Managing Sport Sponsorship Programs:
Lessons from a Critical Assessment of English Soccer

Following recent increases in the financial value of sport sponsorship programs, some commentators believe this has been accompanied by the development of sponsorship management practices. Despite this, there are still widespread concerns about some of these practices. This study therefore sets out to examine and comment upon the practice of sponsorship management from an English perspective, specifically in soccer. This is an area of sponsorship that has previously been examined and is a sport in which there have been significant commercial developments in recent years.

Using face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, 43 corporations provided information about their sponsorship programs. While there is some evidence of good practice, a continuing failure to effectively manage sport sponsorship programs is clear. The study thus concludes by making recommendations about the future development of sport sponsorship management.

INTRODUCTION

There have been dramatic recent increases in sponsorship activity with IEG (2002) estimating that worldwide sponsorship expenditure will soon hit $25 billion. In the United States, they valued the market at $10 billion, of which 70 percent was accounted for by sports sponsorship while in Britain Mintel (2000) indicated the total value of British sponsorships is $1.3 billion. Of the British total, approximately 55 percent was devoted to sport sponsorship programs. In addition, of the 589 leading sport sponsorship deals agreed in 2001, 209 were soccer-based sponsorships, and seven of the top-ten highest valued deals during the same period were accounted for by soccer sponsorships (Mintel, 2002). Given further growth of commercial sport and the development of new media opportunities, Chadwick and Thwaites (2004) have suggested that the importance of soccer sponsorship is set to grow even more.

In general, soccer shirt sponsorship contracts, which typically entail sponsoring corporations paying a fee in return for having their logos placed on team shirts, are entitled to advertise on playing field perimeter boards and gain access to a corporate box for the duration of the contract. Chadwick (2004) identified that such arrangements are generally viewed by clubs as little more than a readily accessible source of revenue. As such, the achievement of other objectives is, at most, of secondary importance, but in most cases is actually ignored. Hence, while generating revenue is not in itself a problem, it actually denies the achievement of broader, potentially more valuable, objectives for the clubs. Sponsors engage in soccer sponsorship deals with rather more sophisticated objectives (for example, generation of awareness, fostering attitudes and perceptions) (Thwaites, 1995). However, they also tend to adopt a conventional view of sponsorship—as a marketing communications tactic—rather than a relationship building, resource acquiring/developing, or networking strategy.

Given the growth of sponsorship activity and expenditure, Meenaghan (1998) explained that a more “hard-nosed” corporate attitude now under-
pins sponsorship decision making. Miles (2001) concurred, noting how corporations have been forced to address the professional management of sponsorship. The argument that sponsorship management practices are working well is seductive, but further examination of the evidence suggests otherwise. IEG (1999) expressed concerns that sponsorships are failing because corporations do not recognize that they are complex and challenging to manage, and Mintel (2000) identified that a failure to professionally manage sponsorships still poses a threat to their effectiveness.

Although there is some evidence of progress (for example, Harris, 2002), it appears that warnings are going unheeded by many corporations. Burton et al. (1998) and Thjomae et al. (2002) noted the continuing failure of managers to address management issues, while Cornwell and Maignan (1998) highlighted an ongoing failure to understand how sponsorships should be managed. Speed and Thompson (2000) explained there is much still to learn about sponsorship, and Hoek (1999) bemoaned the lack of development in management practice.

Opinion is therefore divided as to whether developments in sponsorship management have kept pace with the dramatic rises in its financial value. To clarify the situation in a British context, this study aims to investigate whether a more professional approach to the planning, strategic use, and implementation of sports sponsorship programs has been adopted. This is set in the context of earlier research in this area (Thwaites, 1995), which expressed concerns that such programs were poorly managed. It also takes place in a sport that has become more overtly commercial in recent years (Deloitte and Touche, 2002).

**METHODOLOGY**

This research study utilized the sponsorship management process model conceptualized by Irwin and Asimakopoulos (1992), which was modified in the light of Thwaites' (1995) earlier examination of soccer sponsorship. The study therefore examines sponsorship management practices across six stages (identiﬁed in Table 1).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight managers responsible for managing soccer sponsorships within corporations, the purpose of which was to identify salient issues. Managers were asked to identify key practical issues at each of the six stages noted above. The content of these interviews was analyzed and formed the basis for a postal questionnaire that was drafted, pilot tested, modiﬁed, and then dispatched. Prior notiﬁcation, assurance of conﬁdentiality, and altruistic appeal were subsequently used to maximize response rate. Questionnaires were dispatched to 43 out of the 44 sponsors (in the top two English professional leagues); 37 corporations responded, giving a response rate of 84 percent. Analysis of questionnaire responses was undertaken using SPSS. To generate insight into the questionnaires findings, ten in-depth follow-up interviews were undertaken with sponsoring corporations, during which respondents were asked to clarify and explain their questionnaire responses.

**FINDINGS**

A summary of the quantitative findings from this study is shown in Table 2. Further issues identiﬁed during follow-up interviews are incorporated in the commentary below.

**Objective setting**

The objectives of a sponsorship program can incorporate elements of marketing communications, relationship marketing, resource allocation, and networking. Despite claims of developments in management practice, the ﬁndings nevertheless show a widespread failure to pursue such objectives. Indeed, only 54 percent of respondents indicated that they set any objectives for their programs. In one sense, this could imply sponsoring corporations are pragmatic in their approach. That is, rather than enter into a relationship with a soccer club based upon a tangible set of targets, corporations adopt a more evolutionary style of management where objectives emerge. Evidence nevertheless indicates this approach is not at all prevalent.

One explanation for the failure to formulate objectives appears to rest in the timescale within which decision making takes place. Most soccer clubs are small businesses, employing few staﬀ, added to which has been intense pressure upon them to grow their income streams from sources other than sponsorship. This means sponsorship decisions have been relegated down the list of priorities and are often made at a late stage. In turn, sponsors are often approached very close to the start of a new season, meaning they agree to sponsor clubs very quickly and, as a result, fail to really address why they are engaging in such relationships.

This process is compounded by the role that sponsorship consultancies play. High pressure selling techniques, the widespread use of cold calling, and the promise of lucrative packages exacerbate the sense of corporate impulsiveness. Critics inevitably comment that corporations should not be seduced into deals they will not know what to do with. Yet this neglects the power that sport, and speciﬁcally soccer, has over some decision makers. What should be a rational economic decision sometimes therefore becomes a personal one, motivated by a desire to be associated with soccer. This need not be a bad thing: the beneﬁts of brand association and image transfer are accepted as pay-offs from a sponsorship deal. The problem is corporations appear either
### TABLE 1
Stages in the Sponsorship Management Process

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<th>Stage</th>
<th>Recommended Good Practice</th>
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| **Objective setting**        | • The sponsoring corporation should set specific/quantifiable objectives for a sponsorship program.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should use sponsorship strategically and tactically, and should set objectives that are consistent with these approaches.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should formulate objectives that reflect both broad marketing and marketing communications objectives.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should identify a range of target audiences for the sponsorship and formulated appropriate objectives.                                                                                                                                                      |
| **Screening and selection**  | • The sponsoring corporation should have in place a structured process through which sponsorship proposals are considered.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should ensure they are able to screen and select sponsor proposals on both a proactive and a reactive basis.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should screen and select properties linked to objectives and be able to employ tangible measures of effectiveness.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should be clear about the motives for engaging in a sponsorship deal.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| **Contract content**         | • The sponsoring corporation should ensure contracts reflect strategic thinking on their part.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should, when entering into an agreement, be clear about how the content of the contract will help to deliver their objectives.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should be careful to negotiate terms into a contract that will enable it to leverage the deal more effectively.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should, when negotiating a deal, communicate with a property or partner.                                                                                                                                                                                |
| **Execution of the deal**    | • The sponsoring corporation should employ a range of techniques to leverage the full value of the sponsorship contract.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should employ leveraging techniques that will enable it to realize the objectives for the sponsorship program.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should be aware that the contract with a property or partner may either constrain or facilitate effective execution.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should ensure there are clear and effective links between decision makers and those responsible for executing sponsorship programs.                                                                                     |
| **Evaluation**               | • The sponsoring corporation should ensure there is a clear link between objective setting and evaluation, with appropriate measures of effectiveness being employed.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should employ clear evaluation criteria that are communicated at the outset to everyone internally associated with the sponsorship program.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should be clear about what it is trying to measure and how this can be best achieved.  
  • The sponsoring corporation may need to employ a range of both quantitative and qualitative measures to generate an accurate evaluation of the program’s effectiveness.                                                                 |
| **Critical success factors** | • The sponsoring corporation should ensure that there is good communication within the organization and with the property or partner.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should strive to ensure the effectiveness of communication prior to, during, and after a relationship with the property or partner.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should ensure it makes full use of the sponsorship package.  
  • The sponsoring corporation should ensure that the full use of a sponsorship package is not simply restricted to contractual terms.                                                                                                                                 |
### TABLE 2
Summary of Findings from 2000 Study of English Professional Soccer Club Shirt Sponsors

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>N = 43</th>
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<tr>
<td>Response rate</td>
<td>84% (37 of 43 sponsors)*</td>
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**Objective setting:**

- Corporations setting specific objectives | 54%
- Respondents setting corporate level objectives:
  - Generate public awareness | 94%
  - Generate media attention | 93%
  - Enhance image of the corporation | 88%
- Respondents setting existing and new-product objectives:
  - Increase awareness levels | 93%
  - Reinforce target market perception | 86%
  - Increase sales leads | 80%
- Respondents setting public relations objectives:
  - Enhance business and trade relations | 77%
  - Improve employee motivation | 72%
  - Promote community involvement | 67%

**Screening and selection:**

- Based on local proximity | 71%
- Based on soccer club profile/status | 44%
- Existing relationship with a soccer club | 29%

**Nature of the selection decision:**

- Respondents proactively seeking properties | 39%
- Respondents reacting to an approach from a property or intermediary | 61%

**Contract content:**

- Respondents signing deals for one year | 22%
- Respondents signing deals for two or three years | 56%
- Respondents signing deals for four years or more | 22%

**Execution of the deal:**

- Respondents devoting no additional funding to leveraging activities | 24%
- Respondents devoting up to 25% of contract value to leveraging activities | 58%
- Respondents devoting between 26% and 49% of contract value to leveraging activities | 15%
- Respondents devoting 50% of contract value to leveraging activities | 3%
- Respondents devoting more than 50% of contract value to leveraging activities | 0%

**Evaluation:**

- Respondents employing post-sponsorship evaluation techniques | 44%
- Respondents employing pre- and post-sponsorship evaluation techniques | 56%
- Respondents using media recognition as the primary evaluation technique | 93%

**Critical success factors:**

- Good communication | 95%
- Full use of the sponsorship package | 90%
- Success of the club | 64%

*Although there are 44 soccer clubs in the top two divisions of English football, one club was without a shirt sponsor at the time of the study.*
unable or unwilling to quantify the effects that association can have. Evidence of this was apparent when corporations were asked to identify how they evaluated their sponsorships. A broader issue underpinning the decision-making process is that the sponsorship decision could therefore be regarded as irrational, unhinged from broader strategy. Yet it also implies that sponsorship might be more of a relational exchange, embedded within social interaction between corporation and property.

Even in cases where objectives were set, it appeared that most corporations adhered to a tried and tested formula. That is, sponsorship is a communication vehicle helping them to realize marketing objectives and entertain clients. What was really lacking was a sense that sponsorship can be used strategically. Moreover, there was a paucity of creativity and innovation, factors that can help corporations gain a competitive advantage over their rivals. Nevertheless, there were glimmers of hope. In one example of good practice, a recruitment consultancy has used their sponsorship to help it locate premises inside stadiums. This has been linked to profit sharing and joint decision making between the corporation and soccer club, and effectively helped the corporation to establish itself as the recruitment consultancy of choice for soccer fans.

**Screening and selection**

The main factors governing screening and selection decisions were the locality of the club in relation to the sponsoring corporation’s premises and the success of a club. The former confirms, for example, that enhanced public relations are important, the latter that the benefits of association and image transfer are significant. Philanthropy and the hobby motive appeared to impinge upon screening and selection process. For example, during one follow-up interview, a respondent indicated that his decision to sponsor a soccer team was based primarily on his support for that team and only secondarily on commercial considerations. One possible reason for this is a gender bias in sponsoring corporations where males control and allocate resources. One might say this is good targeting: more men watch soccer than women, male decision makers will know what they want, and the packages that are assembled around soccer sponsorships are intended to appeal to men. However, when some commentators are continuing to doubt management practices, one might ask if a more commercially aware female may be better at screening and selecting properties rather than a male soccer fan.

**Contract content**

The findings show the prevailing view is one of a sponsor signing a short-term contract that it subsequently does not renew. The follow-up interviews revealed this is partly the fault of soccer clubs. They are resource-driven, lacking market-orientation, and are constantly seeking bigger, better deals. But sponsor’s can only be strategically oriented in forging relationships if a partner is willing. Again, the seductive nature of an association with soccer comes into play: they may look good but soccer clubs often do not necessarily make good partners.

This raises questions about the nature of property selection by sponsors. What seems strange about the sponsor/club relationship is that the latter invariably behaves as though it is the customer. Once more, this reflects the balance of power in the relationship: if sponsors want to be associated with soccer, they have to dance to a club’s tune. This means they are forced into short-term deals, sometimes attached to very poor terms and conditions, and often with little chance of renewal.

But sponsors are not simple innocents, entering and leaving soccer at the behest of more powerful clubs. Many corporations like soccer sponsorship but they are not particularly committed, often because they are unsure what the longer-term benefits of it might be. This means they are happy to sign short-term contracts: they can leave if things go wrong, but it still gives them plenty of time to assess program effectiveness. This does perpetuate, however, a culture of “short-termism.”

Another notable feature of soccer sponsorship is what is left out of contracts rather than what is put in. Some sponsors think the placement of a logo on the team shirt is all they need to think about. Only when they get into a relationship do they realize that they should have adopted a more hard-line approach in negotiations. This is partly due to the power of the club and partly due to sponsor’s naivety. Whether seduced or bullied, many corporations repeatedly agree upon contracts, the terms of which are tipped in favor of clubs. The implication of this is that corporations need be aware of what sponsoring a club involves. But it may be that sponsors and clubs are simply failing to communicate with one another or that there is an abuse of power in relations between the two. The result is that many sponsorship contracts thus tend not to be imbued with any real sense of partnership.

**Execution of the deal**

There is an acceptance among sponsors that they must leverage a deal to ensure its effectiveness. Our findings show that 24 percent of respondents allocated no additional expenditure to leveraging activities, with 58 percent claiming they had only spent up to 25 percent of contract value. Although there are various recommendations that corporations should match contract value on at least a “dollar for dollar” basis, none of the respondents were
spending such amounts. Leveraging expenditure is frequently associated with television coverage and is linked to media recognition measures of sponsorship effectiveness. Although Miles (2001) explained how important media recognition is and how it can be measured, there nevertheless have been problems in the English market for televised sport. Television audiences have been small and forecasts of rapid growth in the digital market have not been realized. As such, one has to question whether leveraging a deal via, for example, television advertising is entirely appropriate.

In some respects, the extent and nature of leveraging activities used by soccer sponsors seems to be an area of relative strength but also potential weakness. Most sponsors do it, many spend a significant proportion of contract value on it and one interviewee professed to spending, "as much as it takes to get the most out of a deal." Despite this, sponsors still fail to match the "dollar for dollar" predictions, and there is a clear absence of creativity and innovation in formulating measures to extract maximum value from sponsorships. Although many sponsors seem to have spent lavishly on entertainment, for many it was the extent of their leveraging activities. In an interview with one sponsor, the actual extent of their creativity was to buy a costume for a mascot that was paraded in front of crowds before, during, and after games. The restrictive nature of such "initiatives" is telling, undermining the potential worth of the properties into which corporations have bought.

Yet sponsors are not helped by clubs; the engrained organizational culture of secrecy and competitiveness in English soccer, the failure of clubs to grant sponsor's access to players and other resources, and the tendency for clubs to see sponsors as adversaries does not help. Leveraging efforts are therefore being stunted by properties that should actually be helping to generate value for them. In some respects, sponsors further exacerbate this situation. Senior managers frequently undertake up-front activities such as screening and selection but then leave junior managers to make implementation and leveraging decisions. The nature of many sponsorship contracts is such that these juniors find themselves bound by restrictive terms over which they have no control. Moreover, they often have no sense of how important the deals are: senior managers make selections, and they are then left to implement and manage them. The notions of empowerment and of ownership, prevalent elsewhere in business, appear not to have infiltrated the domain of many soccer sponsors.

Evaluation
It is a contradiction but, despite the widespread absence of formal objective setting by soccer sponsors, a majority of them claimed they evaluate the success of their sponsorships. Moreover, the predominant evaluation tool is media recognition measures. Despite its limitations, a number of which are detailed elsewhere in this article, more than 90 percent of respondents indicated its use. In one sense, this personifies the failure to professionally manage the sponsorship process. Poorly thought through deals, characterized by impulsive property acquisition, appear to force sponsorship managers into a post hoc rationalization of their decisions. Even though they may never have had chance to think about why their corporation got involved in the first place, they are often forced to justify sponsorship deals.

Such a harsh view may mask some of the organizational and cultural issues facing sponsorship managers. The reality is that soccer sponsorship has to deliver benefits, and managers will therefore be asked to justify continuation, expansion or withdrawal, irrespective of their role in putting the deal together. In one interview with a sponsorship manager, this is an especially pertinent observation. The individual concerned was responsible for managing a sponsorship that had been agreed to and signed by a marketing director, without his knowledge. The marketing director had then passed responsibility on to a local branch manager to organize links and liaise with the soccer club.

Yet there are equally strong cultural forces influencing the evaluation process that undermine sponsorship management practices. To reiterate the point: soccer is incredibly popular in England. Sponsorship managers can thus assure themselves that their corporations will be recognized and that the benefits of association will be achieved. But this is naïve and probably explains the profusion of media exposure evaluation methods identified in this study. Another problem with the media-exposure technique is that many corporations actually state that corporate hospitality or employee motivation are as important, if not more important, than brand awareness and association. What use therefore are media exposure methods? Therein lies another indictment of management practice. The consensus emerging from the qualitative interviews is that one measures the success of a sponsorship deal according to how many people you entertain, not how many new customers have been acquired or retained. As for employee motivation, it would seem there is a general assumption that workers “just are” motivated by their employer’s association with a soccer team.

It may simply be the case that sponsors do not know how to evaluate properly, they may be lazy, they could be frightened by the statistical techniques needed to analyze feedback, or they might continue to believe the popularity of soccer
guarantees success. Evaluation may also be seen as expensive, time consuming, and too imprecise to be justifiable. The logic in this case would seem to be that sponsors need to take evaluation more seriously. But this clearly costs money, and sponsors therefore need to factor this in when calculating the cost of securing a property. The problem is that the market for top-level sponsorships is competitive, and this places a strong emphasis on cost-effectiveness. With limited budgets, when sponsorship managers are faced with a choice of spending on hospitality or high-level quantitative evaluation, they seem to opt for the former.

Critical success factors
Sponsors generally agree that good communication and full use of the sponsorship package are key success factors. In the light of this study, the need for communication does indeed seem to be an important ingredient in sponsorship success. But many soccer sponsorships are like short-lived marriages without a courtship, ultimately ending in an often acrimonious divorce. This is bound up in the power of the clubs, aware of their appeal, dictating terms to their sponsors. The selection decision for corporations thus often becomes a financial one, not one where you get to know your prospective partner and their culture, goals, and policies. In many cases, the findings showed little communication between sponsor and club actually takes place. Although the sponsorship managers who were interviewed expressed a willingness to engage in such a dialogue, clubs have often refused.

That sponsors make use of their sponsorship packages is clear, a fact borne out by their leveraging activities (such as associated media advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, etc.). But the semantics of this are telling: corporations tend to see sponsorship deals as short-term contracts with a finite life. This reduces relationships to little more than a contractual obligation, whereby two parties transact through an exchange of money and legal rights. It is also notable that "the package" is a generic term for a homogenous array of activities used to leverage sponsorship deals. The uniformity and general absence of creativity in this type of deal are striking, something likely to be borne out of contractual obligation. Such deals are generally seen as tactical marketing communications tools, not a form of strategic collaboration or relationship marketing. This also shows why corporations tend not to approach sponsorships with the long term in mind, and many do little more than move from one short-term contract to another.

MOVING SPORT SPONSORSHIPS FORWARD
Given proclamations of developments in sponsorship management practice, it would be pleasing to report that the English experience is consistent with this. However, the findings of this research do not provide grounds for optimism. There have been some minor changes in practice but evidence indicates little has changed in England. Sponsoring corporations continue to be guilty of unprofessional, short-term practices, and there is little to suggest that we are on the brink of any significant advances in the process of sponsorship management.

This is surprising because sponsoring the shirts of a soccer club can be hugely beneficial: people love the sport, and customers get to see names emblazoned across team shirts. But the sheer power of the sport actually seems to have constrained the development of associated sponsorship management practices. Corporations have been lazy in developing their managerial practices, seduced by the appeal of soccer, impulsive in responding to cold calling by agents acting on behalf of soccer clubs, and naïve in assuming that such sponsorships inevitably lead to tangible benefits. In one respect, such criticisms are rather harsh. The nature of the relationship between corporations and soccer clubs is one that is loaded in favor of the latter. Clubs are powerful, and they are prepared to exploit their position. If the practices of sponsors are expected to at least comply with conventional sponsorship management practices, then the balance of power within the relationship dyad needs to be redressed.

What is interesting about the relationship dynamic is that most soccer clubs are little more than small businesses with most consistently failing to make a profit and many lacking both commercial managerial competence and/or a marketing orientation. Contrast this with the profile of their sponsors: often large corporations, profitable, a much stronger sense of strategic direction, market led, and marketing oriented. In the light of this study's findings, it is clear that sponsors need to use the relative strength of their position to change the relationship dynamics. In particular, sponsors must ensure that clubs are more open and accountable in their relationship with them (many soccer clubs
Corporations have been lazy in developing their managerial practices, seduced by the appeal of soccer . . .

simply refuse to communicate with their sponsors), more receptive to leveraging the full value of the contract, and more oriented toward the market.

It is heartening to note that "president's whim" is an increasingly less important part of the sponsorship management process. The reality is, however, different; although the questionnaires dismissed its relevance, the interviews suggested the continuing influence of a president's support for their favorite club. This is a generalization because, while personal interest can be a sponsorship aim, there is now a much stronger commercial logic for presidents to align their hobbies with their business interests. The problem for sponsorship managers is that they are often left to justify and manage a relationship that may not have had a rational basis in the first place. A debate therefore needs to take place within sponsoring corporations about the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the sponsorship and the nature of communication that takes place between them. If a sponsorship manager is empowered to make sponsorship decisions, they need to be clear about why the corporation got involved with the soccer club in the first instance.

Soccer sponsorship is often made more palatable to sponsors if a club is successful on the field of play. This presumes a sponsor will achieve benefits of association, but this may not necessarily be the case. It also implies that sponsorship of a less successful or failing club will have negative impact. But our findings indicate this is not the case. There are some excellent examples of successful sponsorships where a club has failed to perform well on the field, but clubs and sponsors have still forged strong and effective links off it. This has reflected well on sponsors, enabling them to realize greater returns from their contracts than some more high profile deals. Screening, selection, and sponsorship management decisions therefore need to be about much more than the success of a team, or indeed the cost of acquiring a property. A clear sense of the impact a sponsorship can have, particularly if the deal is geographically localized, is important. Moreover, the criteria by which the success of a sponsorship is assessed equally need to reflect broader, long-term, and possibly less tangible outcomes.

To a large extent, this is bound up in the continuing view that sponsorship is a form of marketing communication with a short-term transactional focus. There appears to be a marked absence among corporations of the notion that sponsorships are business-to-business relationships or a form of relationship marketing. Hence, there has been a failure to address how to build strategic relationships with the clubs they sponsor, and almost no thought given to how they can acquire and retain valuable properties and the customers associated with them. In part, this reflects the resource orientation of soccer clubs and their preoccupation with short-term revenue generation. But sponsors seem equally happy with the short-term nature of their property acquisitions. The qualitative interviews also revealed an element of "silo thinking" among corporations who appeared unwilling or unable to work with others to leverage the full value of their sponsorships by adopting more creative approaches, including opportunities created by the development of new media. Many also seemed ignorant to the customer acquisition and retention opportunities their sponsorships generate for them.

An irony of short-term thinking is that many sponsors readily stated that they are committed to the properties with which they are associated. This implies that they have a long-term or strategic relationship with a business partner. Yet figures for the duration and renewal of sponsorship contracts indicate this is not the case. What the notion of commitment does imply, however, is that screening and selection should not just be based upon the on-field success of a club, but also upon the marketing orientation of a proposed partner, the organizational values partners share, and whether they trust each another. A related factor related to this is the timing of sponsorship decisions. The interviews suggested there are temporal dimensions to a sponsorship agreement that affect the extent of partner commitment to a deal: the length of time between first approach and signing of the contract, the current strategic compatibility of a sponsoring corporation and soccer club, and the interrelatedness of their corporate and marketing objectives all seem to play a part in the extent to which they commit to one another.

In this context, a broader basis to the formation and management of sponsorship relations would lead to the more effective leveraging of deals. Partners would be able to communicate more openly and work cooperatively in managing their partnership. On this basis, it is thus reasonable to expect that sponsorship management can become a more creative process, something notably absent in English soccer at the moment. Evidence from this study highlights the large degree of homogeneity between sponsor-
... a significant majority of sponsors acknowledge the importance of leveraging, although the problem is that nobody seems particularly sure how much they should spend on it.

ship contracts. The balance of power between clubs and their sponsors is such that the former may be responsible for this, offering “take it or leave it deals” that signal an absence of imagination. However, sponsors themselves must take some of the blame. A number of the sponsorship managers interviewed were either unsuitably qualified for their posts, lacked experience, or were disinterested in the medium.

This failure to take sponsorship seriously is also reflected in the somewhat blasé approach to leveraging expenditure. It is good to know that a significant majority of sponsors acknowledge the importance of leveraging, although the problem is that nobody seems particularly sure how much they should spend on it. One interviewee stated that his company spends “whatever it takes to make the sponsorship work,” while another indicated his company fixed a budget and “made it work,” irrespective of the actual performance of the sponsorship. In the same way that a rate of return calculation is applied as a measure of program effectiveness, so an indication of the ROI on leveraging expenditure would also prove useful in this context. Unsurprisingly, this is just one aspect of how best to evaluate sponsorship. The rigor of current evaluation practices is such that we must doubt how much corporations really know about what they are doing. At a time when other forms of marketing communication are developing, it is imperative that sponsorship reasserts itself. More professional and coherent evaluation practices, which illustrate the power of sponsorship, would help in this direction.

Given profit considerations, most evaluations tend toward generating figures for ROI. The problem in England is that there appears to be a marked reluctance to deal in figures. It is possible that a cultural phobia of numbers underlies this, but it need not be a problem as long as strong and legitimate qualitative measures are used as an alternative. But the reality in soccer is that this is not the case, and most qualitative measures rely excessively on “gut reaction.” Typically, this involves a sponsorship manager instinctively reporting back successes to decision makers. This dictates that evaluation is reflective and anecdotal rather than target driven and systematic. If sponsorships are to be taken seriously, the rigor and clarity of qualitative evaluation techniques thus need to be ensured. Added to this, a new spirit of openness in their relations with soccer clubs should be established to generate the data needed for a more systematic process of evaluation.

At a time when other forms of marketing communication are developing, it is imperative that sponsorship reasserts itself.

Based on the findings of this research, it appears that the good reputations of many sport sponsors are in danger because sponsoring corporations are:

• being driven by emotional and/or parochial sponsorship decision making;
• dominated by the smaller, less competent, and under-resourced properties that they sponsor;
• confused in their decision making, notably failing to maintain the connection between sponsorship decision makers at the strategic and operational levels;
• sometimes perceived of as being “glory hunters” (seeking associations with successful clubs) rather than organizations that seek a value adding relationship with an appropriate sponsorship partner;
• easily persuaded to enter into relationships with sponsorship properties they often know little about;
• one-dimensional thinkers, incapable of developing creative or innovative approaches to sport sponsorship;
• either quitters or half-hearted in their approach to sponsorship because they often seek to sign short-term deals with no intention of renewing their contracts and/or they routinely fail to allocate leveraging resources to ensure the maximum effectiveness of their programs; and
• attempting to measure sponsorship program outcomes even though many of them are not entirely sure what they are doing, both in terms of the measurement techniques available to them and the full range of outcomes that sport sponsorship can actually help deliver.
We therefore propose the following action points for sponsorship decision makers:

- Do not simply assume that sponsorship programs work—proactively manage them.
- Do not be seduced by the appeal of the sponsorship property—understand what it can do for you, how it will do it, and how your relationship with it should be managed.
- Remember that sponsors are the customers—they are paying the rights fee and properties need to contribute more than just shirt space to a deal.
- Sponsorship properties need sponsors just as much as sponsors need them—establish, build, and manage your deals as a partnership of equals.
- When making a sponsorship decision, rationality and whimsy may interplay with one another—but you must ultimately be clear what the deal will add to the bottom line.
- Sponsorship decision making is a corporate phenomenon, not a sporting one—liking sport is one thing, securing acceptable returns is something different (although both need not always be mutually exclusive).
- Sponsoring the best team does not ensure that a deal will be the best one for a sponsor—know why you have engaged and how your two organizations can work together.
- Do not view sponsorship as an exclusively short-term transaction—greater long-term benefits may be attainable from a closer, more strategic, network-related association with a property.
- Be aware of the balance of power within sponsorship relations—if a partner is more powerful than you are, they could exploit this for their own benefit.
- Leveraging deals is an important feature of sponsorship programs, but be creative—innovate, develop value-adding activities, and seek new media opportunities.
- Achieving bottom line returns from a sponsorship program is one thing, securing marketing communications objectives another, but be as visionary and creative in the way that you measure success as you are in the properties you secure and the way you manage relationships with them.

CONCLUSIONS

The sponsorship of English professional football clubs continues to be very popular among corporations. As such, the medium’s overall appeal is not in question, although this article justifies the need for more professional management of the activity. Moreover, the study confirms the need for corporations to think differently about sponsorship; unlike other forms of marketing communication, sponsorship has the potential to fulfill a much greater and more powerful strategic, network, and relationship marketing role. This is, nevertheless, dependent upon changes in the nature of power and the cultural foundations within and between the organizations involved in the soccer sponsorship dyad.

Bound up in this view is the need to move away from a short-term transactional perspective, the success of which is measured crudely and simplistically (for instance, cost of property acquisition, increase in sales, increase in customer awareness of brand). In conjunction with themes prevalent in other areas of marketing, the notions of marketing orientation, commitment, acquisition and retention, and generation of long-term value of a sponsorship deal need to be embraced. Moreover, these need to measured in different ways; for instance, a sponsorship may promote brand recall, but it may also help to facilitate technological developments and the creation of value-adding strategic partnerships.

Despite criticizing sponsorship management, a worthwhile footnote to this study is that the “professionalization” of it is still under way. The salutary note within this is that current managers should not believe the hype of inflated contract values over the last 10 years. That is, the financial values of sponsorships and developments in sponsorship management practices have not necessarily been commensurate. Interest in developments in practice continues to grow but, in soccer at least, the actual acceptance and use of a more professional approach continue to demand ongoing attention. The problem is that sponsors may not actually be to blame for the stunted development of managerial practices. Instead, it could be the fault of soccer clubs and the way they exploit their power and appeal. In which case, sponsorship has a distinct set of challenges that need to be addressed. For practitioners, managing sponsorships in this context poses some interesting questions that currently are not being answered. For academic researchers, it opens up a whole new stream of research, the major challenge being how to move understanding forward in the context of the obstacles detailed in this article.
REFERENCES


