

Sponsorship Engagement: Leveraging Ancillary Events to Increase Title Sponsor Awareness

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Of the estimated \$60 billion generated in sport sponsorships in the United States, corporate sponsorships within sport are an increasing number within that total (Henseler, Wilson, & Westberg, 2011). Corporations imagine the goodwill from team loyalty will transfer to their products (Madrigal, 2001). Often these sporting events include ancillary events, such as fan fests, concerts, and tailgates. There is some previous evidence these ancillary events increase fan engagement, satisfaction, and brand awareness of sponsoring corporations (Ballouli, Koesters, Hall, 2018). Modern corporate sponsorship has evolved from a philanthropic focus to advantageous business to business agreements between the sponsor and the sport organization (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Exploitable commercial potential has become the main focus in the sponsorship agreements as companies are seeing the true marketing value in their bottom-line (Cornwell, 1995; Irwin & Sutton, 2004). The key in corporations seeking to enter sponsorship agreements is reaching the intended target audience, increasing awareness of the brand, and moving fans towards purchase intentions (Barros & Silvestre, 2006; Cornwell, 2008).

Brand awareness, purchase intentions, attitude toward the sponsor, and sponsor patronage are all common measures of sponsorship effectiveness (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012; Reams, Terry, Cork, 2015; Zhang, Won, & Pastore, 2005). It is important to note that most of the existing literature on sponsorship effectiveness is embedded with the team sport segment. The context of this study was the 'Battle at Bristol,' an event where the NASCAR speedway converted into a college football stadium as a neutral-site for the rivalry competition between Tennessee and Virginia Tech. While the current study focuses on a team sport event, the neutral site offers a unique sponsorship platform for corporate sponsors that does not include "team brand" or "point of attachment" components that past research has placed focus on. In addition, the breadth of ancillary events provides an interesting intersection of ancillary events normally seen at larger annual or one-off sporting events, such as Formula 1 or the NCAA Final Four, and the brand loyalty of college football.

Consumer behavior and sponsorship brand image will serve as our theoretical framework. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How aware were event spectators of the event's title sponsor?
2. Did participant engagement at "sponsored" ancillary events influence "level of awareness" of the title sponsor?
3. Did participant engagement at "sponsored" ancillary events influence "willingness to recommend" the title sponsor?
4. Did the title sponsorship contribute positively towards the overall enjoyment of the event?

Method

A random sample of 724 completed surveys ($N = 724$) were collected onsite at the Battle of Bristol event using the fan intercept method. Nearly two-thirds of respondents were male, and approximately half were the ages 18 – 34. Sponsorship variables including title sponsor awareness, evaluation of sponsorship effectiveness, likelihood to recommend the title sponsor to others, and attendance at ancillary events were measured. Supplemental questions were also asked including how many times the respondent had previously attended events at Bristol Motor Speedway, where they obtained information to plan their trip to Bristol, and which of the ancillary events/activities (i.e., the interactive fan zone, the Honda Ridgeline Bristol Tailgate Party, College GameDay, other pregame ceremonies) each respondent intended to attend during the event weekend.

Results

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Overall event spectators were aware of the Battle at Bristol title sponsor, Flying J/Pilot. 80.8% of participants stated they were “very aware” of the title sponsor, with only 7.8% indicating they were “not at all aware.” All participants in attendance at the “sponsored” ancillary events reported high levels of awareness of the title sponsor of Battle at Bristol (average $M = 1.30$). Those who attended both the Pilot Flying J Fan Zone and the Honda Ridgeline Concert were most aware ($M = 1.17$). Interestingly, those who reported attending all three “sponsored” ancillary events, while still very aware, reported they were less aware than those attending one or two of these events ($M = 1.30$). There was no significant difference found among the ancillary events and awareness of the title sponsor ($F(6,570) = .608, p = .724$). In regards to awareness of the title sponsor, those who attended the Home Depot College Game Day event, which was the most highly attended ancillary event ($N = 240, 42\%$), reported one of the lowest levels of title sponsor awareness ($M = 1.40$).

In terms of willingness to recommend, when participants were asked to report their willingness to recommend Pilot Flying J's products, all participants of the “sponsored” ancillary events reported a Mean range of 7.6 to 8.42, indicating a high likelihood of recommending the title sponsors products. Those attending the concert were found to be the most likely to recommend the products ($M = 8.42$). However, there was no significant differences found among the three ancillary event participants and overall product recommendation ($F(6,570) = .641, p = .698$). Additional statistical analysis will be run to gauge whether or not feelings of event satisfaction factored into these reportings. Finally, in terms of enjoyment, participants (84.8%) also indicated the sponsorship was positive for the overall enjoyment of the event.

Discussion

The results indicate a high level of awareness of the title sponsor, but unlike previous literature (Ballouli et al., 2018), ancillary events did not increase that awareness. Specifically, in regards to differences between the ancillary events, location or type of event may be a factor. College Game Day did not add value from an awareness standpoint. Interestingly, it was the only ancillary event off-site at a neighboring campground, and unlike the fan fest, was not interactive. This has important implications for the title sponsor when considering how ancillary events are calculated into their sponsorship value and future price. Further discussion, practical implications, and limitations will be explored on the poster.

References

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