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Who said sponsorship was easy?

By Emy Casaletti-Bwalya, issued by Optimize Agency

24 Oct 2013

Bottom line is that it's not. It's one of the hardest things to do... successfully that is. There is little doubt that sponsorship works. It's a tried and tested vehicle to get to market. What's important to bear in mind though is that a lot of work needs to be done from all three sides: the sponsor, the rights holder and the agency.

A lot of corporates go into sponsorship with the wrong idea. They believe the property they buy will increase sales, their brand equity will improve and all their objectives will be met.



I like to equate sponsorship to marriage, the sponsor finds a rights holder who is compatible to their objectives and so they take the plunge. Once they are in the partnership, in many cases they realise all is not a bed of roses.

Their partner is demanding, they are not fulfilling their end of the bargain and they are not giving enough attention to what is important. The sponsor doesn't receive what they were expecting and so they end the union and swear never to get married again!

Like with marriage, as a sponsorship you need to be patient and need to believe that you get out as much as you put in. There is no point in having a sponsorship and not leveraging it.

You need to set aside at least 80c to each rand you spend to maximise and make the investment work for you. When you go out shopping for a property, don't budget just for the rights, make sure you have enough funding for double that, because without this you are virtually guaranteed a failed sponsorship.

Of course, there are times when the partnership is untenable, when your partner makes your life hell. Unfortunately, this is time to move out. When the partnership is damaging your brand, the sooner you end it the better.

But if you're in it, make sure you're in it for keeps. Make sure your entire corporation is involved from the receptionist to the CEO. It's no use spending millions of rands and not giving every effort possible to that project. It's a marriage of convenience that can achieve mutual objectives, so don't give up until you have given it your all.

Finding a sponsor is difficult for any discipline, keeping that sponsor is even harder yet. You need to nurture your commercial partner and ensure their happiness always.

Many rights holders believe that merely displaying the sponsors' brand on the contractual bits and pieces will do the job. Maintenance, innovation and over-delivery are key. Throw the contract away and surprise your partner with more than they are expecting.

Make them happy, be loyal, be single-minded. "Sponsor is King". Keep them updated with all your decisions and news, understand their business objectives and try your hardest to help them achieve them.

Regular updates and communication is vital. It's even worth hiring a bespoke manager to nurture and oversee the 'marriage' full-time. You must be at their beck and call.

On some of our international missions as FIFA marketing instructors to national football associations across the world, they believe that one visit from me will solve all their sponsorship problems.

They whine that sponsors don't want to invest in them and that the market is impossible to work in. My response is always the same: "Look at yourself and ask yourself why does no one want to marry you?"

In order to find a sponsor you need to make yourself attractive enough to find the right suitor. So the hard work starts. What do you have to offer? Are you 'sponsor-worthy'? Are you stable? Are you reputable? Are you honest and transparent? Is it worth taking the plunge with you? Find your unique selling proposition and work hard on growing this uniqueness.

Sporting codes should also be proactive in measuring their worth. Find quantifiable values to your rights so that you can place realistic prices on what you have to offer. A rights holder cannot pit their value based on a counterpart because they might be offering the potential sponsor rights that you might not have or own. Measure your worth and price yourself right.

So the hard work begins. Of course, results on the field of play count a lot, everyone loves a winning athlete or team, but the results off the field count for even more. Let the potential sponsor buy into your vision and your future, a sponsor can fall in love with a future winner a promise of success. Everybody loves the underdog with the potential to soar.

Be professional and constantly strive to under-promise and over-deliver on your sponsors' expectations. That way, coupled with measurable results, they will find it very hard to let you go.

Advertising and sports marketing agencies need to be alive and dynamic. Long-term contracts bring with them complacency. The idea that 'we did it like that last year, let's do it again this year', just doesn't cut it any more.

New innovations and ideas need to be forthcoming, sold and implemented. Understand the sport and the culture you are dealing with. So many advertising agencies have presented creative to us that is totally inappropriate for the sponsorship property in question.

Immerse yourself in the property you are working on. Live it, sleep it, eat it. Experience the event/sport/game like a fan. Get into the shoes of your clients' target market and come forward with relevant strategies that are do-able, not some far fetched creative ideas that look pretty but mean nothing.

There is nothing that can equate to the passion and emotions that sport evokes. Sport has the capacity to transcend race, colour, religion and even war. If it can achieve all of that, imagine what it can achieve for your brand?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emy Casaletti-Bwalya is CEO of Optimize.

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