Consumer Awareness of Sponsorship at Grassroots Sport Events

Kimberly S. Miloch and Keith W. Lambrecht

Abstract
As the nature and motivations of sponsors have evolved, sponsorship of grassroots and niche sport events has grown. The purpose of this research was to assess consumer awareness of sponsorship at a grassroots and niche sport event through an examination of recall and recognition rates and purchase intentions. Data were gathered using traditional methods of consumer awareness assessment. Recall and recognition rates in this study were comparable but somewhat lower than those noted in studies of Olympic sport or mega-sport events. Recall and recognition rates appeared to be influenced by location of signage, activation, and level of familiarity with the event. Age appeared to influence purchase intentions. Recommendations to increase sponsor awareness at this level of sport are provided.

Consumer Awareness of Sponsorship at Grassroots Sport Events
Grassroots and niche sports can best be classified as sports that are not mainstream and do not appeal to a mass audience. Rather, participants and supporters of these sports usually represent a niche demographic or a sub-segment of sport consumers. Examples of niche sports are diverse and include sports like tennis, lacrosse, bowling, fishing, curling, horse racing, and action or extreme sports like skateboarding. While no empirical studies have been conducted examining sponsorship of grassroots and niche events, a steady increase in participation and sponsorship of these sport events has been documented (Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2002; SGMA, 2005). Grassroots and niche sports like those mentioned above as well as archery, fishing, bowling, cycling, mountaineering, and snow sports have seen participation numbers increase in the last decade while participation in many team sports has declined (SGMA, 2005).

Grassroots and niche sport events include those hosted by state sport commissions or associations such as the Prairie State Games in Illinois. Operated by organizations attempting to target individuals at the most basic level of sport involvement, grassroots and niche sport programs often focus on participants as a primary target market rather than spectators (Parks and Quarterman, 2003). Oftentimes, sponsorship at these events is linked to lifestyle marketing in a direct attempt to reach a desired niche market. Grassroots and niche sport events allow sponsors to become involved with the activities that mean the most to their target consumer. Essentially, the goal is to associate a particular product with the lifestyle, beliefs, institutions, and culture of a target audience and to capture the market by tailoring products and promotional strategies to fit the target audience's recurrent patterns of behavior (Hanen, 1980; Michman, Mazze, & Greco, 2004; Schreiber & Lenson, 1994).

Participants and supporters of these events are arguably more identified and passionate about these particular sports than the average sport consumer and their participation and support has likely become an integral aspect of their everyday life. Because they are highly identified and because these events are likely integral to their lifestyle, it is possible that participants and supporters may be more likely than the average sport consumer to become aware and to purchase the products of sponsors associated with these events. The grassroots and niche sport participant and supporter may be...
different than the average sport consumer, and sponsorship awareness at this level warrants examination.

As the nature and motivations of sponsors has evolved, sponsorship of niche sport events has grown (Liberman, 2005). Special sport events and festivals have proven particularly advantageous at reaching niche markets for sponsors (Brenner, 2003; Lefton, 2004a; Lefton, 2004b; Liberman, 2004a; Liberman, 2004b; Liberman, 2004c). Grassroots sponsorship focuses on a local or regional market and although sponsors may reach fewer consumers at these sport events, the return on investment can be much greater (Brenner, 2003; Lefton, 2004; Nethery, 2004; Stotlar, 2005; Warfield, 2004). This is likely due to the fact that the spectators and participants in grassroots sport events are typically more homogenous than audiences of sport events with a mass appeal, which allows sponsors to reach a larger base of potential consumers.

Subaru has seen an increase in sales of its vehicles directly tied to grassroots and niche sport events. The company has sponsored events such as a cross-country ski marathon, a dog sled marathon, cycling events, and Nordic skiing events. Through these events the company sold more than 170 vehicles and attributes the success to support of niche events drawing its core consumer (IEG, 2001a). Re/Max International’s sponsorship of the World Long Drive Championships allows the company to focus on grassroots events across the United States and to break into realm of golf. Re/Max officials note that fewer consumers are reached at these local events but the sponsorship has provided the company with a presence from May through December (Brenner, 2003).

“Sport marketers can no longer present standard sponsorship packages to potential corporate partners. Rather, they must tailor the sponsorships to meet the specific motives of the corporate partner.”

The Evolving Nature of Sport Sponsorship
Sport sponsorship originally appealed to corporations as a form of uncluttered advertising (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000). Increased financial pressures combined with growing numbers of sponsors have forced sport marketers and corporations to become more innovative and creative when designing and activating sport sponsorships. In turn, these pressures have also increased the need to more effectively assess the return on investment of such sponsorships and have forced sport marketers to pay closer attention to the needs and objectives of corporate partners.

Sport marketers can no longer present standard sponsorship packages to potential corporate partners. Rather, they must tailor the sponsorships to meet the specific motives of the corporate partner. Corporations are motivated to engage in sport sponsorship for a variety of reasons, but most often the goals are to increase revenue through brand loyalty, increase brand awareness, gain access to new target markets, enhance brand image, and build relationships with consumers and clients (IEG, 2003; Komoroski & Biemond, 1996; Lough, 1996; Ludwig & Karabetos, 1999).

To assess consumer awareness of sport sponsorship, sport marketing scholars have most often been guided by Sandage’s (1983) measures of advertising effectiveness. Both direct and intermediate measures can be utilized to perform such assessments. Intermediate means of assessment examine consumers’ responses to advertisements, while direct measures of assessment examine consumers’ purchase behaviors relative to advertising exposure. However, the utilization of intermediate measures is most prominent in the sport marketing literature (Bennett, 1999; Bennett, et al., 2002; Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Pitts, 1998; Pope & Voges, 1997; Sandler & Shani, 1993; Shilbury & Berriman, 1996; Stotlar & Johnson, 1989; Turco, 1994).

Measurement of consumers’ ability to recall and to recognize sponsors of an event is a well-established intermediate method for examining consumer awareness of sport sponsorship (Bennett, 1999; Bennett, et al., 2002; Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Pitts, 1998; Pope & Voges, 1997; Sandler & Shani, 1993; Shilbury & Berriman, 1996; Stotlar & Johnson, 1989; Turco, 1994). The majority of this research examines sponsorship awareness in televised sport or at major sport events. A paucity of research exists on grassroots and “niche” sport sponsorship awareness (Bennett, et al., 2002). The growth in grassroots sport participation and sponsorship warrants examination of sponsorship awareness at this level (SGMA International, 2005).

Purpose
Because grassroots and niche sport events do not typically appeal to a mass or mainstream audience, participants and supporters of these events may be different than the average sport consumer. These events may have greater meaning to this segment of consumers and, as such, participants and spectators may be more likely than the average sport consumer to become aware and to purchase the products of sponsors associated with these events. The purpose of this research was to assess consumer awareness of sponsorship at a grassroots sport event through an examination of recall and recognition rates and purchase intentions. Specifically, this study examined recall and recognition rates and purchase intentions relative to age, gender, level of interest in the event, and subject type (partici-
pant, spectator, or volunteer). This study also examined the impact of visibility and activation on subjects' recall and recognition rates. Assessing consumer awareness at this level will provide greater insight for event organizers, for grassroots sport sponsors, and for sport marketing scholars when examining the value of sponsorship at this level of sport.

"Recall and recognition rates both appeared to be influenced by location of signage in the venue."

Method

Subjects
Data for this study was gathered during a "State Games" grassroots sport event hosted by a state association in the Midwest. The event was the culmination of four sectional events hosted within the state. Participants qualified for the event based on performance at one of the four sectionals. Subjects (N = 492) were randomly selected for participation in the study upon exiting the event venue. Every fifth subject exiting the venue was asked to participate by completing a self-administered questionnaire. All subjects (participants, spectators, and volunteers) exited the venue at the same location. Using traditional measures to assess consumer awareness of sponsorship, subjects were first asked to recall as many sponsors as possible from memory and then asked to recognize event sponsors from a list (Cuneen & Hannan, 1993; Pitts, 1998; Sandage, 1983; Slattery & Pitts, 2002). Subjects received no incentive for completing the questionnaire.

Instrument
The instrument was developed for non-bias responses and page formatted for ease of completion by event attendees. Prior to distribution to subjects, the authors consulted three event organizers, four sport marketing scholars and professionals, and two experts in survey design to examine the instrument for content validity. These experts agreed the instrument would be an appropriate and an effective tool for data collection.

Survey questions focused on demographics, sponsorship awareness, and purchase intentions. Sponsorship awareness was assessed through subjects' memory recall and recognition of sponsors. Subjects were asked to recall sponsors by listing as many sponsors as they could from memory. Sponsor recognition was assessed by asking subjects to select from a list the sponsors of the event. Dummy sponsors were also included in the list.

A 5-point Likert scale with response selections ranging from 1, (strongly agree) to 5, SD (strongly disagree) was used to assess subject's responses regarding purchase intentions. Statements focused on subjects' purchase intentions regarding event sponsors and the impact of sponsorship on their purchase intentions. In addition to the aforementioned content areas, the survey also included four questions requesting the subject’s age, gender, level of interest in the event, and reason for attending the event. Level of interest was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 indicating "Very Interested" and 5 indicating "Not Interested". Reason for attending was measured by assessing the subject's classification as an athlete, a spectator, a volunteer, an official, or other.

Data Analysis
Frequencies and descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the recall and recognition rates of event sponsors. T-tests were performed to determine if significant differences existed in recall and recognition rates based on location of signage and activation of the sponsorship. ANOVAs were performed to determine if significant differences existed in subjects' recall and recognition rates and purchase intentions based on age, gender, level of interest, and subject type. To correct for the possibility of a Type I error, the Bonferroni procedure was used (Keppel & Wickens, 2004). As a result, the per comparison alpha level was set at p < .025.

Results
Subject Recall
Fifty-five percent of subjects correctly recalled at least one sponsor with 11% correctly recalling three or more sponsors. Only 2% of those surveyed correctly recalled five or more sponsors. A breakdown of mean recall rates may be viewed in Table 1. The four major sponsors: a gas company, an insurance company, an energy company, and a beverage company as well as an unofficial venue sponsor were the most frequently recalled sponsors. It should be noted that the unofficial venue sponsor was a beverage company with signage in the host venue and was not an official sponsor of the event. These sponsors also had highly visible signage and multiple signage in the venue. The high profile signage included scoreboard signage. Two of the sponsors also provided a souvenir item to event attendees. Another sponsor had also been a major sponsor of the event for the past three years.

The results of the t-test revealed a difference in recall rates based on location of signage at the venue. Signage in highly visible areas (M = 9.4, SD = 4.0) was recalled more than signage located elsewhere in the venue (M = 4.0, SD = 2.6), t(6) = 2.04, p = .08. While the difference was not significant relative to the standard p = < .05,
Table 1
Mean Recall and Recognition Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Recall</th>
<th>Recognition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Recall</th>
<th>Recognition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spectator</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1.4*a</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Interest</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Recall</th>
<th>Recognition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Very interested</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>1.1*b</td>
<td>4.5*c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.6*c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little interest</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No interest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Recall</th>
<th>Recognition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 and under</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-25</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>3.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 and over</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at p < .025
a: Significantly higher than athletes
b: Significantly higher than those with neutral interest
c: Significantly higher than those with general or little interest

this difference is approaching significance and is noteworthy given the low power associated with a population of eight sponsors. A further breakdown of recall percentages may be viewed in Table 2.

The results of the ANOVAs revealed a significant difference based on subject type and level of interest in the event. Volunteers had significantly higher recall rates than athletes participating in the event $F(17, 605) = 2.88$, $p < .023$. Persons indicating a high level of interest in the event had higher recall rates than those indicating a neutral interest in the event $F(22, 598) = 3.50$, $p < .008$.

Subject Recognition
In general, subject recognition rates were higher than noted recall rates. As a whole, 86% of subjects correctly recognized at least one sponsor with 35% recognizing five or more sponsors. A further breakdown of mean recognition rates may be viewed in Table 1. Similar to recall rates, the four major sponsors: a gas company, an insurance company, an energy company, a beverage company, and an unofficial venue sponsor were the most frequently recognized sponsors. Again, the unofficial venue sponsor was a beverage company with signage in the host venue and was not an official sponsor of the event.

Sponsors with signage in highly visible areas of the venue ($M = 35$, $SD = 9.1$) were recognized significantly more than those with signage located elsewhere in the venue ($M = 9.0$, $SD = 3.6$), $t(61) = 4.62$, $p < .004$.

Although not statistically significant, it should be noted that the mean recognition rate for the two sponsors activating their sponsorship by providing a souvenir item ($M = 41$) was double that of those sponsors not activating their sponsorship ($M = 20$). A breakdown of recognition percentages may be viewed in Table 2. Also similar to recall rates, subjects indicating a high level of interest in the event had significantly higher recognition rates than those indicating a general interest or little interest $F(100, 2242) = 3.80$, $p < .005$.

Purchase Intentions
As a group, 44% of subjects agreed that they were more likely to purchase a product of an event sponsor. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed agreed to the statement “by purchasing the product of an event sponsor, I am personally contributing to the success of the event.” However, most subjects were neutral (32%) or disagreed (25%) that event sponsorship had no impact on their respective purchase decisions. Sixty four percent of subjects disagreed that they were less likely to purchase a product of an event sponsor. A breakdown of mean purchase intentions may be viewed in Table 3.
Results of the ANOVAs revealed a significant difference relative to age and likeliness of purchasing the product of an event sponsor. Those age 26-35 and 36-45 indicated a stronger likelihood of purchasing a product of an event sponsor than those over the age of 55, $F(19, 314) = 4.61, p < .01$.

**Discussion**

Generally, the recall and recognition rates in this study were slightly lower but comparable to sponsorship awareness studies, particularly those focusing on mega-sport events (Cuneen & Hannan, 1993; Pitts, 1998; Stotlar, 1993). On average, event attendees' recall and recognition rates ranged from 55% to 66%. These rates were comparable to Stotlar's (1993) study of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games where rates ranged from 20% - 61.66%, but the recall rates are somewhat lower than 57.8% to 83.3% range at Gay Games IV and that of an LPGA event (Cuneen & Hannan, 1993; Pitts, 1998). This suggests that when compared to mega-event sport consumers, participants and spectators at grassroots and niche sport events may not possess the same level of sponsorship awareness.

Recall and recognition rates both appeared to be influenced by location of signage in the venue. Sponsors with signage in high profile, highly visible, or high traffic areas were more frequently recalled and recognized than sponsors with signage elsewhere in the venue. Sponsors with scoreboard or on-field signage yielded higher recall and recognition rates. This supports earlier research which found that sponsors with signage in high traffic or highly visible areas such as the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Mean Purchase Intentions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subj. Type</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spectator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Very int.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
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<td></td>
<td>46-55</td>
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<td></td>
<td>55 and over</td>
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</tbody>
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* Significant at $p < .025$

**Likely:** I am more likely to purchase the product of an event sponsor.

**No impact:** Sponsorship of the event has no impact on my decision to purchase the product of an event sponsor.

**Contribute:** By purchasing the product of an event sponsor, I am personally contributing to the success of the event.

**Not likely:** I am not likely to purchase the product of an event sponsor.
concessions area, scoreboard signage or signage that was “part of the game”, and those with multiple signs were more frequently recalled and recognized by event or game attendees (Cuneen & Hannan, 1993; Stotlar & Johnson, 1989; Pope & Voges, 1997). This suggests that regardless of the type of sport event, grassroots or mainstream, it is advantageous for sponsors to place signage in highly visible areas of the venue.

It should be noted that an unofficial venue sponsor was often perceived by event attendees as an official event sponsor. Event organizers rented the venue for the purposes of hosting the event and were not able to remove existing signage at the venue. Approximately 29% of event attendees recognized this unofficial venue sponsor as an official event sponsor. Referred to as an accidental ambush (Howard & Crompton, 2004), this is cause for concern for grassroots and sport event organizers and official event sponsors. The existing venue signage may have devalued the official event sponsorships, especially for those event sponsors desiring an enhanced brand image through association with the image and mission of the event. This type of accidental ambush is almost unavoidable due to the multiple entities involved in hosting and operating the event (Howard & Crompton, 2004). Accidental ambushes are more likely to occur during grassroots and niche sport events since these events usually operate on a smaller scale and do not control signage in the host venue.

The manner in which sponsors leveraged or activated their respective sponsorship may have influenced recall and recognition rates. The major sponsors that provided an event specific souvenir item and allowed for product sampling were one of the most frequently recalled and recognized sponsors. The mean recognition rates for these sponsors were twice as high compared to those sponsors that did not activate their sponsorships. It should be noted that this was the sponsor’s first year sponsoring the event. This is similar to the findings of Pitts (1998) who found that sponsors supporting or leveraging their respective sponsorships with additional advertising such as promotional merchandise or products on-site generated an increased awareness compared to sponsors not engaging in these activities. This suggests that regardless of the event, activation strategies should be implemented as part of the overall sponsorship. Additionally, it would also be advantageous for sport event organizers, grassroots and mainstream, to provide suggestions regarding activation to potential sponsors. Additional research indicates an increase in the amount of dollars sponsors are spending for activation since 2001. This spending declined in 2003, but sponsors once again reported an increase in this type of spending in 2004. In fact, more than 80% of sponsors report some amount of spending on activation (IEG, 2004; IEG, 2005).

Similar to previous research (Bennett, 1999; Bennett, et al., 2002; Cromwell, Relyea, Irwin, & Maignan, 2000; Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Slattery & Pitts, 2002), findings suggest that event attendees with more familiarity or interest in the event are more likely to correctly recall and recognize sponsors. Volunteers and those indicating a high level of interest in the event posted the highest recall and recognition rates in this study. These rates were significantly higher than the rates of other subject types and those indicating a general or little interest in the event. Previous research has positively linked familiarity or level of experience with the event and heavily involved or heavily committed patrons to recall and recognition rates (Bennett, 1999; Bennett, et al., 2002; Cromwell, Relyea, Irwin, & Maignan, 2000; Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Slattery & Pitts, 2002).

“... it would also be advantageous for sport event organizers, grassroots and mainstream, to provide suggestions regarding activation to potential sponsors.”

Forty-five percent of respondents noted a likelihood of purchasing the product of an event sponsor and 55% also noted a feeling of personal contribution to the success of the event by purchasing a sponsor’s product. Not surprisingly, volunteers and those indicating a high interest in the event reported the most positive findings regarding purchase intentions. Both indicated a greater likelihood of purchasing a sponsor’s product and noted a feeling of personal contribution to the success of the event by doing so. This supports earlier research findings indicating that, on average, 20% of committed fans indicated a greater likelihood to buy a sponsors product as a result of the sponsor’s support of their respective team (Bennett, 1999).

Age appeared to influence purchase intentions in this study. Respondents age 26-35 and 36-45 noted a significantly higher likelihood of purchasing the product of an event sponsor than those in the 55 and over age bracket. Persons in the more mature age group may not have seen a benefit in purchasing a sponsor’s product. Age often determines need for various products and services, (Moschis & Mathur, 1993) and many of the benefits associated with sponsor’s products may not have appealed to this age group. Based on relative necessity, this age group may not have perceived benefits from the products or services of a sponsor, and therefore, may not have identified with the featured products or services. Additionally, it should be noted
that this is only problematic if sponsors desired to reach this age group as a target audience.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings in this study and a review of relevant literature, several recommendations are made for grassroots and niche sport event organizers. Grassroots and niche sport event organizers should develop sponsorship packages that will enhance opportunities for sponsors to activate or leverage the sponsorship (IEG, 2005; Migala Report, 2005). Doing so will allow attendees and participants to identify with the sponsor’s products. Creating a sense of identification with a sponsor’s product will increase the likelihood of brand awareness and brand loyalty. Activation strategies should be designed to form a link between the event attendee and the sponsor’s product. Enhanced public relations efforts, internal communications, traditional advertising, hospitality, Internet tie-ins, and enhancement of business-to-business partnerships are most attractive forms of activation to sponsors (IEG, 2005). Grassroots and niche sport event organizers should include these elements as potential pieces of inventory when developing packages to meet specific sponsor objectives.

“Grassroots and niche sport event organizers should also note that sponsorship at their respective events may possibly be devalued via pre-existing venue signage.”

Grassroots and niche sport event organizers should also note that sponsorship at their respective events may possibly be devalued via pre-existing venue signage. Recall and recognition rates in this study revealed subjects might have interpreted venue sponsors as official sponsors of the event. While this may be beneficial for the venue sponsors, it could devalue the grassroots and niche sport event sponsor’s package. Organizers of these events should work with venue officials to avoid this confusion and to provide the most value for their respective sponsors.

Increased participation and sponsorship of grassroots and niche sport warrants examination of consumer awareness of sponsorship at this level. As the nature of sport sponsorship continues to evolve, sport marketers must become creative and innovative in developing sponsorship packages to meet the specific needs and objectives of corporate partners. Sponsorship of grassroots and niche sports has proven effective in generating a return on investment for sponsors at this level. This study has examined consumer awareness of sponsorship at a grassroots and niche sport event. Future research should examine the role of the consumer’s lifestyle as it relates to sponsorship awareness as well as how the consumer’s lifestyle influences purchase decisions, brand image of the sponsor, and brand loyalty to the sponsor. Further research examining the impact of activation on sponsorship awareness at grassroots and niche sport events, as well as mainstream sport events, is warranted. The results of this study indicated that the grassroots and niche sport participant and supporter may be different than the mainstream sport consumer, and sponsorship awareness at this level should continue to be examined.

**References**


