

Partnership marketing in sport

Mediator Communication's **Joe Craggs** and **Camilla Davenport** discuss the advantages of the affinity marketing approach.

The imminent arrival of the 2002 World Cup in Japan/Korea, coupled with Manchester's Commonwealth Games, the Ryder Cup and the ever increasing popularity of Wimbledon has made sports marketing and promotion a huge growth area for brands. To be linked in some way with a major sporting event brings enormous cachet to brands such as Barclaycard, Axa Sunlife and Coca Cola, while the organisers of the events themselves are permanently on the look out for ways of raising their profile in an ever more crowded sporting calendar.

Even in the sporting arena however, the threat of recession is looming and while in previous years companies were happy to build their brand by glamorous associations, they are now looking for tangible campaign responses. It seems that everywhere companies are looking for ways of improving results while reducing spend.

This has led to a surge of interest in collaborative marketing initiatives between powerful consumer brands. The ability of brands to appeal to significant segments of the British public via sports initiatives makes them focal and powerful partners in many collaborative campaigns.

Mediator Communications' own research programme has revealed that 78% of top UK marketers see partnership or affinity marketing as producing uplift compared to single company campaigns, on average by some 27%. You would have thought that no marketer could ignore such efficiency, especially in economically pressurised times.

What precisely do we mean by "partnership marketing"? In essence, we are talking about the situation where two or more complementary brands conduct joint marketing campaigns. It does not take a genius to realise that the outcome should be greater results for lower (shared) costs.

'Interesting' brands for the consumer would be those that are actively relevant to their lifestyle – fashion, holidays, cars, leisure pursuits and particularly sports. The link with a sporting event or team gives a company access to a major pool of prospects. Not only does partnership marketing reduce the cost of campaigns, but perhaps more importantly, it adds a richer seam of interest to each marketing approach and thereby produces tangible uplift in response. Therefore, the extent to which brands complement one another is critical to the success of any partnership marketing campaign.

Mediator's recent research helps to map out an order of priorities for the sports marketer. Our respondents felt that the benefits of partnership marketing (although all quite closely ranked) came in the following order: first – improved brand image and awareness; second – enhanced customer loyalty; third – better return on campaign investment; fourth – reduced campaign costs. Therefore, the factors which one initially might think were most appealing in a recessionary atmosphere – those to do with finance – came secondary to brand issues. This is because enormous effort has usually gone into building a brand match and the lure of short term campaign gain is very dangerous if pursued at the expense of longer term brand image.



Constructing an affinity partnership of complementary brands is a sophisticated affair. Consumers must have similar habits (behaviour) for a campaign partnership to work. The main point of putting a partnership campaign together is so that the combined appeal of the partners' offers is greater than the sum of its parts.

For the purposes of the sports marketer, there will be one common behavioural trait among the target audience: a love of sport. The marketer must then identify related common behavioural threads, from literature to loan profile, from credit card usage to holiday habits, before the first stage of partner selection can begin.

The tools used to plan behavioural affinity comprise: actual brand research; geodemographic segmentation systems; lifestyle databases; and campaign history analysis. If two of the partners in an affinity campaign are dependent on geography (ie, if they both operate through a club or venue), then matching the relative strengths of their on-the-ground presence will be a critical first step.

The psychological profile of a consumer, on the other hand, takes us into very interesting new territory for the sports marketer. Consumer psychologies – the individual's social values and beliefs – are a far less transitory affair than behavioural traits (such as what they put in their shopping

basket, how often they visit the cinema, or whether they regularly gamble, etc). However, sports enthusiasm, or particularly team allegiance, is an enduring emotional tie, and therefore falls somewhere between a behaviour and an attitude. Using either specific supporter surveys or social values profiling, the marketer can establish which of the possible complementary brand partners will appeal to each specific group of supporters, enabling him to create bespoke solutions for each campaign.

It is this psychological matching, in combination with a good library of pre- and post-campaign research into consumer attitudes, which ensures that sporting campaign partners obtain brand enhancement from the partnership marketing process.

For instance, in broad brush terms, a brand which appealed mainly to 'experimentalists' – a social value group mainly concerned with the new and untested – would need reassurance that campaign partners offered innovative experiences and a lack of constraints (perhaps Arnette, the new sunglasses and goggles manufacturer, or Gnu skateboards). On the other hand, a brand which appealed mainly to 'conspicuous consumers' – who are concerned with self-image and outward displays of success – would need partners which also represent such an ostentatious cachet (a perfect brand being Manchester United!).

A recession hits other high street brands far worse than most sporting brands and associations. The last thing that people stop spending their money on is their enthusiasm for sport and its associated products, making them ideal partners in a collaborative campaign.

However putting the right brand partnerships together is a delicate affair, requiring analysis and planning based on behavioural and psychological consumer information. Planning has to be matched by campaign learning, both in terms of sheer response and in terms of consumer attitudes. However, sports marketers are reporting substantial uplift benefits from partnership campaigns and expect the proportion of their budgets devoted to such activity to rise by 68% in 2002. The careful expansion of partnership marketing activity should pay dividends this year. ■

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