



## The Use of Sport Sponsorship as a Brand Equity Building Tool by Zimbabwean Companies

Lysias Tapiwanashe Charumbira & Judith Charumbira

National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe

### Abstract

This paper examines how Zimbabwean companies use sport sponsorship to build and leverage their brands. Data was collected from eight purposively sampled Zimbabwean sport sponsoring companies by means of questionnaires and document analysis. Descriptive statistical measures were used to analyze and present the quantitative data. Willig's (2001) four stages model of analyzing phenomenological data was used to analyze qualitative data. The study established that sponsorship had positive and negative brand equity building consequences. The findings show that sponsorship objectives and selection are based on business considerations, such as; ensuring maximum returns on sponsorship investment. It was also noted that companies have difficulties in assessing the value of sponsorship. Other findings include the fact that; sponsorship is an element of the integrated marketing communication mix which is mainly used in the introduction, growth and maturity stages of the product life cycle. According to the study, ambush marketing is yet to have adverse effects on Zimbabwean sport sponsoring companies.

**Key Words:** Sponsorship, Ambush Marketing, Brand Equity, Product Life Cycle, Marketing Communication Mix.

### 1.0 Introduction

This study was conducted to establish how Zimbabwean companies use sport sponsorship as a brand equity building tool. Sport sponsorship is a relatively new dimension within the broad concept of marketing, but it has grown to be one of the most powerful strategies used by Zimbabwean companies to achieve the brand goals of getting a response from the consumers and influence them to buy their products. Despite the increased utilization of sponsorship by Zimbabwean companies, there have been difficulties in defining sport sponsorship itself and delimiting the groups of activities involved in it. This partly stems from popular confusion with such concepts as charity, donation, endorsement and patronage (Pope 1998). A survey of sports sponsorship literature indicates a wide range of definitions:

- Meenaghan (1991) notes that commercial sponsorship involves an investment in cash or kind in an activity, person or idea for the purpose of exploiting the potential associated with this activity.
- Sandler and Shani (1993) produced a more or less similar view when they define sponsorship as the provision of resources by an organization directly to an event or activity, in exchange for a direct association to the event or activity. Pope (1998) criticizes this definition on the grounds that it ignores the activity of sponsoring a team or individual competitor.
- Mullin, Hardy and Sutton (1993, p. 254) view sponsorship from the sponsor's perspective as, "the acquisition of the rights to affiliate or directly associate with a product or event for the purpose of deriving benefits from that association".
- Cornwell and Maignan (1998, p.93) view it as, "the orchestration and implementation of marketing activities for the purpose of building and communicating an association (link) to a sponsorship."
- Pope (1998) defines sponsorship as the provision of money, people and equipment by an organization (the sponsor) directly to an individual, authority or body (the sponsee), to enable the latter to pursue some activity in return for benefits contemplated in terms of the sponsor's promotion strategy, and which can be expressed in terms of corporate marketing or media objectives. Van Heerden (2001) views this as the most encompassing definition of sponsorship.
- Van Heerden (2001) summarizes the definitions of sponsorship by saying it is a business relationship that is based on an association between sponsors and sponsees with some promotional objectives in mind.
- Ukman (2004, p154) defines sponsorship as "a cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically sports, arts, entertainment, or causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property."
- Cliffe and Motion (2005) define sponsorship as an indirect persuader for improving perceptions of the brand performance by linking our beliefs about the brand to an event or organization that the target audience values highly.
- Shank (2005) defines sponsorship as an investment in a sports entity to support overall organizational goals, marketing objectives and/or promotional objectives.
- Mihai (2013) defines sponsorship as the relationship between a corporation and a sport organization as a tool to develop brand image and customer loyalty as a result of the association.

Fullerton and Merz (2008) identify the following forms of sponsorship:

- Traditional sponsorship; which involves the acknowledgement of the sponsor by the sports property and the ability of the sponsor to use the property's trademarks and logos in its efforts to leverage the sponsorship and reinforce the relationship in the minds of members of the sponsor's target market.

- Venue naming rights; which have often been characterized as building sponsorships where non-sport organization are involved in the construction of sports facilities in return for the value that sponsors receive from stadium naming rights
- Endorsements; which involve the sponsorship of sports personalities by non-sports organizations in return for their endorsement of the sponsor's products.
- Licensing as a sponsorship-based strategy; may involve giving sportswear manufacturing the right to use the logos of sports teams in the marketing of sportswear.

Thus, from the above one can conclude the sponsorship is one of the means open to companies to bring their brands to the attention of consumers and present them in a favorable light for competitive advantage. Although there is no universally accepted definition of sponsorship, we noted that most of the definitions share the notion that sponsorship is a mutually beneficial business relationship involving the provision of resources by a corporate organization to a cause, sport art or entertainment entity, in return for some brand-building benefits. However, the impact of sport sponsorship on brand equity remains one of the unresolved areas in sports marketing literature. There is wide disagreement among scholars on the subject.

Studies by Sandler and Shani (1989) and Hoek, Gendall and Theed (1999) support the claims that sponsorship can increase brand awareness. However, Ukman (2004) notes that while sponsorship can result in brand name recall by fans of the sponsored sports entity; it lacks the ability to fully impact on brand awareness by delivering detailed product related information. Studies by Pharn (1992) have also shown that where a spectator has low levels of involvement, little attention is paid to the stimulus, which is often the source of the sponsorship message. Equally, at high levels of involvement, the spectator's attention is almost wholly centered on the sporting action, leaving little space for processing sponsorships stimuli. Kosher and Merz (1995) argue that sponsorship is poor at building awareness and is rather used to push existing brand awareness. This view is corroborated by the findings from experimental studies by Johar and Pham (1999) and Pham and Johar (2001) which established that well-known sponsors were more likely to be identified than those sponsors that were not prominent in the marketplace. This seems to suggest, in isolation, that sponsorship is not a suitable strategy for new brands. Van Heerden (2001) captures this by arguing that sponsorship, isolated from other elements of marketing communication mix, would not be effective as these elements are required for advantage of the sponsorship programs. It supports and is supported by other marketing communication elements (Ibid). However, Dolan (2008) doubts whether these experimental results would be obtained in a real market setting.

Brown, Pope and Vogues (2003) note that sponsorship can positively affect consumer attitudes towards a brand's attributes. Studies by Javalgi, Taylor, Gross and Lampman (1994), Park and Srinivasa (1994), Meeneghan (2001), Shank (2005), and Mason (2005) support the view that sports sponsorship can positively influence brand equity and consumer purchase intentions. Similarly, Donlan (2008) notes that it is clear that sponsorship can and does affect brand associations through the process of image transfer. This is echoed by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) who argue that sponsorship has the potential to contribute to brand building in a variety of ways, several of which are unique to sponsorship.

- The primary goal is to create exposure for the brand and develop associations.
- Three other brand-building benefits, however, can be very relevant to the selection and evaluation of sponsorships:
  - mobilizing the organization for brand building;
  - providing an event experience to customers; or demonstrating new products or technologies;
  - Connecting the brand to the customers.

On the other hand, studies by; Lee, Sandler, and Shani (1997), Pope (1998), and Nicholls, Roslow and Dubish (1999) suggest that impact of sports sponsorship on brand equity and consumer purchase intentions is marginal. Cornwell and Maignan (1998) attribute this to the fact that sports audiences tend to be preoccupied with the event, paying little conscious attention to the entities sponsoring the event. According to Ukman (2004), the inability of sponsorship to communicate large volumes of product-related information may limit its effectiveness at creating concrete brand associations; however, it is very useful in building abstract image associations, such as personality.

Results from studies by Easton and Mackie (1998), Pope and Voges (2000) and Verity (2002) support the view that sponsorship has a positive impact on purchase intentions. However, experimental studies by Hoek, Gendall and Theed (1999) found no evidence that the recall of sponsors had any impact on purchase intention. This influenced Poon and Prendergast (2006) to argue that there is, as yet, no definite agreement on the ability of sponsorship to increase purchase intention scores. In the same light, Howard and Crompton (2004) note that, while sponsorship may be able to succeed in creating awareness and building brand associations, it is unlikely, alone, to be able to suddenly stimulate sales in the short-term.

This shows that the impact of sport sponsorship on brand equity remains one of the contentious areas in branding literature. It is against this background that this paper seeks to explore the impact of sport sponsorship on brand equity on the Zimbabwean market and contribute towards the bridging of the gaps in knowledge in this area of marketing theory.

## 2.0 Literature Review

An analysis of marketing literature published in the last twenty years shows that general marketing and brand management text books hardly devote any attention to sports marketing and sponsorship as theoretical constructs. A review of general marketing texts such as Kotler and Armstrong (2010), Kotler and Keller (2009), Pride and Farrell (2011) revealed that they do not mention sports marketing at all. The only aspect of sports marketing covered is sponsorship and most of them regard it as an element of the promotion mix or marketing communication. This may suggest that sports marketing has not yet been embraced as an independent sub-discipline of basic marketing. One of the main limitations of this study in the fact that it is grounded on studies carried out in Asia, Australia, European, North American and South Africa. Such literature may not accurately mirror the sponsorship management practices in

Zimbabwe since it is based on studies carried out in organizations that operate under economic, political, socio-cultural and technological conditions which are different from those prevailing in the country.

### 3.0 Methodology

The population of this study may be defined as all Zimbabwean organizations that sponsor sport. It is however, impractical to compile a complete list of such organizations and hence, only those organizations that were conveniently available and viewed by the researcher as best suited to answer the research questions were selected. Data was collected from a survey of eight purposively sampled marketing executives of Zimbabwean companies which sponsor sport on a national scale. Respondent completed questionnaires were used to collect data from marketing managers of two Bulawayo based and six Harare-based sport sponsoring companies. In addition to questionnaires, such documents as sponsorship contracts, strategic plans and marketing plans of the eight case study companies were secured and analyzed to determine their sponsorship management strategies. This was informed by the views of Noor (2008) who observed that documentary sources are used to supplement and compensate for the limitations of other methods and enhance the validity of findings.

Descriptive statistical measures based on the SPSS Data Analysis Package Version 18 were used to analyze and present the data generated through closed questions. Where mean scores were used:

- A mean score closer to 3 indicates that the subject under consideration is very important to the respondents' companies.
- A mean score close to 2 indicates that the subjects are important to the companies.
- Finally, a mean score closer to 1 indicates that respondents feel that the subject under consideration is not important to their companies.

Willi's (2001) four stages model of analyzing phenomenological data was used to analyze data generated through open-ended questions.

Ethical standards were adopted in this research through coding all participants' names and coding the name of the companies they represented. This was meant to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. The researchers also sought approval from relevant authorities in the organizations targeted for this study and obtain informed consent from the potential participants. The researchers presented to the authorities in the organizations targeted for this study and the participants with a brief background to the study. This information was captured in a written consent form which was mailed all the potential participants with follow up telephone calls being made to assure them and to give clarifications where necessary. Once permission and informed consent was obtained, the participants were formally invited to take part in the study. This helped to reduce suspicion and promoted sincere responses.

### 4.0 Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 At what stage of the product life cycle is sponsorship used as a brand building tool?

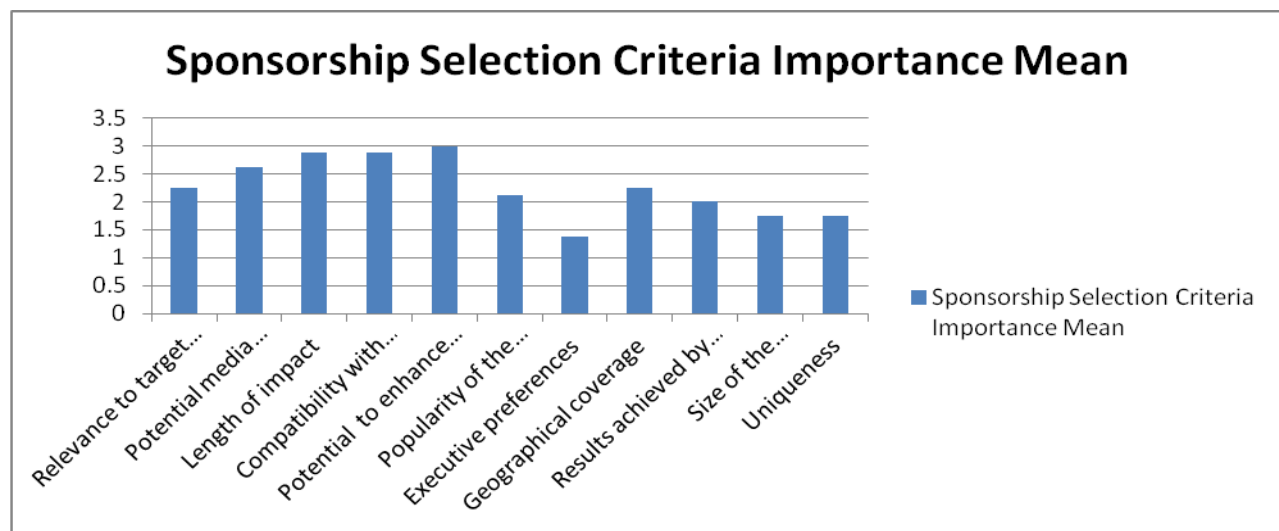
**Table 1: The product life cycle at which Zimbabwean companies use sponsorship to promote their products.**

Stage	Frequency	Frequency (%)
1 Introduction	7	87,5
2 Growth	3	37,5
3 Maturity	8	100
4 Decline	0	0

The findings summarized in Table 1 shows that companies tend to promote their products through sponsorship when they are in the maturity, introductory, and growth stages of the product life cycle. None of studied companies promote its products through sponsorship in the decline stage of the product life cycle. These findings confirm the assertion by Kotler and Armstrong (2010) that public relations and other promotional strategies such as sponsorship and advertising are mainly used during the introduction, growth and maturity stages of the product life cycle. These promotional tools are however, given very little attention in the decline stage of the product life cycle (Ibid).

#### 4.2 What attributes do Zimbabwean companies consider when selecting sports organizations or personalities for sponsorship?

**Chart 1: Summary of the Importance of the Sponsorship Selection Criteria Used by the surveyed companies**



The research findings show that Zimbabwean companies are now ensuring that their final sponsorship selection is a well-informed business decision based on analyzing the sponsee's potential to offer returns on their sponsorship investment. They prefer to associate with sports entities that can improve their brand equity, generate brand awareness, are compatible with their marketing objectives and relevant to the target audience. Factors like executive preferences, uniqueness and the size of sponsorship budget are not important considerations. These findings are consistent with views of Pitts and Stotlar (2013), who state that decisions to sponsor sport related properties must be linked to the business-related objectives of the company. Pitts and Solar (2013) also note that media attention is another important factor in selecting an event to sponsor. The low mean scores for size of the sponsorship budget, uniqueness and executive preferences are also compatible with the same views by Pitts and Stotlar (2013). This also corroborates the views of Wilkins (1997) and Pope (1998). Wilkins (1997) argues that in the 1980's selection of sports entities for sponsorship was based on management interests. Today, the increasing proportion of promotional budgets allocated to sponsorship has seen most companies trying to ensure that final sponsorship selection is a well-informed business decision, and not 'a spur of the moment' agreement (Ibid). Pope (1998) has called for the deletion of personal objectives from the list of sponsorship objectives. In the same vein, Sleight (1989) described personal objectives as the worst reasons to embark on a sponsorship program.

#### 4.3 Do the Zimbabwean companies use any other marketing communication tools besides sports sponsorship? If so, how are these integrated with sponsorship?

The survey results show that Zimbabwean companies do not use sponsorship in isolation to promote their products. Instead, they integrate it with advertising, personal selling, sales promotions, experimental selling, corporate social responsibility, promotional magazines, place and price as summarized in Table 2. The integration of sponsorship with other promotional tools by Zimbabwean companies supports the assertion by Van Heerden (2001) who argues that sponsorship is an integrative element of the promotion mix. It supports and is supported by other marketing communication elements. He goes on to say that sponsorship, isolated from other elements of marketing communication mix, would not be effective as these elements are required for leverage of the sponsorship programs and similarly, the other elements of the communication mix should link into the sponsorship programmer and each other enabling the communication plan as a whole to flow into achieving overall corporate, marketing and communication objectives.

**Table 2: The extent to which Zimbabwean companies integrate sponsorship with other marketing communication tools.**

Promotional Element with which sponsorship is integrated	Frequency	Frequency %
Advertising	8	100
Sales Promotions	4	50
Corporate Social responsibility	2	25
Personal selling	1	12,5

#### 4.4 What are the brand equity building benefits of sports sponsorship?

The findings show that sponsorship has helped the eight cases to strength their brand equity by:

- Differentiating the brands from competition.
- Creating or improving brand awareness.
- Enhancing the perceived quality of the brand.
- Improving the image of the brand.
- Improving the perceived personality of the brand
- Acting as an internal branding strategy by improving employee motivation levels.
- Adding to the financial value of the brand and ultimately ;
- Improving brand customer loyalty and increasing sales.

These findings are consistent with the views of Meenaghan (2001), Shank (2005) and Mason (2005) who argue that sports sponsorship can positively influence brand equity. Pitts and Stotlar (2013) note that sponsorships have been effective in promoting the image of the sponsoring company.

However, 75 % of the respondents indicated that sponsorship is not very good at improving the levels of customer awareness for the sponsoring brands, since it provides very little product related information, if used in isolation. This is in line with the views of Van Heerden (2001) who argues that sponsorship, isolated from other elements of marketing communication mix, would not be effective as these elements are required for advantage of the sponsorship programmes. In the same vein 67.5 % of the survey participants also noted that sponsorship is also not a very good antecedent of brand associations, since sports consumers tend to focus more on the sporting action and they pay very little attention to the sponsoring brands. These findings corroborate the views of Cornwell and Maignan (1998) who note that sports audiences tend to be preoccupied with the event, paying little conscious attention to the entities sponsoring the event.

92.5 % of the respondents acknowledged that the sponsorship of weak sports brands and ambush marketing can exaggerate the customer-based brand equity of the sponsoring brands negatively. This echoes the views of Meaghan (1998) and Cornwell, Weeks and Roy (2005) who identify ambush marketing and the sponsorship of sports entities that are despised by the target audience as some of the main risks associated with sponsorship.

Other negative findings include the fact that the impact of sponsorship on brand equity is negligible and difficult to evaluate. This is in line with the views of Mason (2005) who contends that sponsorship has some impact on consumer behavior, but how much, is not well understood.

#### **4.5 How effective are the methods used by Zimbabwean companies to evaluate their sponsorship programs?**

The findings of this study indicated that 87.5 % of surveyed companies evaluate their sports sponsorship activities by means of a wide range of sponsorship evaluation tools. The most frequently used evaluation tool is extent of media coverage. This supports the views of Pope (1998) who notes that media measurement remains the dominant method of sponsorship evaluation. The other sponsorship evaluation tools with mean scores of 2 and above include radio exposure value, pre-event and post-event attitude surveys, pre-event and post-event sales surveys, measuring brand and product awareness, effect on community relations, target market reach effectiveness, hospitality success, return on investment, increase in sponsor's name recall, sponsorship costs compared to other promotion costs and performance of the sponsored sports entities. On the other hand, low mean scores for such factors as television exposure value, continuity of publicity after the event, spectator figures and surveys on staff attitudes towards the sponsorship may be indicating that the sponsors are not familiar with them or find them too expensive or difficult to use.

The study noted that measuring the effectiveness of sports sponsorship is difficult for most Zimbabwean companies. This confirms the observations of Meenaghan (2001) who noted that the problems facing marketers include how to assess the effects of sport sponsorship on consumer behaviors as well as assessing its business value. This view is further amplified by Mason (2005) who contends that sponsorship has some impact on consumer behavior, but how much and why is not well understood. According to Cornwell, Weeks and Roy (2005), little is known about how humans actually process sponsorship-linked information.

Most of the evaluation techniques used by Zimbabwean companies are based on metrics that have been traditionally used in advertising measurement, such as recall, awareness, brand perceptions, brand preference and ultimately purchase intent. Heath and Feldwick (2007) criticized the use of traditional advertising metrics to assess the effectiveness of sponsorships on the grounds that they assume that brand choice is driven largely by information and that recall of information is thus critical in determining the success of advertising. However, experiments have shown that it is emotionally creative content in advertising that builds strong brand relationships, and not rational messages (Ibid). Secondly, sponsorship and advertising are utilized to achieve different objectives. Advertising is generally used to get a unique selling proposition into the heads of consumers, whereas sponsorship is generally used to enhance the image and increase the awareness of a brand. It is therefore critical to customize their measurement accordingly, rather than taking research methodology devised for the one and applying it to the other (Heath and Feldwick, 2007).

Pitts and Stotlar (2013) criticized media measures for their failure to reflect the whole picture, since they do not measure the quality of the message as well as its receipt by the audience. Thus, media measures should go beyond measuring the levels of brand awareness and include the brand awareness on such market outcomes as buying behavior. In the same vein, the problem measuring sales effectiveness lies in the dilemma of separating the sales effectiveness that actually comes from sponsorship and what does not.

#### **4.6 What are the effects of ambush marketing on the brand building objectives of the Zimbabwean sports sponsors?**

**Table 3: The impact of ambush marketing on the brand building objectives of sports sponsorship.**

<b>Class</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Companies affected by ambush marketing	3	37.5
Companies yet to experience ambush marketing	5	62.5

This study shows that although ambush marketing is slowly creeping into the country's sponsorship industry, most Zimbabwean companies are yet to encounter its negative effects. However, it has the potential to adversely affect and destroy sponsorship.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Sports sponsorship is one of the means open to Zimbabwean companies to bring their brands to the attention of consumers and present them in a favorable light. The ultimate objective is to positively influence consumer attitudes towards the sponsoring brands, for competitive advantage. The study showed that sponsorship is an element of the integrated marketing communication mix which is mainly used in the introduction, growth and maturity stages of the product life cycle. The study showed that sponsorship has positive and negative brand building consequences. It was also noted that sponsorship objectives and selection are based on business considerations such as ensuring maximum returns on sponsorship investment and that companies have difficulties in assessing the value of sponsorship. The study showed that ambush marketing is yet to have adverse effects in Zimbabwe.

## 6.0 Managerial Implications

This research has shown that it is important for corporate sponsors to set clear and realistic pre-defined corporate, marketing or media objectives before engaging in any sponsorship programs and ensure that these objectives are grounded on sound marketing and business principles such as brand equity enhancement. They must refrain from basing their sponsorship objectives on the personal preferences or gut feelings of key decision makers within their organizations. It is also important for companies to ensure that the selection of sports entities for sponsorship is a well-informed business decision based on analyzing the sports entity's potential to offer returns on sponsorship investment. The study highlighted the need for sport sponsoring companies to use sports sponsorship to support the launch of new products since sport appeals to all the demographic segments of the population so much that it can generate immediate awareness. Sponsorship should also be used to promote brand preference and brand loyalty in the growth and maturity stages of the product life cycle respectively and wipe out competitive forces. According to the findings, sport sponsoring companies should desist from using sponsorship in isolation since sponsorship success is dependent on the ability by companies to integrate it with other marketing communication tools. The study also noted that it is important for sport sponsoring companies to evaluate the effectiveness of their sponsorship activities since this will help them to determine whether it is worthwhile to continue sponsoring sports. They should desist from grounding their evaluation techniques on metrics that have been traditionally used in advertising measurement, such as recall, awareness, brand perceptions, brand preference and ultimately purchase intent since sponsorship and advertising are utilized to achieve different objectives. Zimbabwean sports marketers should thus adopt Jansen and Tronchin's (2008) recommendation that sponsorship evaluation techniques should be based on the following principles:

- Define and benchmark objectives beforehand.
- Measure the attitudes of target audiences towards sponsors/sports.
- Viewing the data in different ways by filtering on various sub-samples helps to gain deeper insights.
- Tracking changes in customer purchase behavior.

The findings also encourage sport sponsoring companies to devise ways to curtail or minimize ambush marketing, since it was observed to weaken the effectiveness of sponsorship programs. This can be achieved through such measures as;

- Ownership of intellectual property rights relating to the event by the sponsors or organizers of the event, so that the copyright and patent laws can protect them.
- Event organizer or sponsor can enter into contracts stipulating the terms and conditions governing the sponsorship relationship.
- Control of broadcasting rights by the sponsors or organizers of the sponsored event;
- Legislative measures.

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