BENEFITS AND RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SPONSORSHIP OF MAJOR EVENTS

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Sponsorship may be defined as a business relationship between a provider of funds, resources or services, and an event or organization which offers in return some rights and an association that may be used for commercial advantage (Sleight, 1989). It is a reciprocal relationship that involves an organization and a business engaging in an exchange which offers commensurate benefits to each entity. The nature of this exchange is illustrated in Figure 1. However, implicit in any arrangement designed to be mutually beneficial is the risk that anticipated benefits may not be realized or, even worse, that the relationship may lead to negative outcomes for one or both parties. This paper identifies the major benefits and the risks which may accrue both to the event or organization and to its sponsoring corporate partners.

Benefits Sought From Businesses by Events

An event is likely to solicit three types of sponsorship benefits: financial, media and in-kind. It may be best to secure media sponsorship first but this is frequently not possible. Having print and air sponsors commit to the dollar value of their support and agreeing to promote other major sponsors is likely to make securing financial sponsorships easier. Often, the first question asked from a potential financial sponsor relates to how much media promotion will be forthcoming. However, sponsorship by one newspaper or television station is likely to result in its competitors minimizing their coverage of the event.

In-kind sponsorship with media is more difficult to obtain than it used to be (International Events Group, 1992a). The amount of space available has shrunk considerably. Indeed, failure to obtain expected media coverage is one of the risks of sponsorship incurred by corporate sponsors. Media realized that many event managers after negotiating in-kind media assistance, were collecting revenues from it by selling the in-kind space to other co-sponsors (International Events Group, 1992a). Instead of allowing event managers to broker this space, the media now do it themselves, or else write into agreements that mention of cosponsors in that space is precluded.

There are four main types of in-kind benefits which a business sponsor may provide: (1) product support, which could include equipment, and food and beverages; (2) personnel support, for example, assistance from staff who may have computing expertise that a festival organization needs; (3) communication resources and expertise to increase awareness and interest; (4) the intangible benefit of “institutional clout” conferred on the event by associating with a sponsoring business company of high reputation. Image association with an event may be a primary reason sponsors invest in it. However, the potential for positive association may be equally as

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important to the event. If it links to a sponsor with a strong, positive public image, then this "institutional clout" may help legitimize the event and improve its public persona.

Sometimes it is easier for companies to invest in-kind resources because they can be "hidden" from shareholders or employees who may be skeptical of the value of sponsorship. One of the most widely cited sponsor successes in sport was the Cornhill Insurance Company's sponsorship of English International Test cricket games. However, Head (1981: 77) recalls:

One retains the memory of Cornhill staff pickets parading outside the Oval Cricket Ground in London during a Test match. Their banners pointed out that, while the company was spending £400,000 a year on sponsoring five cricket games, it was, so they alleged, being less than generous in current wage negotiations with its own employees. The fact that sponsorship funds, even if diverted into wage packets, would have little effect on them, or that, as part of a marketing campaign, the money is better spent in promoting business and thus underpinning salaries in the long term, is an esoteric argument that cannot compete with emotive banners, especially at a time of rising unemployment.

Costs Associated With Sponsors Which May Be Incurred By Events

Investments by businesses may require an event to accept some costs. Two of these types of costs are likely to be controversial. First, in return for their support, sponsors may insist on changing the event. Often, changes may be implemented to make the event more exciting, entertaining and attractive to television, or to better fit the media's program-
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The Risk of a Bad Match

A third type of cost for event organizers may emerge if the "fit" between event and sponsor is not good. It is important that organizers seek situations in which both the business and the agency win. This requires event managers to view themselves as brokers who are concerned with furthering the welfare of a potential sponsoring company as well as that of their own event. Too often, events' personnel think more about their own needs than about what the investors want. It has been noted that, "Every company is a potential sponsor for some event, but not every company is a potential sponsor for every event" (Decker, 1991:46). The costs associated with enticing an inappropriate sponsor to partner an event may include: (1) wasted resources which went into pursuing, nurturing and working with the sponsor; (2) the appearance to other potential business partners of being an unattractive investment opportunity; or (3) bad word-of-mouth spread by the sponsor among other business associates.

Sponsors add another dimension of responsibility for the event organization. Event managers are required to make additional efforts to coordinate a sponsor's desires. Thus, sponsors become a second audience who must be satisfied. The key to a successful on-going resource support effort is the retention of previous investors rather than the securing of new sponsors. There is an old marketing adage that says, "your best customers are your best prospects." If investors are pleased with the results accruing from their support, then they are likely to be receptive to future support requests. They are also likely to be valuable sources of testimonials and referrals to others. This will not occur unless the initial match between the sponsor and event organizer is good. It is much less costly in time and effort to sustain a sponsorship arrangement than it is to find a new partner. This means the short term perspective that "we need the checks from sponsors so we can go about our business" (Charney, 1993:55) is likely to be very costly in the long term.

There are two key conditions that characterize a good fit between an event and its sponsor. First, the desired image of the company and the image of the event must match. The second condition, which is discussed later in this section, is that the target market of the company and the target market of the event must match.

Sponsorship activities transmit implicit rather than explicit messages, so image association is of central importance. By linking their product with an event through sponsorship, a business hopes to "borrow" the image of the event and use it to enhance the product's image with its target audience.

Strength of image linkages between a product and an event can be conceptualized along a continuum (Figure 2). If there is no obvious link between a company and the event it is sponsoring in the target audience's mind, then it is unlikely the company will receive commensurate return on its investment. For example, Southland Corporation, the former owner of 4,000 7-Eleven convenience stores, sponsored cycling events. However, there was no obvious link between the stores and cycling: "They never figured out a way to use it to get people in the stores" (Lowenstein and Lancaster, 1986:33). The lack of a natural link between sponsor and the event means a target audience is likely to subconsciously filter out the relationship as being irrelevant.
There are examples of successes where no obvious linkage exists. Cigarette brands which have forged strong image links with particular sports fall into this category. The success of tobacco companies in using events to obscure the substantial hazards of their products is illustrated by De Parle (1989:36): “Quick speak the words ‘Virginia Slims’ and what do you see? A) Chris Evert or B) the cancer ward? If you answered A—and most people do—then Philip Morris has you right where it wants you.” Tennis champions are in peak physical condition and since endurance is important, their hearts and lungs are particularly strong and healthy. Fostering these connotations is a crucial component of the tobacco company’s marketing strategy. The magnitude of investment in direct and indirect expenditures needed to achieve such successes is likely to be high. However, the benefits accruing to sponsors in image terms also are likely to be high, since more added value will have been “borrowed” from the event by the product.

In some cases, there may be no obvious link between the product and the event, but there may be existing image compatibility. Thus, Alka-Seltzer Plus sponsored the U.S. Ski Team because: “The team has the same needs as the product’s customers. Neither can let a cold stop them” (Special Events Report, 1987:6). Similarly, Proctor & Gamble’s Old Spice line of men’s toiletries sponsored stops on the Pro Beach Volleyball Tour because, “Beach Volleyball builds on Old Spice’s long standing sea imagery. Plus the sport is synonymous with young men and that is our target” (International Events Group, 1992b:3).

It has been suggested that this type of image matching may be facilitated by events managers listing a set of descriptors which best describes their events, then seeking products whose existing or defined image fits with those descriptors (Goslin, 1992). Typical words may include:

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For image transfer from an event to a product to be effective, a target audience must perceive there to be a natural and “comfortable” relationship between them. Indirect product link (Figure 2) means there is a logical link between using a product when visiting or participating in an event, but that the product is not essential for those activities to take place. The most pervasive event sponsors of this type are the beverage and food suppliers, but, as the following two cases illustrate, the potential is much broader than that:

- Subaru was the dominant sponsor of American skiing events. The company’s initial sponsorship coincided with its introduction of the first four wheel drive passenger car into the United States in 1975. It was recognized that the car would appeal to skiers and mountain residents. Sponsorship of skiing was a natural fit. After the first year of sponsorship Subaru sold twice as many cars in the United States as it had originally projected (Raabeb, 1989).
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- Canon USA committed to a three year, seven-figure sponsorship to be official camcorder of Little League Baseball. The sponsorship was the result of a survey that revealed primary buyers of camcorders were parents of 6-to-12 year-olds, who earned average and above-average incomes. A central theme of the promotional campaign Canon used to support the sponsorship was that parents tape their children in action as a way to "preserve vivid memories" and "enhance your child's enjoyment of the game by serving as an instruc-tional tool for hitting, fielding, base running, etc." (Special Events Report, 1990:7).

After image compatibility has been explored, the second key condition that characterizes a good fit is that the target market of the company and target market of the event must match. It is important to be able to say to a company, "Your clients are our clients." The most common type of match is on the basis of sociodemographics, especially income:

- Rolls-Royce moved its sponsorship from polo events to sporting clays events because polo became overcrowded with other sponsors and was "no longer just a Rolls-Royce sport." An executive noted, "People who shoot $20,000 shotguns tend to be people who buy Rolls-Royce automobiles." Further, a sporting clays event, whose attendance can be kept to 50 people or fewer, offers a "more exclusive setting" than a polo match, which can attract 5000 or more spectators. At the events, car models were displayed and participants offered test drives (Special Events Report, 1989:7).

- Similarly, Rolex used polo to reach their target market in France, but in the U.S. market they sponsored show- jumping for exactly the same purpose, because the 3–5 million horse owners in the U.S. had an average income of $60,000 of whom 54% had houses worth $297,000 on average and an average of 2–3 cars. As the Rolex director of special events said, "we're looking for people who are able to spend $8,500 on a watch" (International Advertising Association, 1988:7).

An alternative approach to sociodemographics for matching the markets targeted by a sports organization and a business is compatibility of their lifestyles:

- Silhouette Vodka sponsored skiing and sailing events following the findings of a study showing participants in these two groups exhibited relatively high vodka consumption. Sponsorship of these activities was effective for several reasons. First, people consumed the product either immediately before, sometime during, or after the event without violating any event rules. Second, there were alcohol retail outlets such as ski lodges and yacht clubs which provided ready on-site sampling opportunities. Third, the sports were perceived as upscale image building and lifestyle oriented (Dixon, 1987).

- Kinder-Care Learning Centers operate 1,200 centers in North America. The company became official childcare provider of the Ladies Professional Golf Association Tour. Many of the less successful players at events on the tour could not afford to bring their own nannies. Tour moms agreed to mention Kinder-Care when being interviewed about their children. A Kinder-Care official noted, "The LPGA has a strong reputation with all women, so the testimonial of the players is invaluable." Kinder-Care vans picked up players' children from about 30 events, took them to the local Kinder-Care centers, then returned them when their mothers finished (Special Events Report, 1988:7).

The emphasis placed on compatibility of target audiences makes it imperative for event managers to initiate research which delineates the audience profile of their events. Thus, Bassing America asks participants in their fishing tournaments to complete a four-page survey that includes questions about product usage. Bassing uses the results to target new sponsors:

- In the 1989 survey, they discovered, for example, that 67 percent drank liquor and 61 percent cited bourbon as their liquor of choice. After analyzing brand preference and researching the industry, Bassing targeted two bourbons for proposals. Neither brand was a category leader; they were brands that Bassing felt could gain market share by sponsoring their events. Another question on the survey that helped Bassing obtain a sponsor was, "Do you eat while fishing?" It was followed by: "If yes, what?" Seventy-eight percent of respondents said they ate while fishing and 38% wrote in Vienna sausage. Bassing researched Vienna sausage makers and found only one brand had ample distribution within their tournament terri-
tory. They made a presentation to that brand, Amour Star Canned Meats, but were turned down because they missed the company’s budget cycle. The following year an agreement was signed (Brett, 1990:6).

This type of survey can be conducted by all event organizations. They could conduct on-site interviews themselves or hire a research firm. After two or three surveys, a definite mainstream customer lifestyle is likely to emerge. The event is then in a strong position to systematically approach a prospective sponsor with a niche or target for its product or service.

To minimize the risk of a bad match, one experienced manager advises (Charney, 1993:55):

Put yourself in the shoes of the CFO or marketing director of the prospective sponsor, and if you can’t see why she/he would become excited about being a partner in your event, don’t waste your time, or theirs.

If “the shoe doesn’t fit” the event might succeed in attracting a sponsor the first year, but the sponsor is then likely to withdraw with some level of bad feeling and the event has to replicate the effort to attract another company in the subsequent year.

Benefits Sought From Events By Businesses

Companies may be seeking to communicate with groups other than their customers with their sponsorship investments, such as employees, shareholders or financial institutions. For example, sponsorship of a particular event may be designed to create a sense of pride and unity among employees. The profusion of multiple product companies has led many corporations to recognize a need to raise their profile with financial institutions, shareholders and other key publics, and events may be used to contribute to this goal. However, most event sponsorship is likely to be designed to communicate with customers.

A large number of relatively narrowly focussed benefits directed at customers may be sought from sponsorship, and they are listed in Figure 3. They can be classified into four broad categories: increase awareness, image enhancement, product trial or sales opportunities, and hospitality opportunities.

In cases where the awareness level is low, spon-

sorship can have an impact. If a new retail-outlet or service comes to town, or if a new product is launched, then sponsorship may be part of the overall promotion strategy to communicate its attributes to the selected target markets. However, if a sponsor is a major national or international company whose products already have high levels of awareness, then this benefit will not be sought, because sponsorship could only marginally increase awareness. Thus, many major sponsors, who have a high profile with their target markets, tend to use event sponsorship for other purposes.

Image is the mental construct developed by an individual on the basis of selected impressions. Image is amended by information received from the environment, but it is unlikely to change easily. Once people develop a set of beliefs and impressions about a product or service it is difficult to change them. This relative permanency exists because once people have an image, they tend to be selective perceivers of further data. Their perceptions are oriented towards seeing what they expect to see (Crompton and Lamb, 1986). Hence, event sponsorship is unlikely to be effective in changing image. Most major companies are likely to use it to reinforce existing product or service image and to give existing purchasers good feelings about purchasing it.

Product trial opportunities are particularly valuable because moving people from interest in a product or service to trying and evaluating it is a difficult communications task (Crompton and Lamb, 1986). There are likely to be many products in which individuals may have an interest but that they have never tried, especially products for which the cost of trial is high in terms of money, time, potential embarrassment, or whatever. Sponsorship offers a vehicle for encouraging product trial, or it may be a vehicle through which companies identify prospects for product trial. Sometimes product trial means demonstrating the excellence of a product’s technology to potential customers rather than inducing them to test it personally.

“Guest hospitality” refers to those opportunities whereby the company can make face-to-face contact with select publics in a prestigious social context, thereby strengthening and personalizing relationships with decision makers, trade channels and business associates” (Meenaghan, 1983:37). The objective is not to conduct business, but to use a relaxed informal context outside the normal business environ-
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1. INCREASE AWARENESS:
   a. Create awareness of a new product
   b. Increase awareness of an existing product in new target markets
   c. By-pass legal prohibition on television advertising imposed upon tobacco and liquor products.

2. IMAGE ENHANCEMENT:
   a. Create an image for a new product
   b. Reinforce the image of an existing product
   c. Change public perceptions of an existing product
   d. Counter negative or adverse publicity
   e. Build pride among employees and distributors for the product
   f. Assist employee recruitment

3. PRODUCT TRIAL OR SALES OPPORTUNITIES:
   a. Offer product trial to potential new customers
   b. Induce incremental sales increases through promotional give-aways, couponing tie-ins, sweepstakes, and point of purchase displays
   c. Create on-site sales opportunities
   d. Promote a different use of an existing product
   e. Reinforce the image of an existing product

4. HOSPITALITY OPPORTUNITIES:
   a. Develop bonding with key customers, distributors and employees
   b. Develop in-house incentive opportunities

Figure 3. Benefits that may be sought by businesses from sponsorship.

ment to create a personal interactive chemistry which will be conducive to doing business later. Sponsorship of events offers good opportunities for doing this.

Hospitality can be facilitated without sponsorship and this occurs at many major events through the sale of boxes, suites and similar options. However, guests are likely to be more impressed and feel more important if they are invited to an event for which their host is a sponsor. Hospitality linked with sponsorship is differentiating. It offers a business the added value of being seen to be part of the event. It may also be used by companies as part of a performance reward system to positively impact employee morale.

Risks Associated with Business Sponsorship

Sponsors enter partnerships with event organizations to secure benefits, but there are risks associated with such investments. In some situations, the sponsorship could worsen a company’s existing image and reputation. These types of risks can be classified into four categories: risk of poor presentation of an event; risk of poor performance at an event; risk of disreputable behavior at an event; and risk of an intrusive presence generating backlash. A different kind of risk, which may substantially inhibit the benefits a company anticipates receiving, is failure to receive the anticipated media exposure.

An example of the risk associated with poor presentation of an event was given by the public relations manager of Labatt Brewery, Canada’s biggest sponsor of events:

The brewery sponsored an ice skating event and paid for advertisements that stated a number of well-known Canadian skaters would appear. Many of the skaters never showed. Not only was the event unsuccessful, the brewery bore the brunt of
some hostile consumer reaction. In these instances the backlash was against the major corporation sponsoring the event, not the promoter that nobody ever heard about (Special Events Report, 1986a).

Risk of poor performance is inherent in sponsorships that focus on teams or individuals rather than the overall event itself particularly in the context of a competitive event, because a central tenet of competition is that there are winners and losers. If a product is associated with a loser, it may convey connotations of failure and inferiority to a target market:

- A race car or racehorse which continues to finish “down the field” hardly projects a winning image. Rotary watches decided to opt out of motor car sponsorship after its car failed to get off the grid, a fact which did little to promote the jet set image of its product (Meenagh, 1983:41).
- Chrysler’s attempt to link its name with the Scottish World Cup team in the 1978 Soccer World Cup in Argentina went badly wrong. Not only did the team produce poor results on the field, but the disappointment was further compounded by newspaper stories of drunkenness and drug taking (Gratton and Taylor, 1985:224).

The risk of tainting an existing image by associating a company with a sporting event at which there may be disruptive behavior by either participants or spectators was exemplified by the product manager of Kraft’s dairy group. He stated that Kraft elected to sponsor U.S. Skiing because “the possibility of scandal made pro sports out of the question” (Special Events Report, 1986b:2). If players at an event use foul language, fight on the field, abuse officials, or are caught taking drugs, or if spectators engaged in violence, which has frequently occurred among soccer events in Europe, then sponsorship may damage a product’s image.

Most major events receive large revenues from selling space for hospitality, but there is a potential downside to this for sponsors. “The fight for tickets needed by the hospitality operators reduces those available to true sports fans and pushes up the black-market price. The sight of row after row of identical hospitality marquees disfigures many major sports venues” (Sleight, 1989:166).

It is possible that sponsorship may become sufficiently intrusive that it induces a backlash from the general public. For example, some cynics have called the Atlanta Olympic Games the Coca Cola Games. This exemplifies their belief that the primary function of the Games is now to facilitate the sale of products, rather than the primary function of the product sponsorship being to facilitate the Games. They argue that the emphasis of primary purpose has shifted. Consider the preliminary hospitality plans for major sponsors of the Atlanta Olympics:

Each sponsor will have access to as many as 400 hotel rooms, as many as 800 tickets for the opening and closing ceremonies, as many as 1,600 tickets for daily events, and a “Platinum VIP Hospitality Package” that includes four chauffeured sedans. Three “hospitality villages” are also scheduled to be built at three primary sporting venues so that sponsors can wine and dine guests (Ruffennach, 1992:1).

The Risk of Inadequate Media Exposure

One of the risks a company takes is that media exposure fails to reach expectations. Probable extent of an event’s media coverage is likely to be one of the central issues in negotiations between sponsors and event managers. If a sponsor is seeking increased awareness or image enhancement benefits, then a key to receiving them is both the extent and the quality of visibility in terms of its compatibility with the intended projected product image, that can be achieved with the target audience. It is likely that a sponsor will require a projection of the extent of media coverage before committing to an investment. In addition to extending the audience, coverage by the media has a second important dimension in that it takes the form of news, which engenders greater credibility than exposure gained through advertising. Events are particularly valuable sponsorship vehicles because they are newsworthy.

There are two types of media exposure that event sponsors may seek. First, there may be trade-offs whereby the media provide promotional air-time or space in exchange for recognition as the “presenting sponsor.” Ideally, these partnerships would be negotiated with a television station, radio station, newspaper and outdoor advertising company. The benefits associated with this title may include rights to transmit the event, event tickets, or event merchandise which the media sponsor can give away as prizes to its audience.

Alternatively, media exposure may be of an editorial nature. Many sponsors think of the media only
as conduits to a wider target audience. However, in an editorial context there is no exchange of benefits and the media are interested in satisfying their audiences not sponsors. It is these disparate goals which may cause media exposure levels to be disappointing to sponsors. Sponsor visibility may be important to the sponsor, but it is not important to the media.

The media are frequently reluctant to accept and acknowledge the role of sponsors at an event. Many newspapers and television stations believe that to credit sponsors of events in editorial coverage could potentially harm their advertising revenue, since companies are spending their communications money on the sponsorship rather than on advertising. A CBS executive noted, “When you are in the business of selling air time, you don’t want to give away air time” (Lownstein and Lancaster, 1986:33). This explains why one company received so little television news coverage in its sponsorship of a major marathon:

In more than three hours of coverage, our logo never appeared recognizably, even though it was on runners’ bibs, start and finish line banners, and signs along the route. In fact, although pre-race interviews were conducted beneath the starting banner, shots were kept tight to frame our logo out of the picture (Eaton, 1991:4).

Similarly, Seiko Time Corporation stopped sponsoring the New York Marathon after four years because it received less and less exposure each year from the ABC transmission (Niesyn, 1988).

The reluctance of media to recognize sponsors is illustrated by the on-going debate over incorporating a sponsor’s name in the title of an event or facility. If the sponsor’s name is attached to an existing well-known event, it is likely to be particularly difficult to persuade the media to include that name in their coverage. Thus, many media left “Sunkist” off the Fiesta Bowl, “Mobil” off the Cotton Bowl, and John Hancock off the Sun Bowl. Sponsors responded in different ways. The John Hancock Sun Bowl, became the John Hancock Bowl and the word “Sun” was omitted from the official title. Sunkist resolved the problem with NBC who televised the Fiesta Bowl game by agreeing to purchase 25 percent of the advertising time available on the game’s telecast. In return the Sunkist name was used on all on-air promotions for the game and in graphics and billboards during the game (Special Events Report, 1986c). The Sunkist solution recognized that sport is a very important dimension of most newspapers and many television stations, and since sport needs sponsors the media have to be careful to balance their approach to providing sponsors with appropriate credits (Sleight, 1989).

Traditionally, companies have tried to maximize their exposure by locating signs and logos where they anticipate they will have most camera visibility. However, these kinds of “best guess” strategies for obtaining serendipitous media exposure increasingly are being replaced by carefully negotiated agreements between sports events, media and sponsors. These often specify in the contract the number of times a company is mentioned on the air and when its sign is to be shown on camera.

Concluding Comments

The benefits which are summarized in Figure 3 are reasonably well known. Some combination of them is likely to be articulated by advocates in each party in a sponsorship arrangement to justify the resources invested in the relationship. However, minimizing risks may be as much of a key to a successful partnership as maximizing benefits.

Maximizing benefits and minimizing risks requires a commitment by each partner to strive to meet the needs of the other partner. This will involve nurturing a close working relationship and frequent communication. One strategy for achieving this is for each partner to assign a staff member to be contact liaison, who serves as a conduit through which all communications pass. This individual should be positioned as an advocate within the organization charged with seeking to further the other partner’s goals.

An initial sponsorship agreement is not the terminal consumation of a relationship. From a sponsor’s perspective, it may only be a trial offer from which the business will withdraw if returns are not satisfactory. The event organization also should view it from this perspective and recognize that the agreement offer is a tentative initial step. Sometimes all efforts are directed to securing a sponsorship and little thought is given to servicing it. A long term association and commitment will evolve only if both sides’ objectives are met, which involves delivering desired benefits and reducing associated risks.
References


