

Savvy sports audiences care about team sponsorship deals

June 5 2017



Players in a German professional soccer game compete on the field with company brands on their uniforms. A three-member research team has found that sports audiences pay attention to sponsorship deals and what shapes positive and negative reactions. Credit: Photo courtesy of David Woisetschläger

Companies and sports team owners should never underestimate the

communication impact of the sponsorship deals they make. Consumers and fans notice the nature of such deals, and how they view them can influence loyalty or fuel distaste, researchers say.

An effort to understand how these deals convey subtle messages began after witnessing reactions to a seven-year, \$600 million agreement in 2012 in which U.S.-based Chevrolet became a sponsor of Manchester United, a high-profile professional European soccer [team](#). Why, people asked, would an American automaker support a British soccer team?

"It wasn't about the sponsorship of soccer by an automaker, that is common enough," said T. Bettina Cornwell, head of the Department of Marketing in the Lundquist College of Business at the University of Oregon. "Now the players were to have Chevy on their shirts. Before the shirts were even printed, questions arose about the [deal](#) characteristics and the dealmaker was fired.

For the research Cornwell joined two European researchers, David Woisetschl ger of Germany's Technical University Braunschweig and Christof Bachhaus of the Aston Business School in the United Kingdom. Both already were interested in the idea of deals communicating about sponsor motives.

In an initial field study they examined 44 sponsorships in the German Football League. They viewed the deals through already existing knowledge that 2,787 consumers had about brands and sports partnerships. In a second study, they manipulated characteristics of a fictitious sponsorship in a professional handball league to further probe the inferences of 576 audience members for the sport.

Common deal characteristics can include duration, proximity of a sponsoring company to a team or league, the fee paid by the sponsor and the type of sponsorship—whether the company's name goes on a

stadium, signage around a sporting venue and the company's brand appearing on uniforms.

The findings of the two studies, published in the *Journal of Marketing*, are similar overall, Woisetschläger said, but with subtle differences.

The first study found that sponsorships involving high fees and distant international sponsors are perceived as reflecting calculative motives of the sponsors. To some degree, stadium naming rights deals also are seen as more calculative, compared to perimeter logo sponsorships.

Participants questioned whether such a pairing was a good fit—a show of support or just a deal that furthers a sponsor's bottom line

Close geographic proximity of a sponsor to a team is associated with affective motivations, Woisetschläger said. Such deals are seen as positive and suggest the sponsors really care about a team or sport.

Long-term contracts with companies in the same country or region as a team were perceived in both studies as having normative motives, or an expected arrangement. The audiences of this sport believe that such a sponsor is loyal to the team even during down seasons.

"There were, however, some interesting differences between the soccer study and the handball study," Backhaus noted. "In the handball study, high fees paid by a brand to partner with a sport were not seen to be as calculative. In this lower profile sport, higher fees seem to be seen as helping to keep the sport alive."

These new findings, according to the researchers, show that a sport's audiences—a sponsor's potential consumers—are savvy about the deals their teams make.

Team followers, Cornwell said, are wondering what a brand brings to a

team.

"A lot of studies have looked at how consumers respond to corporate partnerships between brands and sport and between brands and art, entertainment and music festivals," she said. "Our new studies have tried to understand the outcome of communications that are not, per se, directed at consumers."

"For the company, it is more than fit—the image or function match. When you cut a deal, people are going to consider the relationship," Backhaus said. "A company needs to consider who they are relative to the team or sport, and what the deal signals. Is there at least some level of genuine support, or is it all about the money? If you are an international sponsor and you'd like to have a relationship with a team outside of your country, you must communicate your relevance."

Team owners also need to consider that relevance, Woisetschläger said.

"The clubs need to tell the story about how a sponsor is important to the team, the market and the area," he said. "They need to communicate how the money realized in a sponsorship will be used—why the money is what it is and how it provides a good benefit."

More information: David M. Woisetschläger et al, Inferring Corporate Motives: How Deal Characteristics Shape Sponsorship Perceptions, *Journal of Marketing* (2017). [DOI: 10.1509/jm.16.0082](https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.16.0082)

Provided by University of Oregon

Citation: Savvy sports audiences care about team sponsorship deals (2017, June 5) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-savvy-sports-audiences-team-sponsorship.html>

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