



ISSN: 2456-4419

Impact Factor: (RJIF): 5.18

Yoga 2022; 7(2): 116-118

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www.theyogicjournal.com

Received: 04-06-2022

Accepted: 10-07-2022

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Comprehensive study on sport marketing consulting strategies and tactics

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Abstract

Sport marketing academics have increasingly recognized the value of making their work more relevant to practitioners. However, there is little literature about specific strategies and tactics for academics to conduct research that will be of use to sport marketing practitioners. In this paper, I will suggest some strategies and tactics for sport marketing academics interested in identifying and pursuing consulting opportunities in the sport industry. Drawing on my experience as a sport marketing consultant, I suggest that academics seeking to work with practitioners should focus their attention on sponsorship sales support, marketing planning and sponsorship activation, and sponsorship and marketing evaluation.

Keywords: Applied research, sales support, marketing planning, and sponsorship evaluation

Introduction

Identifying Prospective Clients

Sport marketing research is a tough sell. Sport properties conduct much less research than comparably sized businesses in other categories and rarely have a dedicated research budget or professional research staff. Among corporate sponsors, sponsorship-related research expenditures have not kept pace with the increased focus on return on investment (ROI). As an industry –both academic researchers and sport-related private sector market researchers– we have failed in large part to effectively communicate the benefits of research to sport marketing practitioners. Consequently, the onus is on sport marketing academics to demonstrate the value of research to practitioners. In order to forge more partnerships between academic endeavours and industry practitioners, sport marketing academics need to practice what they teach. That means starting with identifying the needs and wants of potential clients.

Marketing Practitioners as Clients

Since only a handful of sport properties employ even one full-time researcher, research vendors frequently must approach marketers to sell their services. Even in very large corporate sponsors that have market research departments, the client usually comes from the marketing, sponsorship, or public relations arm of the corporation. Research efforts are often coordinated and/or approved by the market research department of the corporate sponsor but the department handling the sponsorship almost always pays the fee.

Practitioner Needs and Wants

Even a casual perusal of the sport and sponsorship industry trade press results in the identification of a range of problems facing marketing practitioners. There are larger strategic problems, such as the aging fan bases for major professional sports or calculating return on sponsorship investments for sport sponsors. And there are more tactical problems, such as the best starting time for a Sunday game or whether a sponsor should pursue a league-wide or an individual team sponsorship within a particular sport.

For example, the timely identification of a shared need among NASCAR Sponsors resulted in the NASCAR Sponsorship Study out of James Madison University's Centre for Sports Sponsorship. In the past couple of years, costs have spiralled for NASCAR sponsorships. NASCAR sponsors have become increasingly concerned about rising costs amid challenging

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economic circumstances. Some sponsors left NASCAR altogether; others significantly downsized their relationships. However, many sponsors simply reacted to the «sticker shock» instead of rigorously analyzing the value these relationships delivered.

The specific circumstances surrounding NASCAR dovetailed with a broader increased demand for evidence of ROI. Sponsors need empirical support but customized research on low incidence populations such as NASCAR fans can easily run into a six-figure fee from a private market research company. In an effort to create a more affordable research tool for NASCAR sponsors, the staff at the centre for Sports Sponsorship developed the NASCAR Sponsorship Study based on a syndicated market research report model and successfully sold the study to sponsors Gatorade, UPS, the Home Depot, and ESPN.

Sales Strategy

Researchers often misconceive what it is they are selling, frequently making the mistake of selling the «study» (i.e., the data collection, the report, etc.) instead of the benefits of the study. Clients buy the solutions to their problems, not the data. Therefore, successful research sales must emphasize the benefits of research, not the data collection methods or data analysis procedures. While research studies of course need to be customized to individual clients, each of the market research reports I have authored for sport industry clients falls into a typology of benefits. Sport properties (e.g., teams, leagues, etc.) use research primarily for sales support, but also for strategic planning and program justification). Sport sponsors use research primarily for sponsorship evaluation and program justification, but also for strategic planning.

Sales Support for Sport Properties

The biggest challenge in selling research is that it is always at least one step removed from creating revenue for the organization. Since marketers are primarily concerned with creating revenue, they seek ways to translate research into streams of revenue, the most common of which is sponsorship. Sport marketers need to demonstrate their value to prospective sponsors. Research can help by providing evidence of an attractive audience.

For example, audience demographics can be indexed to local and/or national populations to demonstrate appealing characteristics such as affluence and youth. Researchers can measure product usage in selected categories to identify potentially fertile markets. But researchers can and should go beyond basic demographics and product usage. Researchers can identify the «it» associated with the property, a brand association with which sponsors would be interested in linking their brands and companies. Sponsorship proposals are more effective when assertions are supported by empirical data, especially when the data are customized to a specific prospect.

Research can also be used to assist in renewals of existing sponsors. As part of the general trend toward evidence of ROI, sponsors seek more sophisticated and rigorous sponsorship fulfilment reports. Researchers can play an integral role in the production of sponsorship fulfilment reports because of their command of audience characteristics and sponsorship performance. A convincing fulfilment report will likely lead to higher renewal rates. In addition, sport properties can use evidence of sponsorship performance to negotiate more favourable sponsorship contracts. Or, if the evidence points in the other direction, a property can use the

research results to create a sponsorship package that would be more suitable to the sponsor. It is better to have a reduced relationship with a sponsor than none at all, which would be the case if sponsorship costs continued to outweigh benefits delivered. Beyond specific cases, sport marketing academics are positioned to play an important role in promoting the disciplines of sponsorship and sport marketing as a whole. While advertising and public relations professionals each have professional associations promoting their respective disciplines, sponsorship and sport marketing executives do not. As a credible and independent third party, the sport marketing academy can provide support for the overall effectiveness of these disciplines in the larger marketing and business communities.

Strategic Planning

Sport marketing practitioners are primarily concerned with tactical marketing issues, such as deciding how best to allocate their limited marketing resources. It's a zero sum game. If a sport marketer hires more sales representatives that reduces the advertising budget. Researchers can provide guidance for specific tactical questions, such as when to start a Sunday game or how many sales representatives should be hired. While the emphasis is on tactical decisions, many practitioners are also interested in broader strategic questions. The difference between academic interests in theory and practitioner interest in practice is one of intensity; it is not a categorical difference.

Benefits to Sport Sponsors

Sponsorship Evaluation

Clearly, sponsors are asking for demonstrable ROI with increasing frequency and intensity. While a direct link to sales is elusive other than in situations where a sales element is integrated into the relationship (e.g., on-site retail presence), researchers can deliver measures of effectiveness and efficiency. At the end of the day, however, sponsors want to know if the relationships in question are working, or if their marketing dollars are better spent elsewhere. It is helpful to practitioners for researchers to design studies in order to draw conclusions about the sponsorship's performance. It is often helpful to draw comparisons to other marketing communications, especially advertising, because it is frequently the biggest line item in marketing budgets. Researchers can provide competitive intelligence to sport sponsors by measuring competitors' sponsorship performance and brand positioning, thereby identifying areas sponsors can avoid or should put resources behind.

Conclusion

Strategic planning for sponsorship usually flows out of evaluation reports. Of the scores of sponsorship evaluations for corporate clients I have personally conducted, only one was designed for strategic plan.

Pricing Strategies

Be aggressive in pricing

Clients could be billed by service. Data analysis and report writing have a higher value than data entry and report production, even if the same person does the work. Weiss (2000) recommended that consultants pursue value-based pricing instead of hourly billing. However, since revenue is not directly derived from research efforts, a final «value» is difficult to estimate.

Draw clear, concise

Sport marketing practitioners are not interested in plowing through the data. They are interested in «what the research says.» Researchers need to state conclusions drawn from the study. For example, «the audience has very desirable demographics» is simple but can be used as a sales tool. Conclusions should be stated at the beginning of the report in an executive summary, which is the most important part of the report. Keep the methods section brief or include it as an appendix. Keep statistics simple. Unless a client otherwise requests, stick to frequencies and crosstabs. While multivariate statistical analysis is often valuable in identifying relationships, and therefore very useful in analyzing results, they should be included in reports judiciously so as to avoid confusing clients.

Maintaining and Building Industry Relationships

Conducting market research for sport marketing practitioners can be an effective method in establishing relationships with the industry but it can also lead to other consulting opportunities in areas such as proposal preparation and conducting sales campaigns.

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