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A couple of years ago, it would have never occurred to me to write this blog. Things change, however, and I've now been involved in two situations just in the past few months that have caused a lot of strife, and heard about many more. The scenario...

A large brand takes up naming rights sponsorship of a major event. Seemingly clueless to the basics of best practice sponsorship, they are

under the impression that the sponsorship itself is going to deliver their results. (Even modestly-skilled sponsors know that it's leverage – what a sponsor *does* with a sponsorship – that provides the results!)

So, with nothing but the most cursory, old-school leverage planned – let's put a press release on the website! – they set out to justify the investment. And with that, they roll out this classic line:

“We believe this sponsorship should be an extension of our marketing plan.”

That may seem benign enough, but the reality is anything but. Their expectation was, in no uncertain terms, that they had just bought control of the event's marketing plan, which would now be repurposed to drive the sponsor's brand. Their view was that the need for the event to... oh, I don't know... sell tickets, generate interest, or rev up fans was far secondary to their own brand selfishness. And make no mistake about it, trying to muscle a sponsee into diminishing the effectiveness of their marketing plan, or their bond with fans, is really nothing but brand selfishness that will backfire spectacularly.

- I've heard about sponsors insisting that the main taglines for the event's marketing activities are “consistent with” sponsor messaging. Seriously, this has gone to the point that those taglines are more about insurance or soft drinks or four-wheel drives than the tennis tournament or festival that they're supposed to be marketing to the fans.

- I've seen a sponsor hand a sponsee the list of media where they want all of the event advertising. Of course, this was the advertising that was now supposed to be thinly disguised brand advertising.
- I've seen a sponsor insist that the event run all social media communications with fans through the sponsor's accounts – not the event's.
- I've seen a sponsor request a rebrand a well-established event's Facebook page to be what amounts to a brand page with a bit of news about the event – in a sense, just co-opting all of those hard-earned fans.
- I've seen sponsors insist that the *only* way to buy tickets to a major event online was to go through their (tedious, tone-deaf) “brand experience journey” first.
- I've heard a sponsor insist that an established event logo, for a globally televised event, be changed to the sponsor's colour scheme.

In most of these cases, the sponsee had enough spine to knock back these ridiculous requests. In some cases, it cost them the sponsorship. In all honesty, they were far better off without it, no matter how much it hurt financially. And in an unfortunate few, the financial need was so great that the sponsee buckled and gave the sponsor what they wanted, and regretted it from the day they did.

The mindset of sponsors who make this type of requests is clear: We paid so much money that we dictate the rules. Sponsee fear means we

own this event, and as long as we've got the sale/renewal as leverage, we can get away with murder. But here's the thing... As much of a temptation it might be to become a raging Sponzilla, you should never do it. Not only is it terrible sponsorship karma, it's also bad for your brand.

What a sponsorship seeker needs to do and say with their marketing, and the way they connect with people to drive interest and passion and bums-on-seats, is not interchangeable with what you need to do and say to get people to shift their home loans or buy a car. It's simply not. And if you try to do it, the fans will see it as overbearing on your part and selling out on the sponsee's part, neither of which will help you meet your objectives.

The minute fans see you as overbearing is the minute you are no longer a welcome part of the fan experience, and that's exactly the opposite of what you want. Being a welcome part of that experience — demonstrating understanding and respect for the fan experience and adding value to it — is an absolute requirement if you want to deepen your relationships with those fans, building preference, intent, loyalty, and advocacy.

And if the sponsee loses control of their marketing channels to, and relationships with their fans — and their marketing starts to look like nothing but one big billboard for your brand — those fan relationships will diminish, and fan passion and commitment will diminish right along with it. Given that passion is what you're really investing in, when you're investing in sponsorship, you're just hurting yourself.

Whether you're a giant, principal sponsors or not, there are a lot of lessons to learn from sponsors who pull this kind of crap on their partners and fans.

STOP THINKING OF SPONSORSHIP AS “CHEAP ADVERTISING”

Oh, the number of times I've heard clients say that! (Not for long, mind you.) Unfortunately, this is still a pretty common mindset among older school sponsors. But as soon as you start to frame sponsorship as a cheap alternative to advertising, you have set yourself on a very predictable path. You will...

- Over-value visibility
- Lose sight of the amazing, flexible, and powerful marketing opportunity you've got
- Try to exert control over the sponsee's marketing plan, instead of leveraging the opportunity
- Try to exert control over the delivery of the event or program, instead of leveraging the opportunity
- Alienate the fans
- Achieve nothing of any meaning for your brand
- Congratulate yourself on your huge success, based on 90s-era media equivalency figures provided by some dinosaur, logo-counting, “measurement” firm

INTEGRATE... AND DO IT IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

There is a lot of rhetoric about how integration is the key to great sponsorship, and it is, but it's about integrating in the right direction.

What it's NOT about is integrating sponsor's marketing objectives across the sponsee's marketing plan. It's about using the passion of the fans and the relevance of the larger themes across your brand marketing platforms to make those communications more relevant to your target markets. For more on this, check out ["It's Not the Size of the Sponsorship, It's What You Do with It"](#).

LET THE SPONSEE DO THEIR JOB

I know that this will come as a big surprise to some sponsors, but your investment is only a small part of the revenues of many of the properties you sponsor. Ticket revenues, merchandise sales, donations, entry fees, and more can outstrip what you pay by multiples. I'm not in any way diminishing the value of your sponsorship, but we also have to be realistic. A property has to market themselves in a way that they know will maximise all of those other revenues, or they won't be around for long. At best, a sponsor may be piggy-backed on that marketing, but you're never going to be the feature on call-to-action marketing for ticket sales, for instance, and nor should you be.

If you do a good job at integrating the sponsorship across your own marketing plan, you'll achieve all of your marketing goals in a way that will be much more effective for you and your partner, and much more acceptable for the target markets.

DON'T BE A SPONZILLA

If you think for one second that fans can't see when a sponsor is being overbearing – when a sponsor is treating the event or team or organisation they love with disrespect – you're kidding yourself. They won't love you by osmosis, just because they can't avoid you. They'll hate your brand for diminishing their fan experience, and “fan backlash” is not generally considered to be an ideal brand marketing platform for any brand.

I have now written and re-written this blog about twenty-five times, because there is so much to say about how sponsors SHOULD be getting their money's worth from sponsorships. But when it comes right down to it, the topic of the blog is really about what not to do. If you want more on what you can do to make your sponsorships really work, I suggest starting with this round-up of blogs on the topic of best practice sponsorship leverage:

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