

CASE STUDY: Research Measures the Efficacy of Sports Sponsorship Activation

Sports marketing today, is a multi-billion dollar industry. Brands align with teams, leagues and players to showcase their products and services to coveted, difficult to reach target audiences, and compete vigorously to stand out and differentiate themselves. Attend any sporting event and you are sure to see the implementation of these sponsorship affiliations. From the more static signage that lines the playing fields, venue concourses and even restrooms, to promotional give aways and interactive events within the events, games, sponsoring brands and a variety of specialty marketing agencies deploy significant resources with the goal of creating break through in-game marketing experiences that resonate with sports fans.

The cost of entry can be significant for marketers, and the revenue generated for the teams is critical in funding operations as player salaries and other costs continue to sky rocket. It is imperative that both sponsoring companies and the teams and venues that create and sell in game advertising and promotion partner effectively and can measure and evaluate the return on the sports marketing investment. This is not always easily accomplished. With more traditional advertising vehicles entrenched in the minds of brand managers and their advertising agencies, sports marketing can be a tough sell. With that has come a need for well constructed marketing research programs to measure and evaluate the impact of venue based activation. Brands seek to quantify the media equivalency value of their exposures and gauge its impact in changing brand perceptions and purchase intent among the target audience to justify their expenditures and plan more efficiently for future campaigns. On the seller side, the teams and venues seek to demonstrate the impact of their marketing opportunity so as to continue to grow sports marketing revenue. But in today's market place, simply equating exposure to a media equivalency dollar amount, is often not enough. Both sports marketers and activating brands want to understand how effective their sports promotions are at moving the needle in changing fan attitudes and behaviors.

Research firms like Sports and Leisure Research Group (SLRG) specialize in helping sports marketers on both the brand and property side to better and more objectively evaluate the impact of event based sports marketing. As a custom marketing research firm, SLRG works closely with its clients to gather a holistic understanding of the impact of sports marketing activation. Rather than simply measuring exposure time and assigning a traditional media equivalency valuation to it, SLRG subscribes to the belief that good sports marketing is iterative and is better evaluated by measuring the actual impact of activation on a consumer's awareness and perceptions of a brand. But that in its own right can be challenging to measure. Within a media and advertising world where consumers are consistently barraged with marketing messages in a variety of both traditional and out of home forms, it is improper to simply associate return on investment to the last marketing message that a consumer was exposed to before making a purchase. Brand perceptions and awareness grow over time and over multiple marketing exposures. Similarly, to ask a consumer directly, whether a particular advertisement or marketing initiative led to a purchase behavior is unrealistic. The human mind can not cognitively

attribute a particular behavior's impetus to a singular marketing activity. More realistically, the measurement opportunity lies in the ability for a sound research study to gauge changing perceptions of a sponsoring brand through experimental design.

In the late Fall of 2010, a leading consumer products brand invested in a multi-tiered sports marketing program in partnership with an NFL team and one of their sports marketing agencies. The program included a series of in-game promotional messages that included an interactive, fan participation component on the main video scoreboards during the game. In addition, supplemental marketing messaging was delivered to a variety of auxiliary scoreboards that lined the bowl of the stadium. As a final component, sample product was distributed to one of the stadium seating sections as a result of the interactive promotion and this was announced over the public address system. Both the sponsoring brand and the property sought to better understand the impact of their specific onsite activation in transforming the target audience's brand perceptions within the client's relevant competitive set of products. By understanding these brand associations across a wide array of desired brand triggers and within the proper competitive context, the research would become not only about determining how a program worked, but about understanding which message points were resonating and which need greater amplification. Hence, this symbiotic partnership between the property and client could ideally be enhanced and future activation efforts could be refined, accordingly. In essence, the research would become as much a springboard for future activation as it was an ROI scorecard. All parties could benefit.

Sports and Leisure Research Group deployed a field team of interviewers on-site, at the above referenced NFL game. A sufficient number of survey interviews were conducted both with a control group, of "unexposed" attending fans, prior to the in venue marketing activation and after the game with an identical number of fans "post-exposure". This research sampling methodology allowed for statistically valid respondent cells that enabled SLRG to analyze differences in brand recall, awareness, association with key brand attributes and perceived favorability across those in the market who were exposed to the brand activation both before (pre game interviews) and after (post-game interviews) exposure.

Respondents were randomly selected and both the pre-and post game surveys were similar in design, eliciting open and close-ended awareness and perceptions of the sponsor under study and its competitive set across a variety of brand attributes and message points. In the post phase, a series of open and close-ended awareness and recall questions were also included. To protect against brand bias, survey questions were posed in a blind/brand agnostic way. Where appropriate, broad "likert" scales to evaluate agreement with various attitudinal statements were deployed and multiple versions of each survey were used to rotate questions and brand, thus eliminating potential order bias. The study's areas of inquiry included

- Overall demographics and fan characteristics.
- Aided and unaided brand awareness within the sponsor brand's category

- Overall awareness and association of the competitive set brand's activation at the event.
- Usage, perceptions and contextual evaluations of the test brand category and the actual competitive set.
- Overall awareness and association of the test brand's marketing positioning and key brand attributes within the space
- Purchase behaviors within the sponsor brand's category
- Fan experience with and perceptions of the test brand's products and services in comparison with those of competitors across key brand attributes.
- Use of brand identity agreement scale statements across the competitive set, to include relative rankings of each brand's ability to deliver a wide range of "brand personality" traits derived directly from desired positioning

The study results were quite compelling. By comparing the pre-exposure and post exposure findings, the research team and clients were able to evaluate and quantify the direct impact of the in venue activation in lifting sponsoring brand awareness and proper perceptual associations. Of course, not all of the key message points were as resonant as others, and the results also varied across certain key demographic subgroups attending the game. Armed with this insight, all parties involved were able to objectively measure the ability of sports marketing to create a positive lift in attitudes and understanding. Further, the research findings were also impactful in enabling all parties to make necessary adjustments to subsequent game specific promotions.

This case study is just one of many similar projects that firms like Sports and Leisure Research Group engage in. By adding a thorough and appropriate layer of measurement onto sports marketing programs, teams, brands and their agencies can become more effective in leveraging the opportunities present in an increasingly fragmented marketing environment. Smart marketing research can be the engine that informs these critical decisions and maximizes return on sports marketing investment.