Sponsorship management guide

From managing sponsorship requests to exiting an agreement

by elevent

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Any sponsor will tell you that most of the requests that they get online don't meet their sponsorship policy criteria. What if there was a way to automatically sift through all of the requests to get rid of the non-contenders and only keep the gems?

INTRO-DUCTION

The health crisis has directly impacted the entertainment sector, with sponsorship expenditure down an estimated 30% for 2021. That said, sponsorship agreements are signed over a long period of time and are **not hugely impeded by recessions**, as demonstrated by the very slight drop in sponsorship spending between 2008 and 2009.

On the other hand, we should expect to see a sharp rise in sponsorship and donation requests soon, which are likely to overwhelm corporations under pressure to cope with the demand, given their more limited resources, including smaller teams and shrinking budgets.

This will lead to major shifts in many brands' sponsorship strategies, which have historically remained very stable. A change in strategy means a different sponsorship policy, which acts as a guiding light for decision-making in selecting the right recipients for sponsorships and donations.

As sponsorship spending increases, contracts, proper measurement and financial attribution become bigger and more pressing concerns for marketers. Despite the continued growth of investment in sponsorship marketing in North America and a growing need for improved ways to measure its impact on business, little progress has been made to this end.

Marketers are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate results: the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) and the Marketing Accountability Standards Board (MASB) joined forces to provide deeper insights into sponsorship measurement. The results speak for themselves.

Sponsorship budgets are put under the microscope

- 96% of marketers stated that it is important for them to understand the impact of sponsorship vs. other marketing expenditures.

The impact of sponsorship on business

- 57% of respondents have a sponsorship measurement budget. But only 37% of these have a standardized process for measuring the return on sponsorship investment.

Navigating uncertain waters

This guide offers insights into everything from sponsorship policies and how to manage sponsorship requests: from the selection process and refusals to the impacts of changing properties.

Since 2013, Elevent's mission has remained the same: to advance sponsorship measurement with a mix of practical expertise, research and technology.

One of our key learnings is that measuring the impact of sponsorship requires a mix of deep industry knowledge combined with sophisticated tools and technology. That means harnessing the insights of both humans and machines to capture all of the nuances required to provide our clients with world-class recommendations.

FRANCIS DUMAIS
ELEVENT COFOUNDER

Why you need a sponsorship policy (especially now)

By Francis Dumais, Partner, Elevent

While past financial crises have barely made a dent in sponsorship expenditure (chiefly due to ongoing agreements), this pandemic has impacted the entertainment industry like no other calamity in recent times. As shows, festivals and sports ground to a halt, many brands had no other choice but to axe activations and slash their budgets, ending decades of growth for sponsorship as a whole.

Fewer resources and an influx of funding requests

Not only have large sponsors cut back on spending in the short term, but a quick peek at LinkedIn provides clues as to the extent of the damage suffered by the entertainment industry. Properties of all categories have been severely affected by the current situation, which means that rights holders and non-profits will be in dire need of financial backing.

Many surveys have been conducted since the start of the crisis, but with the data shifting rapidly from month to month as the health crisis unfolds, these studies have limited validity. That said, there is a consensus among industry professionals that there will be a drop in sponsorship revenues for 2021 until the vaccination rollout is complete.

An Elevent survey[1] conducted among a sample of 150 industry professionals in May 2020 found that:

- In the short term, sponsorship budgets are expected to decline by 37% on average for 2020
- 47% of properties declared that it was currently difficult to retain sponsorship revenues and 86% said that it was either difficult or very difficult to sign new agreements

The SponsorshipX Covid-19 Study[2] conducted among 76 sponsorship professionals in June 2020 found that:

- Sponsors expect a 27% reduction in rights fees investments for 2020
- The activation spend is expected to be slashed by 49%

[1] Elevent, L'INDUSTRIE DE LA COMMANDITE FACE À LA CRISE SANITAIRE DE LA COVID-19, May 2020

[2] SponsorshipX, "Covid-19 and sponsorship", June 2020.

The data points in the same direction, confirming that there will be a reduction in sponsorship budgets in 2020 with the trend expected to continue in 2021.

On the other hand, we do expect to see a sharp rise in sponsorship and donation requests, which are likely to submerge corporations that will have to manage the increase in demand with smaller teams and shrinking budgets.

The result of all this? Brands will be undertaking major shifts in their sponsorship strategies, which historically have been very stable. And a change in strategy means the need for a new sponsorship policy, which acts as a guiding light for decision-making when it comes to selecting the right sponsorship partners and donation recipients.

Creating a new sponsorship policy means understanding the role of sponsorship within the organization and how it contributes to the overall business objectives. Having a clear sense of this significantly streamlines the decision-making process, and has never been more relevant than in these unprecedented times.

Sponsorship policy

Not so long ago, sponsorship was largely influenced by executive preferences. While this hasn't completely disappeared—discretionary funds do still exist, after all—the decision-making process is now more rigorous and professional. But because many companies haven't managed to clarify how sponsorship advances the company's objectives, their strategic foundations are on pretty shaky ground.

Thankfully, the perception that sponsorship is an extravagance—in part, due to its focus on entertainment spaces, hospitality budgets, and highly visible events—is fading. But the fact remains: sponsorship is under scrutiny. Decisions must be held to high standards, as they often need to be justified to the finance department, company executives, the board and even shareholders.

That's where a strong sponsorship policy comes in, as it rallies the entire company around guiding principles and is the first step in good sponsorship governance.

Where to start?

First, managers have to turn their attention inward to conduct an audit of the company's practices, challenges, and corporate, marketing and communication objectives. Though it may seem obvious, this step is too often overlooked. This is the time have discussions with various relevant stakeholders, from the investors all the way down to the first-line employees.

From there, it's necessary to take a closer look at the current portfolio and sponsorship practices to determine where the starting point is. Should the partnerships be changed altogether or should the properties simply be better informed of the company's objectives?

With the majority of partnerships requiring category exclusivity—meaning that only one brand can be aligned with the property per type of product (insurance, soft drinks, car, etc.)—it is imperative to take into account what the competitors are doing in the sponsorship landscape. That will help determine which space is available for your brand. For instance, if hockey is already highly saturated, it may make sense for a company to differentiate itself by aligning with music events.

Finally, a company needs to identify the opportunities in the market, ensure that they are aligned with their corporate objectives, and establish KPIs to be able to track the performance of their sponsorship investments.

In summary, here's a quick overview of the key steps required to create a sponsorship policy:

1. An audit of the company
2. Interviews with various stakeholders
3. Interviews with some of the main properties
4. Identification of the company's objectives and the role of sponsorship
5. A competitive review
6. An opportunity audit
7. Identification of the best opportunities
8. Identification of key performance indicators to measure success

The two-fold role of a sponsorship policy

A sponsorship policy is a bit like a coin: it can be flipped one way to let the public know what you, as a company, care about, and it can be flipped another way to serve as an internal guide to help select worthy partnerships that are aligned with corporate objectives.

In the end, the process of establishing a sponsorship policy—with its inherent need to clarify corporate goals, understand what constitutes a good fit, etc.—is often just as useful as the document itself.

A final note

While this current health crisis and the upcoming recession will certainly be a rough ride for many of us, the relevance of sponsorship will not disappear. It achieves goals that advertising and digital tools alone never can: it's essentially the handshake with the consumer. And that, too, will come back.

Say no to the show

How to handle sponsorship requests and refusals

Some people have a hard time saying no. But, when it comes to sponsorships, it's part of the routine not only for big sponsors, but also for smaller, local businesses that might have to refuse distributing money to members of their community.

It's easier to say no to sponsorship opportunities when you have a well-structured and strategic program. It's all about finding the right properties that align with your specific objectives—and knowing how to turn down offers with a little finesse to avoid any resentment building up with potential customers and influencers.

The whole process of rejection can seem harsh, but there are a few simple tools that will make it easier for both you and your prospective sponsor. Here are three steps that you can implement to better manage sponsorship requests.

1. Evaluation

Sponsorships, even on a small level, must serve a purpose. Otherwise, it is pure charity. If you haven't done so, start by defining a series of objectives that you'd like to achieve with a sponsorship, be it awareness, enhancing your brand image, motivating employees, generating sales or increasing purchase intent.

Then, outline the criteria that the prospective property must fulfill to attain these objectives. For example, if you want your brand to appeal to young people, choose a property that conveys cool and rebellious attributes. Research shows that the brand characteristics of a property will spill over to the sponsor. This "image transfer" as it is called, is, of course one of the desired outcomes of sponsorship.

According to sponsorship experts, a good fit between your brand and the sponsor will generally lead to a more positive sponsorship outcome. An example of a strong sponsorship fit would be a motor oil company sponsoring a racing team or a running shoe brand teaming up with a marathon. Associations like these will positively affect recall, image transfer and even purchase intent scores. Reflect on how the proposals you're receiving could align with your brand's product and services.

You can then use a simple checklist with the desired attributes to evaluate a property. The more proposals you evaluate, the easier the process will become. With time, you'll instinctively be able to pick out the most interesting properties from the lot.

2. Benchmark

With a first screening process, you might eliminate 80% or

more of all the requests you receive. You then need to evaluate the remaining requests against your existing properties. Will the addition of a new partnership enhance your portfolio? Will it complement it and sit well with your other sponsorship partnerships? Furthermore, does your company have sufficient resources to devote to a new deal, be it in terms of budgets or staffing?

At this point, there are two things to consider: could you enter into a partnership in the future if resources do become available? Is there a risk of a competing brand getting involved and eliminating all future possibilities of a partnership? In the first case, you can leave the door open by inviting the property to contact you again the following year or in the event that another sponsor expresses interest. In the latter case, you may want to consider signing a deal with lower rights fees or signing on for a year with multiple options.

To do all of this in a more efficient manner, you can turn to tools that automate sponsorship management and communication, such as BrickRoad by Elevent.

3. Just say no

Since you'll probably end up rejecting most of the proposals you receive, you need to manage expectations from the get go. If you're part of a larger organization, odds are that you'll also have to manage colleagues' expectations as well. Being transparent about sponsorship objectives and your selection criteria will help you deal with both groups.

A good course of action is to create a section on your website that's dedicated to sponsorships. You can include an overview of your sponsorship policy and include specific niches in which your organization is involved (i.e. saving dolphins, local soccer associations, etc.). By inviting properties to review this section, you can eliminate some requests at the source. If you have more limited means, consider creating a dedicated email with an auto response that outlines your criteria and provides timelines for when applicants can expect an answer. All of these tools are designed to manage expectations and prepare the properties for potentially negative feedback.

The actual rejection letter should be a template to help you process the numerous demands, but some degree of personalization is desirable. You can put the prospective sponsee in your shoes, for example, by talking about the large number of requests and the limited resources in place to accept them all. You can also explain that your choices are guided by specific objectives and clear strategies. This should help eliminate repeat demands from the same property.

You might feel overwhelmed by the number of requests you get. But with a little help you can manage the flow on a daily basis and be done in minutes. Of course, there will be the occasional sponsorship salesperson who won't take no for an answer. As annoying as that may be, on the flip side, you can also find an unexpected unicorn in the mix.

One thing's for sure: you'll never get bored.

Filtering hundreds of donation requests

The Canadian Tire Case Study

Context
In these trying times, health care workers and community organizations are under huge pressure to bring relief to the thousands affected by the current public health crisis. Many companies have stepped forward to start manufacturing medical equipment and others are providing materials and making financial donations.

Canadian Tire, a proud Canadian retail company, announced that they were setting up the Canadian Tire COVID-19 Response Fund to give $5 million to help frontline healthcare and community workers across the country.

The fund consists of two donations of $1 million each to the Canadian Red Cross and United Way Centraide Canada, as well as up to $3 million in personal protective equipment (PPE) and essential products.

Challenge
Canadian Tire needed to set up an online filtering system to evaluate and respond to all requests as quickly as possible.

They expected to receive hundreds of applications and needed a simple solution to identify the donation requests that matched their selection criteria.

Time was of the essence. Frontline medical workers and community organizations were waiting. Canadian Tire needed a tool that could be ready in 48 hours.

Solution
Elevent repurposed BrickRoad™, our sponsorship request management software, into a custom donation request form for the Canadian Tire COVID-19 Response Fund.

The bilingual form is short but carefully constructed. Before filling it out, applicants have to read a summary of the program's guidelines. This helps manage expectations and reinforce the 'why' of the program.

Applicants are able to describe their projects in fewer than five questions, enabling Canadian Tire to receive the data they need to make quick and informed decisions.

Applications that do not meet the minimum criteria are not manually reviewed. BrickRoad™ sends an automatic response to the applicant a few hours after the receipt of their submission, effectively ensuring that no requests go unanswered.

As soon as the form was ready, Canadian Tire sent out a press release highlighting the urgency of the situation and set up a landing page on their website to explain their commitment to the crisis and the objectives of the Canadian Tire COVID-19 Response Fund.

Our repurposed system is performing smoothly and has proven extremely effective in accommodating the sudden increase in requests.

Having the right reflexes when a sponsorship contract is up for renewal

Though sponsorship contracts must respect general contractual rules dictated by local regulations, each contract follows, to a certain degree, the directives of the parties involved. Even so, when a sponsorship contract is up for renewal, there are a number of good basic practices to follow.

Be aware of deadlines

Termination and renewal clauses and even the right of first refusal often have specific deadlines that the parties must respect in order to exercise their rights. Generally, these clauses state that one party must send the other party a notice a certain number of days, weeks or months before the end of the contract. Such deadlines are critical, as the failure to send the required notice on time can result in contractual clauses being automatically modified or in the contract coming to an end or renewing automatically.

Automatic renewal doesn't mean identical renewal

Be attentive to automatic renewal clauses, as they don't always state that the contract will be renewed with the exact same terms and conditions. In fact, with a clause of this kind, the contract can be renewed for a shorter or longer period than the initial duration of the contract, fees can go up, and the obligations of the parties can change. It is therefore important to read the automatic renewal clause carefully so you're not caught off guard.

The relationship is working… for now

When a business relationship between two parties has been established for a while and they are both comfortable with the way the partnership is being managed, it can be tempting to minimize the importance of the contract and let it expire, thinking that the relationship between the parties will continue to go well. Never forget that the contract forms a legal agreement between the parties. If the relationship falters and the contract that was up for renewal is terminated, is automatically renewed with conditions that one of the two parties doesn't agree with, or the deadline to apply the right of first refusal has passed, the parties can find themselves in an uncomfortable situation.

This leads us to our next important point.

Seize the opportunity

Why not take advantage of the contract renewal as an opportunity to reinforce the relationship between both parties? If the parties have developed certain ways of managing their relationship that don't appear in the initial contract or that are different from the contract, the renewal process can be an opportune time to make modifications and add clauses that better reflect the real agreement between the parties, which will go a long way toward avoiding problems in the future.

It's also a great opportunity to re-evaluate each party's risks and advantages and to negotiate the necessary changes so that everyone is happy for the duration of the next term.

In any case, don't let your sponsorship contract gather dust in the bottom of a drawer until a problem arises. And remember to read termination clauses, renewal clauses and right of first refusal clauses very carefully.

While you may want to go on automatic pilot when renewing long-term partnerships, remember that it's THE moment to reassess the relevance of the partnership, the price point, the asset mix and, most importantly, the contribution of the partnership to the company's objectives and, ultimately, its bottom line. At the end of the day, the sponsorship's contribution to the business must be clear. And each property in a portfolio has to play a role when it comes to reaching specific objectives. Much like investing.

How to exit a sponsorship

You spend years building a partnership between a brand and a property and then for various reasons—objectives not being met fast enough, lack of vision at the management level, a changing of the guard or simply the strategic realignment of a scattered portfolio—the time comes to call it quits.

No matter how good the reasons are for leaving, every brand needs a solid exit strategy. There are multiple players involved, from the property to the media to fans and the general public, and their reactions should not be underestimated. You don't want to run the risk of having years of hard work crumble with a single news story.

NO MATTER HOW GOOD THE REASONS ARE FOR LEAVING, EVERY BRAND NEEDS A SOLID EXIT STRATEGY.

The property: a plan

Announcing your exit can hit the property like a ton of bricks. It can generate a lot of insecurity, most notably regarding the securing of new sponsors and the fact that the financial engagements of events are often made far in advance.

The key is to give the property a good heads up, ideally more than 10 months prior to the event, so that it has sufficient time to make the necessary adjustments. A common reflex is to wait for the contract to come to an end to avoid any discomfort between the two parties, but it's best to prepare your exit as far in advance as possible. That helps keep bad press to a minimum and gives you the time to end the partnership on the best possible terms.

Announce the news in person.

This will prevent any bad blood between the two parties and keeps negative comments from being made on the public stage. Then follow up with written confirmation and be sure to copy all administrators. Never lose sight of the fact that a sponsorship is a business deal between two organizations and is a contractual agreement. Written proof of the sponsorship ending will prevent any ambiguity when it comes to renewal clauses, option clauses or the right of first refusal (which can go beyond the end of the contract).

A divestment plan can serve as a good middle ground for both organizations. For example, when the property is delivering positive results, the brand can progressively pull back over two or even three years, slowly diminishing its status as a sponsor. It's also possible to keep only the assets that are valuable for the company. For example, if you don't want to maintain visibility across the entire site but you do want to pursue business development initiatives, you can continue to run a hospitality program. The inverse is also true if it becomes difficult attracting clients to the corporate box. With such an approach, you can issue a clear press release indicating a change in the investment level or status without having to manage a total exit—a compelling option if you're a title sponsor or the presenter of an event.

PR and media go hand in hand

Media outlets looking for a sensational story could be eager to jump on news of a sponsor exiting an event. Have a PR plan in place before you even announce the news to the property. Your message will be more credible if it's controlled by a third party, and you can share your plan with the property so it too can communicate a positive message. Another good reason to maintain a healthy relationship even as you're backing out.

The fans: a positive tone

With any sponsorship, fans are the ones you're trying to reach. There are two possible strategies when exiting a partnership: thanking fans directly for their support or taking a more corporate tack. Generally speaking, the arrival of a brand partner on the scene causes more upheaval than its departure. What's more, the public has become accustomed to brands rotating in and out when it comes to big events. The bigger risk is if the exiting sponsor leaves the property in a vulnerable position with regards to its future, as can be the case with more niche cultural and regional organizations.

What if you are exiting several properties?

The major divesting of several regional properties or a large-scale exit can have a far greater effect on the brand sponsor than if it's backing out of only one property. In such circumstances, it's a good idea to let the blade fall swiftly rather than to stretch out the bad news over a long period of time.

Some key elements to keep in mind when exiting a sponsorship:

- Let the property know as soon as possible to maximize its chances of securing new sources of revenue
- Notify all of the interested parties in writing to avoid any ambiguity regarding option clauses and the right of first refusal in the sponsorship contract: these clauses are often open to interpretation
- Task internal teams or an agency to build a communications plan or a contingency plan for public relations and social media
- Remember that you will continue to be associated with the property for a certain period of time (the effects of sponsorship can last several years after the sponsor exits)
- From a public relations standpoint, keeping communications to a minimum can be a favourable option when a sponsor exits because of a scandal

Despite the risk associated with exiting a sponsorship, it can be good for the brand. A case in point: British American Tobacco pulled out of its various disparate sponsorship activities and invested heavily in one platform: a new Formula 1 team that fits its communications objectives to a tee. Though it's easy to worry about the immediate impact of exiting and its negative consequences, the key for any brand is to make the best decision for the long term.

How fans respond to sponsors cutting ties with a property

Original article: And now, goodbye: Consumer response to sponsor exit, by Julie A. Ruth and Yuliya Strizhakova, 2012

All good things come to an end, and partnerships between sponsors and properties are no exception. Financing sponsorships is becoming an increasingly costly endeavour, and when a contract comes up for renewal, there are times when a brand decides to walk away. The results of the above study suggest that even if pulling out of a sponsorship is negatively perceived by consumers, brand sponsors can mitigate that response by paying special attention to how they announce the news and when they decide to make it public.

From objectives not being met to loss of profits, the reasons for ending a partnership are myriad. However, according to the results of the same study, it's best for a brand sponsor to clearly articulate its motives for pulling out without making reference to commercial concerns. That prevents any possible ambiguity when the media releases the story, and enables the sponsor to position itself as acting in the interests of the community. For example, when CA Technologies, a software corporation, ended its partnership with the World Golf Championships, the PGA publicly thanked the company for its involvement over the four previous years, during which time it not only supported the rich tradition of golf but also gave back to the community.

The consumer connection to the category can also reduce the negative perception towards the exiting sponsor. If a brand wants to leave on good terms, it's best to avoid ending the partnership prematurely. Fans generally express a degree of gratitude towards a brand that leaves after several years, especially if other partners are associated with the property. The future of the event isn't threatened, and consumer perception is less negative.

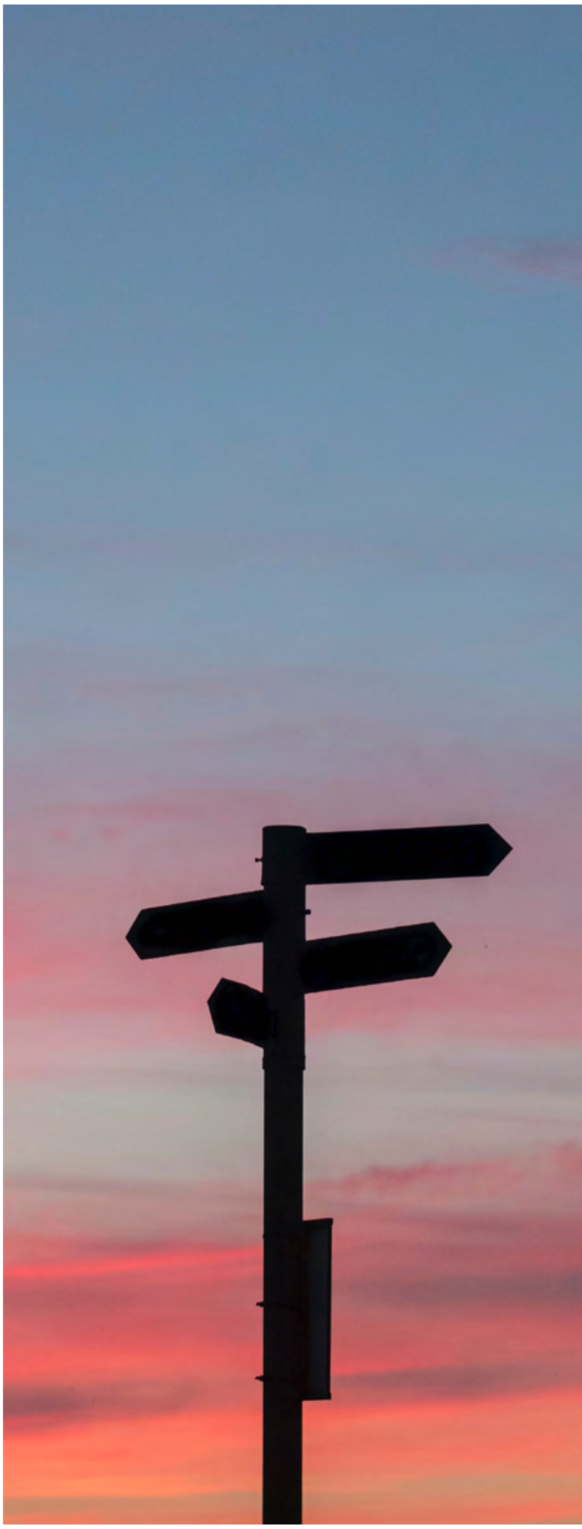
In short, if a brand wants to say goodbye to the fans of an event, it must take the following into consideration:

- **The duration** of its involvement: it's preferable to wait a few years before exiting an event to gain a certain level of recognition.
- **The number** of sponsors connected with the event: it's best to avoid leaving the property without support.
- Lastly, it's important **not to draw attention to the commercial reasons** for ending a partnership, especially on the public stage.

The implications of changing sponsors

This text is part of the series on the Science of Sponsorship, which introduces readers to university publications on sponsorship. It offers a summary of the article and highlights the impact of the findings on sponsorship management.

Original article: "Change in a Sponsorship Alliance and the Communication Implications of Spontaneous Recovery," by Anna R. McAlister, Sarah J. Kelly, Michael S. Humphreys, and T. Bettina Cornwell, Journal of Advertising, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 5–16.



When sponsorship deals are up for renewal, we often see a tide of change when it comes to the organization's partnerships. And that brings about a communications problem: the public continuing to associate the event with the previous sponsor.

Given that brand recognition is the key benefit of sponsorship, this is bad news for a new partner, and it has serious repercussions on how a property and a new sponsor approach the partnership.

This phenomenon is especially problematic when it comes to major sponsors, including title sponsors, but its effects are felt on all partners.

Former sponsors can cast a long shadow on the communications efforts of new partners. As a rule, new partners must understand that former sponsors will continue to benefit from the sponsorship even after parting ways with the property.

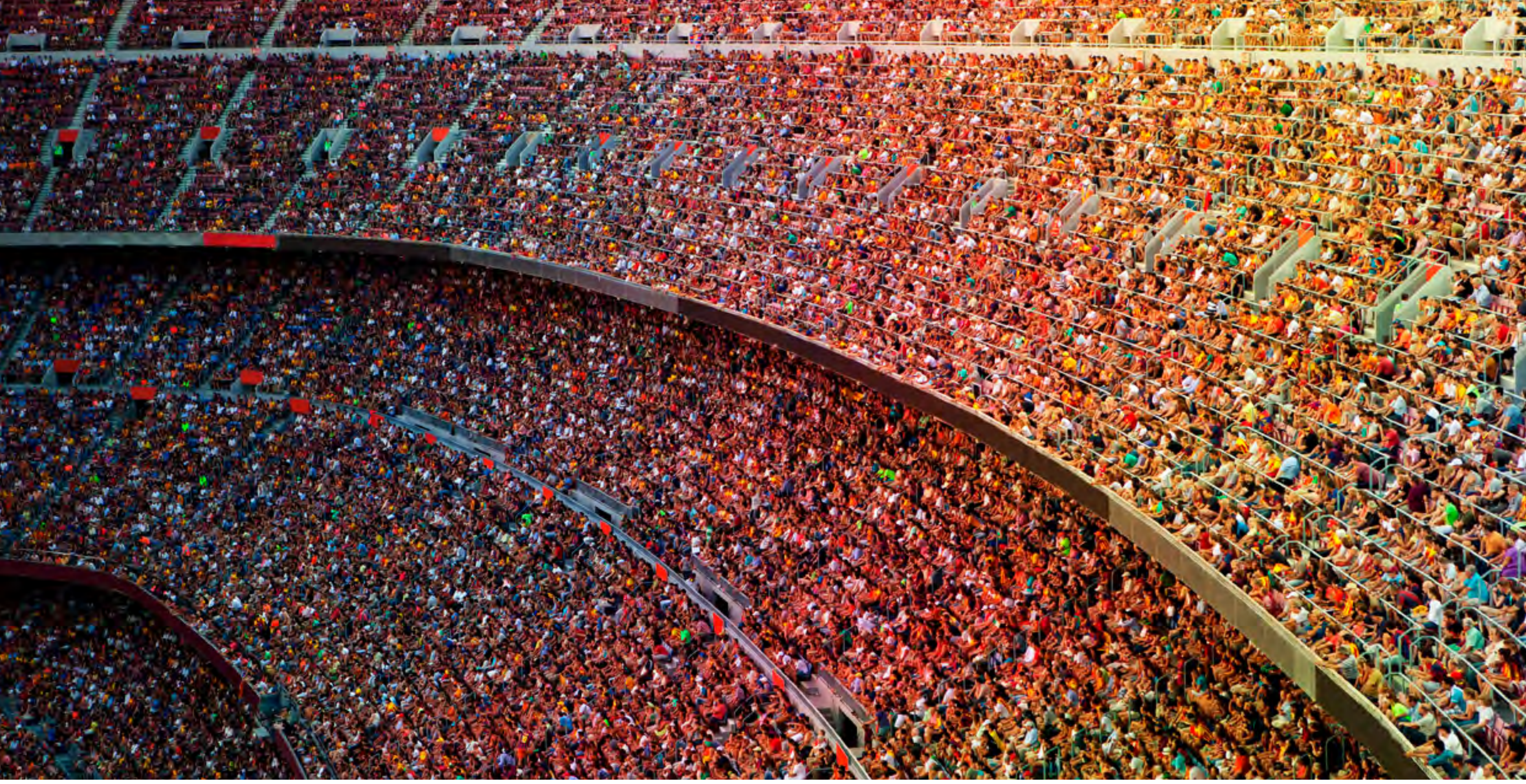
In fact, the longer the association with a property, the longer the effects of the association will last—up to seven years after the end of the partnership.

Key findings:

- The study notes that the first sponsor of a new annual event has increased equity.
- Becoming a lower level sponsor after being a title sponsor enables a brand to communicate and maintain the awareness of a more prominent partner.
- New sponsors are more susceptible to ambush marketing.

What to do:

- To overcome the phenomenon of erroneous association, new sponsors must develop a unique platform with the partnership.
- It's important to invest heavily in the activation and communicate with the public often to establish a connection between the brand and the property.



BrickRoad

An all-in-one solution for sponsorship managers and brand marketers

The number of organizations that have jumped into the sponsorship ring in the hope of growing their revenues has skyrocketed in recent years, resulting in an overflow of requests in sponsors' inboxes. This will be even higher as the health crisis has taken its toll on both the entertainment space and the not-for-profits.

ANY SPONSOR WILL TELL YOU THAT MOST OF THE REQUESTS THAT THEY GET ONLINE DON'T MEET THEIR SPONSORSHIP POLICY CRITERIA.

The illusion

Any sponsor will tell you that most of the requests that they get online don't meet their sponsorship policy criteria. Yet, even when there's never any chance that a company is going to sponsor a soapbox race, for example, the promoter still wastes a good hour answering the detailed questionnaire and the sponsor still loses valuable time having to read and decline the request.

80% fewer requests to analyze

At Elevent, we developed a tool called BrickRoad, which serves as the first litmus test in determining a request's fit. The result? Eighty percent of requests are weeded out right from the start, saving promoters who don't qualify from wasting their time and ensuring the fit of the remaining requests, which the sponsor can then go on to analyze. Bonus: the BrickRoad template can be adapted to reflect a company's brand colours, making it a seamless addition to an existing site.

A needs-based solution

A sponsorship policy, which sets out the criteria for building a sponsorship portfolio and selecting specific properties, is based on a company's communications objectives and sponsorship goals. It usually takes fewer than 20 questions to determine if a request is a good fit with a company's sponsorship policy.

Our tool generates questions to eliminate the requests that don't match the sponsorship criteria. The system is user-friendly and easy to manage: criteria can be added or modified with a few simple clicks, without the need for programming. It includes the option of sending an immediate notification to the promoter or an explanatory email at a later pre-determined date.

This tool has been designed by sponsorship marketers to simplify the process of filtering sponsorship requests. And that benefits both brands and promoters alike.

ABOUT

Strategy • Research • Online tools

Elevent's purpose is to develop solutions which help sponsorship professionals make informed decisions.
We are both consultants and creators of unique tools that facilitate the management and evaluation of sponsorships.

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