

# Exploring the Dimensions of Fit Within Sports Sponsorship

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## Abstract

*A reason for sponsoring events is to garner positive image transference from the event to the sponsor (Gwinner and Eaton 1999; Speed and Thomson 2000). This suggests that perceived fit between the event (sponsee) and the sponsor is important. But fit in sports sponsorship contexts involves more than just that between the sponsee and the sponsor. What also needs to be taken into consideration is the fit between other stakeholders: co-sponsors and consumers. This exploratory research seeks to understand the dimensions encompassing fit (or relatedness: see Johar and Pham, 1999) in the sponsorship marketplace.*

*Using semi-structured interviews with sponsorship managers, findings suggest there are six dimensions of fit within sports sponsorship: target market, product endorser image, geography, typicality, complementarity, and clash. Whilst most have received attention by marketing scholars, others, including interactions, have yet to be addressed. Each of these dimensions is identified; conclusions and implications follow.*

Keywords: fit, sponsorship, image transference

## Introduction

Consistent with findings in the brand extension literature, a good fit between sponsors and sponsee's allows better transference of attitudes (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Park, Milberg, and Lawson, 1991; Crimmins and Horn, 1996; D'Astous, and Bitz, 1995). But sponsorship lacks a clear understanding of multiple stakeholders and their relationships. For instance, drawing from research in congruency theory (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989), Jagre, Watson and Watson (2001) distinguish between two relationships: sponsor-sponsee fit, and sponsor-sponsor fit. Thus, indicating first-order effects, that is, the effect sponsoring an event has on the sponsoring firm(s), as well as second-order effects (e.g. the fit between co-sponsors). These second-order effects have received little attention by marketing scholars (Ruth and Simonin, 2003). Importantly, what defines fit may vary whether one is talking about fit with the sponsee or with fellow co-sponsors or with consumers. Having multiple relationships posits the question; "Are there different dimensions underlying the concept of fit in sponsorship?"

Ambiguity concerning fit clearly exists. A review of 14 articles covering the years 1983 – 2003 (refer table 1) revealed a variety of terms used to define fit, including: compatibility, synergy, symbiosis, congruency, and complementarity. Gaining insights into what precisely these terms mean would have clear practical import. The purpose of this research is therefore to improve our understanding of what constitutes fit within a sports sponsorship context. Given the ambiguity, we undertook exploratory research. Using semi-structured interviews with sponsorship managers a case is made for six dimensions of fit amongst 3 sponsorship stakeholders: the sponsee, the sponsors, and the consumer.

**Table 1: Expressions Describing Fit in the Sponsorship Literature.**

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Meenaghan, J. (1983).	<i>Compatibility</i> between the event and the sponsor.
Parker, K. (1991).	<i>Synergy</i> between the brand and the event.
D'Astous, A., and Bitz, P. (1995).	<i>Symbiosis</i> between the sponsor and the event.
Stipp, H., and Schiavone, N. (1996).	<i>Link</i> between the event and the sponsor.
Crimmins, J., and Horn, M. (1996).	A <i>perceptive link</i> between the event and the sponsor.
Cornwell, B., and Maignan, I. (1998).	<i>Congruence</i> between the consumer and the sponsorship activity.
Gwinner, K. P., and Eaton, J. (1999).	<i>Congruence</i> between the event and the sponsor.
Dean, D. H. (1999).	<i>Linking</i> the company to the event.
Johar, G. V., and Pham, M. T. (1999).	<i>Semantic overlap</i> between the event and the sponsor.
Ferrand, A., and Pages, M. (1999)	<i>Compatibility</i> between the company and the sponsored event.
Erickson, G. S., and Kushner, R. J. (1999).	Value of <i>core competences</i> offered between parties within the sponsorship network.
Speed, R., and Thompson, P. (2000).	<i>Congruence</i> between the event and the sponsor.
Jagre, E., Watson, J. J., and Watson, J. G. (2001).	<i>Congruency</i> between the sponsor and the event.
Ruth, J. A., and Simonin, B. L. (2003).	<i>Complementarity and controversy</i> between the sponsor and the event.

## **Methodology**

The objective of this research was to gain an insight into how businesses view the marketplace as opposed to how the consumers do. Interviews were held with five marketing managers involved in sponsorships. To provide various perspectives, three types of organisations participated in the research: sponsoring organisations (two

interviews), event organisations (two interviews), and a marketing consultant (who has worked for both sponsors and sponsee's).

Potential participants were contacted, informed of the objectives of the research and asked to take part in the study. A letter of introduction was given to all participants preceding the interview and informed consent was obtained immediately prior to the interviews. Anonymity was assured.

Interviews were conducted using an interview guide to ensure consistency of issues covered. Generic questions were developed to ask all parties involved in sponsorship. Questions asked included: *"How do you decide upon which events / firms to sponsor?"*; *"Do you take into account the fit between the company and the event?"* *"If yes, what do you define as fit? If no, why not?"*; and *"Do you take into account who else is sponsoring the event? Why or why not?"*

Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes, was tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted in person by the lead author.

## **Results**

As, as result of the interviews, six dimensions of fit were identified which we have labelled: targeting, image, geography, typicality, complementarity, and clash. These in turn have been grouped into one of three foci that reflect to whom the comment was directed: consumer, sponsee or sponsor. Each of these dimensions will be discussed.

### **Consumer Focused**

Two dimensions of fit applicable to, or perceived by, consumers were identified: targeting and image. Targeting looks at segmentation factors for defining consumer fit, whilst image relates to sponsor-endorser perceptions. As per all foci, selected quotes from the interviews illustrate the dimensions.

#### **Targeting.**

Sponsorship based upon targeting has becoming increasingly important (*"we do have our target markets"*; *"that's why it becomes very important to pick your particular market"*). Though many schemes may be used for market segmentation, demographic fit was predominant (*"where you can specifically target your product to your key demographic who are likely purchasers of your product"*), and were also felt to contain the psychographics of the consumer (*"chances are the activity that is going on also fits with my product, because of the psychographics of the consumers that are there"*).

Demographics had the added benefit of providing a better-tailored marketing effort. This cannot be overstated as participants make use of consumer demographic information (*"so*

*you are able to get very specific, right down to a street or a suburb rather than a mass message that you hope hits where you want it to hit”).*

### **Image.**

Image pertains to how consumers perceive product endorsers. It was felt that product endorsers needed to have a good community image (*“because of how they [the product endorsers] were perceived in the community”; “its got to be someone with broad community appeal, someone who’s not controversial, someone who’s good at what they do and someone who has a clean image and reputation in the marketplace”*).

### **Sponsee Focused**

Sponsee focused fit centred upon two dimensions: geography and typicality. Where geography looks at the physical location of the sponsee, typicality looks at the perceived relationship between the sponsee and the sponsor where the sponsor represents an instance of event category membership (Farquhar and Herr, 1993).

### **Geography.**

Localising sponsorship may increase the success of the campaign (*“the more you can localise any of your campaigns the more chance you have of success”*), especially where your clientele is defined by your business structure (*“sponsorship for us has to be geographical as we are a franchise in a territorial area”*).

Focusing on geography also provides more effective use of finances (*“corporations spending high volumes of their market budgets in areas where the populations don’t justify it”*) as geographic area can help guide sponsorship expenditure (*“it doesn’t make sense spending more money on sponsorship with nothing that guides you to your geographical area”*).

Geography fit also requires matching the campaign to a geographic area (*“what works in Sydney doesn’t necessarily work in Brisbane [and] certainly doesn’t work in Melbourne”*). Local community events were more likely to receive minor sponsorship and may be the first consideration for this form of sponsorship (*“if we look at minor sponsorships, we first look at [what] we prefer -- we like local community”*).

### **Typicality.**

Referring to the fit between the sponsor and the sponsee, typicality consisted of either image or attributes matching (*“we look at things that we believe fit with our brand and fit with our image” “it would be logical to go with [name of brand] purely because of the attribute linkage between them”*). An obvious mismatch is a point of concern for sponsors (*“I didn’t want to get involved in any way, shape or form with an activity such as that”*). These quotes are consistent with brand extension literature, that form and/or image fit improve the chance of success (Bridges, Keller and Sood, 2000; Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994). Image fit in sponsorship has received considerable research over the last

decade (refer: Pham, 1991; McDonald, 1991; Javalgi, et. al, 1994; Gwinner, 1997; Ruth and Simonin, 2003)

### **Sponsor Focused**

Two dimensions were found in sponsor-focused fit: complementarity and clash. Sponsors believe it important enough for the sponsee to bear the responsibility for these dimensions (*"I think it is the responsibility of the event coordinator to make sure that in the interest of all their sponsors, that all sponsors are complementary"*).

#### **Complementarity.**

Whereas typicality dealt with the perceived fit between the sponsor and the sponsee, complementarity looks at the fit between sponsors. Complementarity between sponsors may be both image and functional. Whilst complementarity of image was recognised as having implications on reputations (*"they have to be complementary to the positioning of your industry"*; *"it is as much your reputation and respect on the line by linking with them"*), functional complementarity provided a means for further promotions (*"there is an opportunity and [we are] happy for you to piggy back and promote your new product"*). This dimension of fit has received limited research in sponsorship (for an exception to this refer Ruth and Simonin, 2003).

#### **Clash.**

Product category exclusivity within sponsorship was favoured. Both sponsors (*"I don't think we would go and sponsor something if there was another major [name of product category] in it"*; *"I would never sponsor anything where there is another sponsor from the same industry"*) and sponsee's (*"in any one sponsorship stable there can be only one of a product category"*) recognise the importance of this dimension. Clash, therefore, is a boundary condition: once a sponsor is identified no other sponsors within that product category are entertained, an insight that has not – to our knowledge – been acknowledged within the sponsorship literature.

### **Discussion.**

Research into fit within sponsorship is incomplete. Building on the strategic use of sponsorship as a communication strategy (Cornwell and Maignon, 1998), six dimensions of fit were identified from five interviews. Whilst most dimensions have already been addressed in the sponsorship literature (e.g. product endorser [Dean, 1999], targeting [Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw, 1999; Mahony, Madrigal and Howard, 2000], image [Pope and Voges, 1999; Stipp and Schiavone, 1996]), the fit between sponsors was identified as meriting further attention from market researchers.

Because sponsorships comprise multiple sponsors, fit between sponsors is likely to influence consumers' perceptions (Ruth and Simonin, 2003). Sponsor identification

involves a substantial degree of constructionism. Johar and Pham (1999) show consumers use the heuristics of relatedness and prominence as factors in sponsor-sponsee interactions. However, this exploratory research suggests that there are second-order effects (e.g. the sponsor-sponsor relationship) to be considered in addition to first-order effects. For instance, organisations perceptually related to each other (e.g. General Motors and Michelin) are likely to be evaluated differently from companies that do not have an obvious relationship (e.g. General Motors and Revlon). Similarly, the sponsee to be sponsored (Auto Racing versus Beauty Pageant) would likely affect perceptions of the sponsoring firms. Thus, fit not only applies between the sponsee and the sponsor, but also *between* all stakeholders. For, instance, sponsors may or may not be typical (or prominent) with respect to a sponsee, and may or may not be perceived as complements to each other. Further research on the dimensions identified can help to understand the interaction between such first-order and second-order effects.

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