

DISRUPTIVE SPONSORSHIP:

by Kim Skildum-Reid



LIKE
DISRUPTIVE
MARKETING,
ONLY

BETTER

Marketers like to think they're at the forefront; that because marketing is, at least in part, a creative process, that the marketing industry is uniquely placed to identify and develop what comes next for brand marketing.

But as we sit here in the late teens, with marketers all in a lather over "Disruptive Marketing", I'd like to point out that best practice, Last Generation Sponsorship professionals have embodied the key points of Disruptive Marketing for fifteen years.

Our scrappy, nimble, and resourceful industry has been disrupting since long before that was a buzzword. It imbues how we think, where we focus, and how we define our end game. It drives the creative process to heights and breadths that most marketers have never seen.

If Disruptive Marketing is a game changer, it's changing to a game our industry has been playing for a long time, and we're good at it. So, let's own that, shall we? Let's put together the unique power of sponsorship, the mindset and skills we've spent so long honing, and the exploding array of technology-driven insights and channels, and call it what it is...

Disruptive Sponsorship: Like Disruptive Marketing, only better.

IT'S NOT ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

Discussions of disruption in marketing always seem to devolve into a discussion about technology, and that does the practice a huge disservice.

I get it. Technology is damned sexy, and it's easy to get excited about it. Hell, I get excited about it, too. Technology can collect, aggregate, and parse huge amounts of data. Technology can deliver both messages and customer and fan experiences in ways we could only have dreamed about ten years ago.

But as cool as technology has become – and will continue to be – technology is a just a mechanism. It's like finding gold when you're lost in the desert. It has no real value until you're someplace you can use it. And all this amazing tech has no value, unless you're in the right place to use it, with the right focal point, mindset, and strategy.

Disruptors focus on the target markets – what's important to them, their aspirations and disappointments, and, critically, how they connect with people and interact with the world. So, as people adopt new lifestyles, priorities, and technologies, disruptive marketers incorporate those changes in what they do, just as disruptive sponsors have been doing for fifteen years.

The currency of marketing is no longer reach, exposure, influence, or even sales. It's dopamine, oxytocin, and serotonin. It's endocannabinoids, endorphins, and epinephrine. It's about emotions and connections and joy and self-worth. It's about identity, belonging, and feeling valued, and when a brand can evoke those things, people will align themselves with that brand in a way that will transcend any fleeting promotions a competitor may mount.

THE DISRUPTIVE SPONSORSHIP ADVANTAGE

When it comes to Disruptive Marketing, sponsorship was there first, and we're already good at it. But as nice as it is to have bragging rights, it's even better to have mountains of the substance that makes this disruption work.

When it comes right down to it, sponsorship delivers power that Disruptive Marketing doesn't intrinsically have. Like experiential marketing before it, Disruptive Marketing is often left to manufacture the relevance that's baked right into sponsorship, and more often than not, it rings hollow.

With sponsorship, relevance, passion, and emotion are baked right in, as sponsorship is, at its core, about what people choose to care about. It gives sponsors a credible platform to demonstrate what their brand is about, not just talk about it; to demonstrate the values it shares with target markets. Sponsorship fosters authenticity in voice and brand conduct. And the driving force behind all of it is meaning.

Dopamine – Reward, desire, happiness

Oxytocin – Bonding, trust, loyalty

Serotonin – Confidence, worthiness,

belonging

Endocannabinoids – Bliss

Endorphins – Pain relief

Epinephrine – Adrenaline rush

Without meaning, Disruptive Marketing is just an empty vessel – a bunch of data and tech and creativity, with no resonance. Meaning is sponsorship's superpower. No other marketing media goes close.

Customer-Centric

Brands have bragged for years about being "customer-driven" and "consumer-centric". In most cases, that's been centred around their commitment to customer service, not the larger way that they relate to those customers, and certainly not about marketing, which has been largely stuck in the mode of yelling-in-target-markets'-general direction for decades.

Disruptive Marketing has identified the value of putting customers (and potential customers) and their needs first in marketing, as well as embracing the fact that every interaction with a potential customer is, in fact, marketing – so they'd better get it right.

Sponsors realised long ago that their starting place with any fan base is "interloper", and if they were to have any chance at all of meeting brand needs, they were going to need to meet fan needs first. Understanding, respecting, and adding value to the fan experience became the third "win" in "win-win-win" sponsorship, and though the fan experience now bears little resemblance to the fan experience back then, building that third "win" into the sponsorship equation is still the foundation stone of sponsorship returns.

In fact, disruptive sponsors value this approach so much, that they've found ways to use sponsorship to provide meaningful "wins", not only to fans, but to their customers, potential customers, staff, communities, and other stakeholders.

From Impressions and Sales to Alignment and Advocacy

I've been doing this a long time, and for as long as I can remember, the marketing process has gone something like this...

- Make decision based on target market fit, reach, and cost.
- Roll out one ad, promotion, or other communication after another, with the primary reason to convince someone that they want or need the product.
- Assess results based on recall, promotion participation, bulk social engagement (likes, follows, clicks, shares), and incremental sales.

Certainly, there's more to it than this, but that "more" is different from one brand to another, and virtually always focuses on metrics.

MEANING IS
SPONSORSHIP'S
SUPERPOWER.



DISRUPTIVE SPONSORSHIP LIVES AT THE INTERSECTION OF PASSION, AUTHENTICITY, AND CHAOS.

Disruptive Marketing has shifted that thinking, so the primary goal is to improve sentiment toward the brand. The thinking is that if people are demonstrably feeling more positive toward a brand, the sales and other objectives will come.

The thinking is along the lines of employers who need their staff working at peak performance. Old school thinkers would do productivity training, contests, and incentives which, frankly, only work on some types of people, and may only result in short-term gains. Other employers have identified that happy staff, who are proud of the company they work for, are more productive, and that productivity gains are across the board, so they focus on creating a workplace and organisational culture with happiness and pride as the focal points.

From the perspective of Disruptive Sponsorship, we can talk about "sentiment", but because what we sponsor is intrinsically meaningful to the target markets, the analysis goes deeper, the emotions more specific, and the perceptions more tightly held. It's about motivations and pinch points, priorities and self-definitions, bragging rights and social credibility. It's about empathy and kindness, tribalism and rivalry, joy and pain.

Disruptive sponsors mirror all of that, reflecting, amplifying, and adding value to the fan experience, and when done well, creates sustained alignment to the brand and large groundswells in advocacy.

People Are in Control

Unlike some of the other elements of Disruptive Marketing, understanding the degree to which people have taken control of their media consumption, and the degree to which this has made many traditional marketing channels largely redundant, has been an evolution for brands over the past eight to ten years.

Sponsors know that fans have always been in control. Sponsors are choosing to interact with them through something they've already decided they care about. That makes it pretty damned easy for people to ignore – even willfully ignore – the sponsors cluttering up their fan experience.

And woe to the sponsor that thinks disrespecting the fan experience is the way to achieve marketing goals. Interrupting, or gratuitously intruding upon, a fan experience may get people's attention, but certainly isn't going to build affinity or alignment. And advocacy? I've never in my life seen someone post about how moving LED signage right next to the field during the play of game made the game a better experience for them.

Sponsors also know that losing control is part of the process. People who are well-versed in controlling their entire media experience aren't interested in a brand's one-way marketing messages, even if they are coming to them in conjunction with a

sponsorship. No, they want to create and collaborate and remix content, they want a voice, a platform, a champion, and they want to share it all on their own terms.

It's messy and chaotic, but it's where the people are. Disruptive sponsors know that embracing the chaos is a vital part of making sponsorship work, and that the more they foster fan freedom, participation, and expression, the more powerful a platform sponsorship becomes.

MAKING DISRUPTIVE SPONSORSHIP WORK

Sponsors that have embraced best practice already know how to make Disruptive Sponsorship work. They have the mindset and the skills to translate lifestyle trends, societal changes, and technology growth into emotionally powerful and resonant marketing opportunities. They know that the look of sponsorship may change dramatically from one year, market, geography, or sponsorship to the next, but that the bones of it stay the same. These are some of the biggest techniques they use.

Design Thinking

For over thirty years, sponsors have been well aware that the lion's share of their brand results – if not all of them – don't come from the sponsorship itself, but from the leverage activities they mount around it.

It would be fair to say that early leverage strategies were pretty uninspired, but when sponsors saw the light on win-win-win sponsorship fifteen years ago, the game changed completely. Sponsors realised that, given what they sponsor means something to people – that they don't only invest time and money, but belief and emotion – an empathy-driven approach to the creative process around sponsorship is the only approach that makes any sense. Without realising it, sponsors became experts in design thinking.

Design thinking starts with empathy. It focuses on people - not tech, not data, not fine-tuning old ideas, or making a product relevant. It removes limitations on creativity, and challenges assumptions. The more varied the viewpoints participating, the better the ideas will be. The worst thing for design thinking is for only marketers to be involved.

The goal is to generate a large volume of ideas that can be piloted, tested, and scaled, and some degree of failure is accepted. In sponsorship terms, that large volume of ideas can be used across time, geography, and different market segments. They can be built on year after year, or used to keep a sponsorship

fresh. And while there will be occasional missteps, thoroughly understanding the fan experience means those missteps will be few and far between.

Design thinking is the intersection of analysis and creativity, and the goal isn't to convince people that the product will make their life better, but for the brand to genuinely make the things they care about better. And while I'm aware that all sounds like a bunch of airy-fairy crapola, in practice, it couldn't be more straightforward.

Design Thinking and Leverage Planning

Although it's tempting to walk you through every step and intricacy of how design thinking intersects with sponsorship planning, we're going to have to settle for toplineing it. Either book referenced at the end of this paper will have the entire process in detail.

Who you involve in this process is critically important. Assemble a group where marketers are in the minority, and expertise is less important than diversity. Involve HR and sales and data analytics. Involve regional management, distribution, and government relations. Involve senior executives. Involve the receptionist. Do whatever you need to do to get a broad variety of people and perspectives in the room. Pro tip: Bribe them with sandwiches. You'll only have to do it once, because this process is fun, and they'll want to come back.

The first stage of any sponsorship leverage brainstorm is about establishing empathy – humanising the target markets, understanding who they are, what matters to them, and their fan experience.

Ask these questions, in this order, but don't let anyone overthink them. Perfectionism isn't useful in this process, and will only slow you down.

- What are their perceptions of the property? How do they think other people perceive it?
- These perceptions can be accurate, inaccurate, good, bad, or ugly.
- What are the best things about the fan experience?
- What are the worst things about the fan experience?
- What are the main motivations for someone to want to get involved in this property? To attend, join, donate, or pay attention to it in any way? (These motivations become your market segments.)
- Based on those main motivations, develop flagbearers/personas for each segment. Give those flagbearers names,

lives, priorities. Describe them in terms they would use. Do it fast and on the fly. (Quickest to break into smaller groups, each working on a different flagbearer, then share.)

- Give each of those flagbearers a wand. What would they want from the property, if they could have anything? Their wishes don't have to be realistic.

Throughout this process, don't forget that the property will have lots of remote fans – people who care about what you're sponsoring, but for whatever reason, won't be there. You also need to consider fans of the larger themes of the property, who may not even know that the property exists, but have a real passion for the subject. An example is a high-end food and wine festival, which will have elements that will appeal to foodies, no matter where they are.

Once you've established a strong understanding of the fan experience, from their perspective, it's time to open the floodgates for ideas. For the purposes of brainstorming, remove all financial, political, and practical constraints, and assume you can have any benefits you want from the property.

With the fan still firmly at the forefront, ask these questions, in this order:

- How can we amplify what's best about the fan experience? Make it more participative? More immersive? More rewarding?
- How can we ameliorate what's worst? Remove annoyances? Make the experience easier, more accessible?
- Can we give the flagbearers what they want? If not, can we get them closer??
- What kind of exclusive content can we access, create, or remix?
- What kind of content can fans/customers create, customise, or remix?
- How can we make customers, fans, staff, or our communities the heroes?
- Can we give any of those people control over some aspect of the property?
- What can we do that will demonstrate, not just talk about, our brand values?
- How can we integrate the sponsorship across our existing touchpoints?

Not every idea will be a winner, but many of them will be. Some ideas will take time to get into the marketplace, while others will be responsive, and launchable in real-time. Some ideas will build momentum over time, while others will serve as burning epicentres for shorter-term ideas, and all of that is okay in design thinking.

Tell Me A Story

If Disruptive Marketing is the buzziest thing to happen to marketing in decades, storytelling is the buzziest thing about Disruptive Marketing. And that's fair enough; there's a lot of power in a compelling story.

Without sponsorship, there are basically three kinds of stories a brand can tell:

- Brand stories.
- Customer stories.
- Community stories (brand- or customer-adjacent)

This is a very limited pool and, frankly, there's only so much you can talk about your brand, and the people that use your brand, before people's eyes will glaze over and they'll tune out.

This approach appears to come from the same mindset that gave us "experiential marketing" and "branded experiences"; the mindset that assumes that if the experience is cool enough, or the story is compelling enough, people will volunteer to become part of the "brand story". Puh-lease

Honestly, nobody wants to be part of a brand story. Belay that, there is a tiny handful of brands that compel that kind of devotion – Apple, Harley Davidson, Thermomix – and your brand is almost surely not among them.

The answer isn't about telling ever more elaborate stories, or creating ever-flashier brand experiences, in some vain attempt to make your brand more compelling, but to deliver stories that are meaningful to the people you're trying to get close to, whether they have anything directly to do with your brand or not.

Disruptive sponsors know that if you add sponsorship-driven storytelling to the mix, you suddenly have a vast array of stories to tell – stories that matter to people, that they're hungry to hear.

You can tell stories about the property, the fans, the stars, the history, and the community. You can tell surprising stories, funny stories, instructive stories, and inspiring stories. You can go behind the scenes, dive deep, or tell a story with a moral. You can tell stories about the impact of the property on the community it serves, and you can spread stories out across multiple episodes. Because as soon as you're telling stories about something that has meaning to people, there's no end to the stories you can tell.

You'll certainly find places to tell brand stories and customer stories, but within the context of the other stories you're telling, it will no longer feel like the thinly-veiled schtick of an infomercial, but an authentic

reflection of what the brand is about.

Making Others the Heroes

I've lost track of the number of times over the years that I've heard a brand manager or some agency type waffle on about how an idea is going to make the brand a hero.

Disruptive Sponsorship isn't about creating brand heroes, and in fact, takes a diametrically opposite approach. Again, these sponsors have taken on board that their starting place with any sponsorship is "interloper", and realised long ago that doing anything that smacks of self-congratulation is no way to align with fans.

Instead, they're creating ways to make fans, customers, and staff the heroes – championing them, telling their stories – in a powerful act of putting people first, and demonstrating what the brand stands for.

Participation, Not Spectating

Disruptive Sponsorship heralded the death of the wallflower, as fans hungered for ways to feel more involved. They wanted to participate, not spectate, and this has become a fertile ground for sponsors looking to add value to the fan experience, both in-person and remote.

There are as many ways to create fan participation as there are properties, and people who love them, but some of the major angles include...

- Amplifying tribalism or a sense of community around the property
- Gamifying the fan experience
- Providing a platform for fans to celebrate, vent, or share
- Providing focal points for user-generated content, customisable content, and content remixing
- Augmenting the fan experience through augmented reality apps and second screen content
- Crowdsourcing aspects of the property, fan experience, and sponsor-generated content.

What constitutes participation is going to vary wildly from one fan to the next. As with all of Disruptive Sponsorship, the starting point is empathy. When you understand what they value, and why the property matters to them, the types of participation that will resonate will be crystal clear.

Stand for Something

There are ample surveys showing that people think better about brands that sponsor charity and community organisations, and this is often used as a selling point for doing it. In reality, though, every brand sponsors at least one charitable organisation, it's usually something bland and uncontroversial, and virtually all of them do no more than pay lip service about how "community minded" they are. It's just a self-serving lie. There's no halo effect for self-congratulatory benevolence.

Enter Millennials and Gen Z, who have joined the explosion of social justice warriors and other issues-driven consumers in demanding that companies be about more than profit. They want to align with brands that do business in an ethical way, and will actively campaign against brands that aren't in line with community standards, or their own world view.

When it comes to sponsorship, they are less concerned about whether a brand pays money to a big list of causes, arts, and community organisations than they are about the depth and authenticity of those sponsorship commitments.

It's about standing for something, and disruptive sponsors are all about it. They're sponsoring unsexy causes that are genuinely relevant to their customers – causes like depression, prostate cancer, and prison dog programs.

They're also sponsoring organisations championing positive social change, such as marriage equality, despite the fact that there are detractors. They're sponsoring environmental organisations in battles that will help the environment, but could cost jobs. They're weighing the pros and cons, with the understanding that it's no longer possible to please everyone with neutrality, and that these ethical and social conundrums are only going to increase. They realise that to demonstrate what a brand stands for – through sponsorship or not – is both to lose customers and gain brand love.

The other area where standing for something has become a powerful marketing tool, is when sponsorship is used to reflect and amplify fan concerns. A fantastic example of this is around FIFA, which steadfastly ignored the fans' persistent and growing calls for an end to corruption in the organisation. For years, sponsors ignored the fans, as well, adopting a stance that could best be described as, "Nothing to do with us"... until they didn't.

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When several major sponsors used their enormous financial clout to amplify fan concerns, demanding transparency, accountability, and an end to cronyism, they truly did become brand heroes.

Nimbleness is Non-Negotiable

When a ten-year-old can produce an edited video, on a smartphone, in the time it takes to get to school on the bus, taking months to formulate a sponsorship leverage plan is ridiculous. Taking weeks to ensure every piece of sponsorship-driven content is beautiful is also ridiculous. When being “responsive” still takes days, that’s ridiculous, too. Bureaucracy is the enemy of Disruptive Sponsorship, with perfectionism playing the role of evil sidekick.

Disruptive Sponsors have a number of strategies that help them to be nimble:

- They balance long, medium, short, and real-time leverage activities, pulling from a large catalogue of ideas developed using design thinking.
- They focus on the perfect production and delivery of the big ideas that will be in the market the longest.
- They have a bank of existing content that can be remixed, reworked, or repurposed at short notice.
- They are constantly on the lookout for stories to tell, people and communities to champion, wins to celebrate, and concerns to reflect, and have a framework that facilitates responsiveness.
- They prioritise relevance, meaning, and timeliness over production values.

Even my job has changed. Where I used to write strategies that told clients what they should be sponsoring and how, my strategies are now about how to fundamentally change how sponsorship is done, so they’ve got the framework, tools, skills, fast planning and approval frameworks, fall-back options, internal buy-in, and real-time feedback they need to be successful at Disruptive Sponsorship. My job has changed to setting clients up to be nimble.

KNOW YOUR CHANNELS

Yeah, I know... Disruptive Marketing channels, yada yada, heard it all before. Don’t worry, I’m not going to waste time and words going over the basics of this well-trodden ground.

What I do want to do is reframe these channels in the context of Disruptive Sponsorship, and how they relate to the core principles behind it.

Brands as Media

The whole “brands are now media owners” thing is a bit of a furphy, as we’d say down here in Australia. That is to say it’s misleading.

Brands have *always* been media owners. Every brand touchpoint your brand has ever controlled is a media through which you could channel relevant content. Whether you do it or not is another story, but with the exploding number, quality, and ubiquity of tech-based channels in recent years, the need for meaningful, interesting content has exploded right along with it.

When it comes to Disruptive Sponsorship, sponsors know two things are true...

1. Sponsorship is the mother lode of content for a brand. Whether it’s episodic, durable, or user-generated, customised, gamified, or crowdsourced, exclusive or remixed, or whether it heroes your customers, staff, or the fans, if it’s authentic content around something they love, it will be compelling to your target markets.
2. The media a rightsholder is providing – how many mentions on social, program advertising, where the logo goes, etc. – shouldn’t be a focal point of the deal, because what a sponsor can do with the content in your own channels is more powerful than anything your partner could do for you.

You can showcase that content to fans and remote fans, you can work the broader themes to your broader target markets, you can make a local sponsorship work for your brand on a regional or national level, and you can do it across a timeframe that is far longer than that of what you’re sponsoring.

Devices

Obviously, the big news in devices is the dominance of mobile. It’s actually such big news I’m going to devote very few words. Suffice it to say, optimise your content for mobile – make it look good, load fast, and work properly.

Related to the overarching dominance of mobile devices, while some pundits prattle on about digital giants becoming additional content distributors, extending the reach of major sports, concerts, and the like – which they are – the more interesting development to me is the second screen.

This refers to the phenomenon of watching something on television or in person, while simultaneously engaging with that experience on a mobile device. That second screen could be providing

additional information and insights in real-time, in a manner akin to DIY augmented reality, it could be about sharing the experience, or it could be both. This is a huge area for sponsors wanting to create wins for fans.

Virtual and Augmented Reality

When discussions of Disruptive Marketing turn to tech, it’s usually less than ten seconds before someone mentions virtual reality. And really, what’s not to love – especially when applied to sponsorship? It’s immersive and participative, getting all of those brain chemicals pumping. It’s plain, flat sexy, with cool factor one thousand. It’s also notoriously difficult to scale.

Scalability is a major issue, given how many fans any given property is likely to have. If a sponsor opts to go all the way, with headsets and handlers and lines of people waiting to have a go, the experience will be amazing, but only a tiny percentage of fans will be able to take part.

Disruptive sponsors are repared to compromise quality for scale, availing themselves of low-tech solutions, like cardboard headsets that will hold any smartphone running the brand’s VR app, or dispensing with headsets altogether, with fans using their phones as a viewfinder. The issues with maintaining the high-quality, immersive experience at scale will reduce significantly over time, as the accessibility of personal VR equipment improves.

Augmented reality is at least as powerful as virtual reality, when it comes to Disruptive Sponsorship. If virtual reality is taking a person into an entirely different experience, augmented reality improves the experience a person is having. If that’s a fan experience, that fan is going to appreciate and engage with meaningful, real-time information, insights, and opportunities for further engagement. It’s also scalable and can be repackaged to work for remote fans.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence and machine learning are amazing, and getting more amazing every day, but current applications are primarily centred around analytics and operations, not consumer-facing marketing.

This appears to be an area that is set to erupt, and I almost hesitate to commit these limitations to the written word, as the advice will surely be outdated by the time I hit “publish”. With that in mind, I cautiously offer a couple of areas that I think are ripe for Disruptive Sponsorship.

It could be used for crowdsourcing.

Artificial intelligence provides a platform for collating and parsing a mountain of fan data, and automating the creation of something – content, art, music, or something else entirely – from it. Similarly, it can be used to synthesise voluntary inputs and other data, such as social media profiles (with permission), to create completely customised content around a property.

Again, I think this is the tip of the iceberg. Less. It's the snowflake on top of the tip of the iceberg, and both the applications and the sophistication will grow exponentially in the short- to medium-term. Due to the intrinsic power of both crowdsourcing and customised/remixed content in the Disruptive Sponsorship space, I do think these will remain major veins for adding value to the fan experience, fostering both fan ownership and collaboration, and making fans the heroes.

Big Data

Big data has been a major disruptor, with eye-watering amounts of data being collected and collated every day. From social media to search engines, apps to APIs, plus customer, sales, and historic data, and so much more. We're now getting familiar with the term "petabytes", but "exabytes" may not be far off day-to-day vernacular.

But it's often said that big data is about the "what", not the "why", and applications are minimal for giant, lossy datasets in a

marketing media that's all about individual passions, relevance, and meaning.

I do think big data has some potential for sponsorship selection. If brands can use behaviour analytics to find interest trends early, they can investigate sponsoring properties on those categories. There may also be a role in using behaviour analytics to spot early signs of lifestyle changes, or a technology uptake tipping point, providing an opportunity to develop bold, new leverage strategies.

Where most brands go wrong with big data and sponsorship is that they look at properties as simply another source of data. I've heard the phrase, "We only undertake sponsorship for data acquisition", so many times I've lost track, but every sponsor that takes this approach is wrong.

Let's think about this for a second. A brand sponsors something that people care about – that they have a passion for, that has built-in meaning and relevance. But rather than using that passion to nurture their bonds with the target markets, the primary driver is data acquisition. Any data that is acquired is added to the existing pool, to be used to craft and target one-way communications to those same people at some point in the future. It's inefficient and ignores the most powerful and compelling aspects of sponsorship, as a leverageable marketing platform.

Smart sponsors know that the primary goal of all marketing is to be the natural

choice for their target markets, and they've identified that nurturing relationships with them is far more effective than shouting messages at them, no matter how targeted they may be. These disruptive sponsors have an entirely different view of how data intersects with sponsorship, while preserving the passion that makes sponsorship work. They use their big data insights to inform some of their leverage, while the fans are far more likely to volunteer data to a brand that has worked to build a genuine relationship with them.

Micro-Targeting

Micro-targeting of ads and other messages is an amazing use of data, and there are applications for sponsorship. But thinking it's the holy grail of sponsorship leverage would be an overstatement.

First of all, because you don't need to sponsor anything to micro-target by passion, this approach to marketing would appear to be an ambusher's best friend. But while this ambush activity can be very specific in its targets and messages, those messages are one-way, and likely to ring hollow, as they'll lack authenticity.

For a sponsor, using micro-targeting to simply spruik the sponsorship – "Look at our sponsorship!" – is going to be about as meaningful as sticking "proud sponsor of" at the bottom of all your ads.

Disruptive Sponsors use micro-targeting to augment an authentic and fully-formed leverage plan, pulling fans into the meatier aspects of your activities, pulling them toward that third "win".

Social Listening

Social listening is being increasingly used as both a measure of brand alignment, and a source of market intelligence. It's a powerful tool, and I believe it becomes even more powerful when used in conjunction with sponsorship.

Social media brings out what people care about, so unless a brand has done something super-controversial or super-amazing, the amount people will be engaging about a brand is likely to be underwhelming.

With sponsorship, you're connecting with people through something they've already decided they care about, and with or without your brand, they're going to share it. When disruptive sponsors add value to that fan experience, it's foreseeable that there will be an increase in activity around your brand, the care factor will rise, and fans will provide more insight than they ordinarily would. A few of the things you will be able to gather through

A poem about corporate sponsorship, generated by artificial intelligence

So busy holding onto something new.
It had its own commercial enterprise!
A hundred thousand dollars at renew,
How could they ever wanna advertise.

But there are only seven members paying!
For you to join a dominant position! We never really need a signal fading,
Even any cable television.

Too many advertising revenue,
When the number one is getting paid! An answering machine and azure blue,
A group of people on the tape delayed.

Like a million dollar license fee,
The life of Miller Brewing Company.

social listening around sponsorship:

- Social benchmarking (share of voice)
- Brand pain points
- Fan pain points
- Incremental mentions and/or changes in sentiment during the period of a major sponsorship
- Changes in demographics
- Brand advocacy
- Trends in sentiment, mentions, or other factors, over time.

BRAND IMPACTS MAY VARY

According to Cindy Alvarez, author of Lean Customer Development, there are three types of brand relationships:

- Identity brands
- Improver brands
- Transactional brands

Her assertion is that identity and improver brands are the only ones using Disruptive Marketing well. To an extent, she has a point. Some brands are sexier than others, with more obvious marketing hooks, but I contend that Disruptive Sponsorship can have a huge impact on all three.

- Identity brands are brands that reflect who we are, how we live, and how we want to be perceived by others. Their positioning is about being part of a movement or personal mission. Disruptive Sponsorships will be anchored on the ideas of alignment, inspiration, aspiration, and championing that identity.
- Improver brands are brands that are, unsurprisingly, about improving ourselves and our lives. The positioning is about empowerment, insight, practicality, and celebrating achievement. Disruptive Sponsorships will be anchored on the same concepts, providing next-level expertise, advice, and vision.
- Transactional brands tend to be unsexy, and are largely interchangeable commodities. They tend to lack personality, and as a result, garner little real alignment from their target markets. Disruptive Sponsorship is a powerful platform to imbue a transactional brand with traits of an identity or improver brand (or both).

Of course all of these brand types can use sponsorship to nurture relationships, by understanding, respecting, and adding value to what people care about. All of them can champion the fans and make their customers heroes. They can all tell compelling stories. But the type of story,

what makes a meaningful win, and what constitutes a hero will vary vastly from one to another.

BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS

Before the barrage of rhetoric around Disruptive Marketing, buzzwords filtering through sponsorship were maxing out at a healthy trickle. “Synergy” had a good run, but has thankfully died in the arse. “Engagement” is still enjoying a long run of meaningless lip service.

Disruptive Marketing has opened the floodgates on buzzwords. Even “disruptive” is a buzzword! But as we learn all the new terminology, synthesising what it means into our jobs and our strategies, we need to ensure we never let go of the underlying structure that makes it all work – the humanity, the selflessness, the passion, the meaning. We also need to hold tight to the mission all brands share – to be the natural choice for their markets.

“Disruptive” anything isn’t inherently good. And as cool as it all is – apps, content, big data, and microtargeting, virtual reality, augmented reality, and near-field communications, artificial intelligence, live streaming, gamification, and the rest – without empathy, technology is just noise.

But beyond everything else, remember that sponsorship was at the vanguard, driving the marketing shifts that we now call “disruptive”. We’ve got the meaning no other marketing meadha has. In short, we’ve got this.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Corporate Sponsorship Toolkit – My bestseller for corporate sponsors.
- The Sponsorship Seeker’s Toolkit 4th Edition – Often referred to as “the bible of the industry”, this industry bestseller is a must-have for rightsholders.
- Kim Skildum-Reid’s Corporate Sponsorship Blog – Here you’ll find over 250, mostly how-to blogs for both sponsors and sponsorship seekers.
- Free White Papers and Templates – I have a broad variety of white papers and templates that are available for no-obligation download.
- Find a Sponsorship Broker – I don’t offer a brokerage service, but I do have a listing of brokers from around the world.
- I also offer consulting, workshops, webinars, and in-house training, and professional coaching for sponsors and sponsorship seekers, as well as

options for government and industry associations. Contact me on admin@powersponsorship.com to discuss a consulting, strategy sessions, customised in-house training, and coaching.

If you have any questions, a gripe, or would otherwise like to reach me, you can also feel free to drop me a line on admin@powersponsorship.com.

Kim Skildum-Reid is one of the sponsorship industry’s most influential thought leaders. She has a blue chip list of consulting and training clients spanning six continents, is author of global industry bestsellers, *The Sponsorship Seeker’s Toolkit* and *The Corporate Sponsorship Toolkit*, and commentates to major business media around the world. She is the brains behind industry hub, PowerSponsorship.com, and offers sponsorship consulting, training, speaking, and coaching. Kim can be reached at: Email: admin@powersponsorship.com | Phone AU: +61 2 9559 6444 | Phone US: +1 612 326 5265 or for more information, go to: <http://powersponsorship.com/>.

