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Define Sports Marketing Success Before You Measure It

by Jon Last, Tuesday, June 14, 2011 6:58 AM

Demonstrating accountability and ROI continue to be front and center among the demands placed on sports marketers in justifying their investments. Yet, I continue to be underwhelmed by the means with which many of us attempt to assess and measure the impact of these investments.

I've used this space, in the past, to espouse some of my strong convictions about how measuring the wrong things can lead to improper conclusions that force both sponsors and rights holders into a commoditized box that unfairly pits sports marketing against traditional media.

At the risk of belaboring that point, ask yourself whether the ways in which you place a valuation on a sports marketing opportunity is still driven primarily by some form of gross impressions equivalent. And while I've made the argument that an affirmative answer to that question stops way short of truly understanding the value of sports marketing, my goal this month is not to further berate those who limit their ROI calculations to measuring eyeballs. Rather, I'd like to reflect more on what may be the root causes that inhibit us from "reaching beyond reach."

First and foremost, the simple and utterly disappointing answer might be that calculating and comparing reach is how things have been done for years. Research of this type has often been subjugated as a "necessary evil" or a threat to the ability to sell (or buy) something, that the path of least resistance is to just calculate opportunistic exposure, provide a means to justify the cost of that exposure relative to traditional media and move on to the "fun stuff" like building a micro site, developing the cool mobile app or planning the onsite hospitality footprint and sampling promotion.

It's conceptually easy to measure exposures and calculate a cost per exposure. It harkens back to the familiar days of mass media while translating nicely into our new media world where CPMs can be equated to costs per click, page views, exposure time, hits and unique visitors. But easy doesn't make it right!

I'd still argue that measurement of "engagement" and the ability of sports marketing programs to shift a target's levels of awareness, understanding and brand perceptions are infinitely more appropriate measures than simply counting impressions, even though I acknowledge that absent well constructed measurement tools, one can still draw misleading conclusions.

But that aside, the "conceptual commonality" and ostensible ease of cross program reach measurement and comparison may not be the only reason why more sports marketers haven't dug deeper. Rather, I'd suggest that in lockstep with the proliferation of truly innovative and exciting new ways to reach a target through sports, our fascination and desire to jump ahead of our competition into the "next big thing", has led us to forget another old school nemesis that holds us back from proper measurement We haven't aligned measurement with a clear definition of sports marketing objectives!

One of the first questions that we always ask clients, circles back to the very definition of sports marketing success. Typically, when one scratches below the obvious generalities (to position the brand, move product, grow awareness, etc.) specific definitions of success are truly unique for each and every sports marketer and property, thus requiring thoughtful customized measurement design.

If all you are after is impressions, without regard for their impact, then by all means, count eyeballs and be done with it. But as the vision of society that George Orwell depicted in *1984* is now here, albeit 27 years later than predicted, I'm convinced that most sports marketers need to go beyond that. When you do, you might actually be happy with what you learn.

0 comments on "Define Sports Marketing Success Before You Measure It".

Seth Leeds from **Sponsorium** commented on: June 15, 2011 at 9:21 a.m.

Bravo Jon. This is the exact message that Sponsorium gives to it's nearly 300 worldwide clients. We provide them with an evaluation tool and sponsorship portfolio dashboard (all web-based) that I think you'd be interested in. Hope we can connect.

Jim Morrison from **Jim Morrison, LLC.** commented on: June 15, 2011 at 12:29 p.m.

Jon, You hit on a very important point. Success in sports marketing depends on a strategy/objective to ignite a dialogue with fans "through" a sport. Ex: as Coke does so brilliantly with The World Cup. Measurement, engagement and association with sports has to go beyond participation in the logo-fest that clutter many sporting events today.