The Relationship Between AFL Season-Ticket Holder Satisfaction And Sponsor-Related Behaviour

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Abstract

In a sporting context, it has been acknowledged that fan attention and response to sponsorship is affected by a range of variables, including the duration of sponsorship and fan commitment to the sporting organisation. The results of surveys of the members of five AFL clubs indicated that there is a positive relationship between the satisfaction level of season-ticket holders and their orientation toward club sponsors’ products and brands. Despite the weak relationships found in this research, the results suggest that more satisfied season-ticket holders will seek to use club sponsors’ products, and this is yet another reason to manage the satisfaction of customers.

Keywords: satisfaction; sponsor-related behaviour; members; sporting clubs

Background

Determining the value and influence of sponsorship is a complicated task, and the factors that lead to a high return on sponsorship investment are not well understood (Walliser, 2003). In a sporting context, it has been acknowledged that fan attention and response to sponsorship is affected by a range of variables, including the duration of sponsorship and fan commitment to the sporting organisation. However, sponsorship is a widely used and expensive tool, so managers are seeking increasingly to identify in detail what influence sponsorship has, so as to judge its value (Farrelly and Quester, 2003).

Beyond simply raising awareness for a brand, one of the key reasons for engaging in sponsorship is the desire to see a transferral of brand image from the organisation or event being sponsored to the company paying to sponsor it (Meenaghan and Shipley, 1999; Pope and Voges, 1999). In recent studies, this is referred to often as Brand Image Transfer (BIT) (Smith, 2004; Grohs, Wagner and Vsetecka, 2004). However, it is more than just brand associations that many sponsors seek to have transferred – it is the positive feelings and affection consumers may have toward the recipient of the sponsorship. Meenaghan (1991, p. 8) argued that it is the audience reaction that sets sponsorship apart from other promotional communication forms, claiming that consumers recognise the “beneficial effects” of the sponsorship and respond by transferring “goodwill” to the sponsor. Crimmins and Horn (1996, p. 14) included in their suggested measures of sponsorship impact “gratitude felt by consumers because of the link” as one of four key determinants of success. McDonald (1991) wrote of the perceived benefit to society resulting from sponsorship, particularly for events whose survival is perceived to be dependent upon it. He claimed further that it is the “social” aspects of sponsorship – “that it helps those who lack resources” (1991, p. 36) – which are the main differentiator of sponsorship from other forms of marketing communication.

Meenaghan and Shipley (1999) found through qualitative research that “goodwill” is not stable across sponsorship categories, with social causes the most likely to be viewed as philanthropic, and sponsoring mass media broadcasts of events to be the least. All of this, of course, presumes that consumer attitudes towards the recipient (sponsee) are positive, stable...
across time and consistent across the consuming population. Some diverse research projects have suggested that this view of the consumers of even the organisations most frequently cited as having passionate, positive consumers (e.g., the arts, sports, and charities), is simplistic. For example, it has been well-established that individuals prefer to associate with those they perceive as successful (Caildini, Borden and Thorne, 1978), and this is often reflected in merchandise sales and attendances (Tapp, 2004). The idea though, that sporting club fans are loyal to the teams through “thick and thin” is questioned frequently now by researchers who have found more often wide variation in both the attitudinal and behavioural loyalty of self-professed fans towards their teams (Mahoney, Madrigal and Howard, 1999; Bristow and Sebastian, 2001; Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

Recent sponsorship effectiveness studies have concluded that the key determinants of sponsorship success are factors such as event involvement, prior brand awareness, perceptions of sponsor-sponsee fit and exposure to other sources of integrated communications (Grohs, Wagner and Vsetecka, 2004; Quester and Thompson, 2001; Pope and Voges, 1999). All of these factors have been found to vary amongst the consuming population. In one of the few studies of its type, Cornwell and Smith (2001) looked at consumers of a sponsored race for breast cancer awareness, finding that consumers varied in terms of the meanings they attached to the race, the cause and the sponsors, and that individuals were satisfying a range of both collective and individual needs by participating in the event.

Based on all of this past work, it seems logical to predict that within the consumer base of any sponsored organisation or event, there will be a high degree of variation in any attitudes held, including reasons for consuming, loyalty and goodwill. The “goodwill” that people feel towards their sporting team, for example, may fluctuate based on long-term factors such as changes in ownership or geographic location, through to more short-term factors such as winning or losing particular games or how satisfied they were generally with the event they attended.

To examine this concept empirically, a simple starting point is to look at satisfaction levels amongst consumers of a sponsored team, and to investigate whether variation in satisfaction with the club relates to variation in attitudes towards sponsors of the club. The satisfaction level of customers has been linked consistently to a range of attitudinal and behavioural outcomes including retention, loyalty and advocacy (word-of-mouth) (Oliver, 1997). The relationship between fan satisfaction with a sporting team and attitudes towards the sponsors of that team, however, has not been studied extensively previously. It seems reasonable to speculate that satisfied season ticket holders will pay more attention and be more positive in their responses to sponsors than unsatisfied ticket holders. Findings of this nature could suggest that when making sponsorship decisions, it is crucial to examine the relationship which the potential recipient has with its “community” and to determine to extent to which its consumers are satisfied with past activities.

The following hypothesis was tested:

H1: AFL Club members’ satisfaction level is related positively to their orientation to sponsors’ products.
Method

This study looks at season-ticket holders of Australian Football League (AFL) Clubs. Australian Rules Football is one of the largest sporting codes in Australia, and the AFL is the major competition for it, with attendances of over 6.3 million a year and over 460,000 paid club members (around one in every 40 Australians). These clubs rely on sponsorship and season-ticket sales as major sources of revenue, and the clubs have negotiated increasingly substantial sponsorship deals with multi-national firms including Ford, Toyota, and Emirates Airlines. For this study, five AFL clubs, each with more than 20,000 season-ticket holders (called “members” in the AFL), were selected. Each club has several major sponsors, which are promoted as such in club communications (newsletters, website, stationery, etc.). As “members”, AFL season-ticket holders receive a range of goods and services from the club including magazines, entry to games, social functions, voting rights for board elections and free merchandise. Initially, preliminary in-depth interviewing was conducted to identify the relevant components of the membership product and to develop a questionnaire to test satisfaction with these aspects and attitudes to sponsors. Undertaking a mail census of the full membership lists was not feasible due to the large list sizes and associated costs of mailing. Instead, all members on the email lists of the clubs (approximately 25 per cent of all members for each club in 2004) were invited to complete an embedded email questionnaire, sent directly to each member once permission was received. Submission of the questionnaire was secure, with members needing to enter their membership numbers and surnames to submit. The survey ran for three weeks. The sampling frames used for this project, the email lists, were compared to the overall populations of members on key demographics and found to be reliable representations of the populations.

Results

In total, up to one-third of email-members responded by completing questionnaires by the due dates. The returned samples were checked for non-response bias using two different methods (first and last comparison and comparison to overall population details) and no evidence of it was found. The incidence of missing data was low. For four AFL clubs, sponsor orientation was operationalised as: “In relation to our sponsors, which of the following best describes you?”, with four alternative statements provided for choice, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Sponsor Orientation of AFL Club Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor Orientation</th>
<th>Club and Proportion (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I pay little attention to the sponsors</td>
<td>58.2 57.1 58.4 59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know little about the sponsors but would like more information on the sponsors’ products</td>
<td>5.6 10.0 7.6 4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I think all brands are the same, I try to use the sponsors’ products</td>
<td>29.8 26.0 27.9 28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I actively seek out and use the sponsors’ brands whenever possible</td>
<td>6.5 6.9 6.0 7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For a fifth AFL club, sponsorship orientation was operationalised as: “I try to buy products from organisations which sponsor the (club name)”, with responses measured on a 0 – 10 scale, with 10 being “strongly agree”.

The most noticeable features of Table 1 are that the row percentages are very similar across all four clubs, and that the majority of club members pay little attention to the sponsors, while a surprisingly-uniform core of members (6-7 per cent, or one in 16) say that they actively seek out and use the sponsors’ brands whenever possible. For Club 5, 11 per cent of members “strongly agreed” with “I try to buy products from organisations which sponsor the (club name)”, while 38 per cent rated their agreement as five or lower on the 11-point scale.

For this study, the overall measure of member satisfaction with the club’s membership was measured on a 0 – 10 scale, with 10 being “extremely satisfied”. This satisfaction measure was correlated with sponsor orientation, with the results shown in Table 2. In addition, ANOVA was performed, to see if there were identifiable differences in mean satisfaction between the groups of respondents selecting the particular sponsor orientation options. Table 1 reports the results for the comparison between the most sponsor-oriented group, and the least sponsor-oriented group of members. The correlations were Spearman’s rho due to the ordinal scalar properties of the sponsorship questions for four clubs.

Table 2: Relationships between AFL Club Members’ satisfaction level and Orientation of AFL Club Members to sponsors’ products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Club</th>
<th>Correlation (Spearman’s rho)</th>
<th>ANOVA (highest cf. lowest sponsor group)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.20 (p&lt;0.01; N=893)</td>
<td>Sig. (p&lt;0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.09 (p&lt;0.01; N=2698)</td>
<td>Not sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.14 (p&lt;0.01; N=3059)</td>
<td>Sig. (p&lt;0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.16 (p&lt;0.01; N=1310)</td>
<td>Sig. (p&lt;0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.37 (p&lt;0.01; N=708)</td>
<td>Sig. (p&lt;0.05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall Satisfaction was a better predictor of sponsor orientation than either the measure of how well expectations about membership were met, or the number of games attended, for the three clubs for which both questions were asked, and the correlations computed.

In order to try to characterise those members who were more likely to be active sponsor supporters, the data for Club 5 were examined in greater detail. As alluded to earlier, support for sponsors could be associated with other variables, e.g., donating to the club or volunteering, or a sense of member involvement. The key sponsor-related question: “I try to buy products from organisations which sponsor the (club name)”, had a reasonably bell-shaped distribution, with its mean and median just a little above the scale mid-point (6-7), and a standard deviation of 2.5. Being member data, it would be expected that the mean would be above the mid-point, but the data were not badly skewed. Therefore, this variable should be a useful dependent variable. Further, it was expressed well, in the sense of being “intentional” or conative (I try to do something), and purchasing-oriented (I try to buy), and quite explicit about the fundamental aspect of linking the sponsoring organisation to the club.
Several demographic variables, including age, family life-cycle stage, and occupation, were found to be virtually uncorrelated with sponsor product purchase intention. While there were numerous positive and significant simple correlations between items and the sponsor variable, all were <0.4, and when a regression analysis was conducted with the sponsor variable as the dependent variable, and the most likely predictor variables, having a sense of “belonging” to the club, or being “proud” of it, or “caring about it in the long term” were not significant. However, some brand-related variables and a donating variable were useful predictors (see Table 3; R=0.64; adjusted R-squared=0.39).

### Table 3: Regression of an AFL Club Members’ responses against the Orientation of the AFL Club Members to sponsors’ products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Standardised Coefficients</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the club brand provides higher value than other AFL club brands</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If club-branded clothing costs a little more (say, 10%) than other clothing, that is OK with me</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have bought club-branded merchandise in 2003-2004 for myself</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how satisfied are you with the ticketing arrangements provided by the Club?</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would consider donating my time or money to the club (NB: You will not be contacted as a result of your response)</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have bought club-branded merchandise for other people in 2003-2004</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Discussion, Conclusion and Further Research

All of the principal relationships are in the manner expected, that is, as member satisfaction rose, so did the likelihood of using sponsors’ products, so there is support for H1. All of the correlations are significant (at the 0.05 level) but weak, so satisfaction alone explains only a small amount of the variation in sponsor orientation. Similarly, all of the ANOVA results, except those for one club, are significant (at the 0.05 level), so for most clubs, it is possible to distinguish those members with the most favourable orientation toward sponsors, from those with the least favourable orientation toward sponsors. While this is yet another reason to try to manage the satisfaction of customers, further research is needed to understand the drivers of this orientation, but it seems to be related to broader aspects of brand value, both for the club and its sponsors. There is a need for more research about the role of “identification” with a club, and the notion of “rewarding” sponsors for assisting/supporting the club, and the broader issue of motivation, so that there is less reliance on inferring motivation.

One promising research stream appears to be that related to “brand communities”. For example, McAlexander, Kim and Roberts (2003) suggested that as customers become experienced or regular users of the service under consideration, satisfaction becomes less important to loyalty intentions. Similarly, McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) argued that brand relationships are not dyadic, and that crucial relationships form between the customer and brand, the customer and the organisation, the customer and the product in use, and the customer and their fellow customers. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) argued that consumers have a sense of moral responsibility for the preservation of the brand, product or organisation under the brand. Clearly, this would have implications for sponsorship research.
References


