

Unpacking the value of sports sponsorship

Since the dawn of advertising, brands have caught onto the emotive involvement of South Africans in sport and invested large sums of money into the branding and backing of local sporting codes.

Telecoms giants, such as MTN, Vodacom and Telkom dominate the soccer arena with sponsorships including teams such as Chiefs and Pirates and events such as the Telkom Knockout and MTN 8 Tournament. South Africa's local financial institutions are said to prefer nurturing up-and-coming athletes through sponsorships such as the FNB Classic Clashes and spending the sponsorship big bucks, such as ABSA, with the Springboks, Bafana Bafana and the ABSA Currie Cup. Overall, you would be hard-pressed to find a South African corporate of sizeable proportions that has not at one point been involved in a sporting sponsorship.

One has to wonder what return these companies are seeing from such sponsorships and whether or not they are connecting with their core or secondary target audiences.



Greg Reis

Greg Reis, CEO of local professional services firm BSG, says that he believes that sports are a valuable investment for brands and he invests in a local triathlon series called the BSG Triseries. Along with this sponsorship, comes the support of various internationally recognised triathletes, including the likes of Richard Murray and Kate Roberts, both of whom competed at the 2012 London Olympics.

Element of the marketing strategy

Reis says that it is an element of the company's marketing strategy that has directly impacted the perception of its business amongst its current clients, as well as future customers. "I've walked into many a meeting with top ranking executives and had complimentary feedback on an event they've either heard of, participated in or supported."

It is reportedly the carry-through of the sponsorship into the business that has made a difference. "We've taken the spirit of our sports sponsorship and promoted the idea of a healthy and active lifestyle amongst our staff. In fact, we're so dedicated to the process that we invited Olympic triathlete Chris Felgate to join our staff complement to look after wellness - both internally and amongst our clients."

Felgate joined the company in 2009 and is the custodian of driving the company's ethos of being a proactive force for positive change. Testimony to this is the company winning the Discovery Healthy Company Index (2011 and 2012).

Key elements for successful partnerships

"The first element is that the company needs to be true to the 'promise' it is communicating through the sponsorship. The company often talks about healthy and active lifestyles and being a positive force for change, but if its staff and offering don't reflect the ethos of its sponsorship, then no amount of investment will hide the cracks in the offering."

The second element is broadening the involvement from sponsoring the series to sponsoring an elite team to cover the full spectrum of the brand message: a platform for making a difference in the largest mass triathlon sprint series, which also acts as a welcome mat to the sport. This depicts it as a high performance company through the Elite sponsorship.

Supporting evidence

Matt Riley, head of strategy at Cape Town advertising agency 140 BBDO, says that there is evidence to support the

success of corporate investment in South African sports, particularly in those cases where it was effectively leveraged.



Matt Riley

"If you consider the investment from the leaders in many market categories, you will find that they have supported the growth of sporting codes appealing to core pockets of their audience and amplified their involvement to those purchasing their product or service. The essential idea is to support the broader community interest, not just 'sponsor' the sporting code. Close the gap for your customers as to how your brand's investment allows for greater access and better performances."

Riley and Reis both agree that it is the continued support and sponsorship that splits the good examples from the bad. "We identified triathlon-related sports five years back and we've seen substantial growth of the sport with participation in the Triseries increasing by 44%. We're heavily invested now and we see even more potential for growth and popularity in the sport," concludes Reis.

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