand in the marketplace.