

Research all the Time

Why research conducted before, during and after a sponsorship program can indicate shifts in perceptions and brand affinity

BY DEREK MAGER

Sponsorship investment within the sports sector has hit an all time high, and as a communication channel is growing at a faster rate than advertising.

Global brands invest in the medium to gain exposure through the endorsement of iconic sports teams, venues and events. And with the Vancouver 2010 Olympics fast approaching, the sector is experiencing an exciting burst of activity.

Like all marketing spend, there is a demand for accountability and the need for sponsorship programs to deliver a quantifiable return on investment (ROI) has never been greater.

Research and measurement in practice

Despite all the industry buzz about the importance of measuring ROI, only a small proportion of brands and rights holders actually seem to be taking notice. Few have an understanding of the breadth of measurement analysis available to them, although it's refreshing to note this is slowly changing and more sponsors are dedicating both time and money to evaluating the effects of their sponsorship opportunities.

Unfortunately their approach is often lacking in sophistication. For too long, brands have quantified their ROI by simply monitoring media exposure to extrapolate the number of impressions received. Measuring media visibility is undeniably powerful, but the true benefit comes from understanding how this exposure has strengthened your brand identity, and enabled you to connect with your target market on an emotional level.

But before you can understand the absolute value of your ROI you need to set defined objectives: What are you trying achieve from your sponsorship program? Do you want to change perceptions about your brand? Do you want to reposition your brand? Do you want to increase brand usage? Clear objectives from the outset will permit you to establish key performance indicators

by which to measure ROI.

Undertaking robust research is clearly the path to insight, and conducting consumer surveys amongst your target audience is just one method you can use to help you understand how your sponsorship program has influenced brand awareness, brand positioning, brand consumption and propensity to purchase.

However, research should not just serve as a post-evaluation tool; it can also be used as a pre-evaluation and tracking tool. In simple terms, this means research should be conducted before, during and after the span of the sponsorship program to assess shifts in perceptions and brand affinity over time. It is only through this rounded appraisal that you will be able to fully quantify your ROI.

Research as a forecasting tool

Smart marketers can take research a step further by combining it with high-level business modelling at the planning stage to devise informed sponsorship strategies which will yield optimal performance and maximum returns. This predictive approach turns the whole process of measurement on its head by enabling you to forecast ROI.

For example, Comperio conducted research on behalf of the Canadian arm of a global energy supplier. This organization needed assistance selecting a sports property that would be a good fit for their brand and would deliver a high return on their objectives. We analyzed volumes of historical data that we had amassed over the years, calculated industry averages, and provided the brand with a quantifiable value and projected ROI for the package they were considering.

On the flip side of the coin, rights holders are also using predictive research to evaluate their properties and quantify the ROI they can deliver to potential sponsors. This approach is particularly apt in today's competitive marketplace as sponsors are quite often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of choice. Therefore, rights holders are under con-

stant pressure to ensure their properties stand out from the crowd.

A prime example is the Edmonton Eskimos Football Club, which wanted to build the Eskimos "brand story" so they could efficiently articulate their value proposition to sponsors on a national scale. Through a detailed property valuation, combined with in-depth consumer research, the Eskimos are now able to present potential sponsors with a clear perspective of the value they would receive if they chose to invest in sponsorship of the Eskimos brand.

A 360 degree view

Measurement needs to be a genuine indicator of the overall impact of your sponsorship investment, if it is to be effective. This is why it is imperative your research program is rigorous and multi-faceted. You need to understand how you have performed on every variable and in each area if you are to gather intelligence that will enable you to learn from past experiences, make informed decisions, implement successful strategies and ultimately optimize performance.

DEREK MAGER is a research director at Comperio Research, a unit of the IMG Group of Companies. He manages the company's operations across Canada and the United States

Golden rules for measuring sponsorship ROI

- Determine sponsorship objectives
- Dedicate a budget for research and measurement
- Develop a measurement plan
- Measure performance against objectives
- Try to isolate the impact of sponsorship
- Measure only what counts
- Use consistent measurement standards
- Determine the benchmark and compare results