

# Leveraging Research on Activation: Quester and Thompson's (2001) Impact on the Field of Sponsorship

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**Abstract** Sponsorship activations—that is, the ancillary marketing communication actions purported to enhance the association between sponsees and sponsors—are what make sponsorships come to life. Activations are generally considered to be critical elements of a sponsorship strategy; for some, perhaps even more so than the sponsorship itself. The work of Quester and Thompson (2001) was a landmark contribution to the study of sponsorship activation on conceptual, empirical, and methodological grounds. It led the way to a host of studies and, to this day, still strongly influences sponsorship research. This chapter highlights why at the time Quester and Thompson (2001) was a significant leap forward in the context of the existing sponsorship literature, calling attention to the fact that this article presented the results of the first study to put to the test the common belief that increasing the intensity of sponsorship activation is beneficial for sponsors. This chapter also makes the point that the rigorous methodological approach of Quester and Thompson (2001), which cleverly addressed issues of both internal and external validity, enhanced the impact of their research in the field of sponsorship. Finally, the chapter discusses the research studies that followed up on Quester and Thompson's (2001) study, the current research topics that echo its contribution today, as well as the future research directions that it suggests.

**Keywords** Sponsorship • Activation • Repeated exposure • Quester • Thompson

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## Key Contributions

Quester and Thompson's (2001) article (hereafter Q&T) improved upon the sponsorship research literature of its time in many different ways. Sponsorship research was then at a critical point, at a juncture between perpetuating a tradition of context-specific findings, where practical considerations often took precedence over scientific standards, and establishing itself as a full-blown academic field. The publication of Q&T, with its significant conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions, clearly marked the beginning of the scholarly and empirically driven phase of sponsorship research, which by all accounts continues to this day. Fittingly, the same year as the publication of Q&T, Cornwell et al. (2001), in a survey of key US sponsorship managers across many different industries, showed that managers considered activations as the most important weapon in the sponsor's arsenal; and yet, at that time, academic research on the topic was very limited.

## Conceptual Innovation

The concept of sponsorship activation is rooted in the sponsorship-linked marketing framework that was put forward by Cornwell (1995), an influential scholar in the field of sponsorship. Sponsorship-linked marketing consists in coordinating all marketing activities across stakeholders in order to enhance the sponsee-sponsor association. One important contribution of Q&T was to provide a rigorous empirical investigation of this framework's activation component; explicitly testing its added value as a sponsorship strategy. As sponsorship researchers and practitioners know, the up-front investments made by sponsors in the form of property right fees only buy the visibility that the sponsee provides directly. This visibility is usually limited and generic for all sponsors in a given tier (signages in and around the location of the event, logos in brochures, etc.). This is why sponsors generally engage in supplementary communication activities aimed at enhancing their association with the sponsored entity. The purpose of these activations—that not only take the form of advertising, but also of sweepstakes, packaging, samples, special product editions, etc. (Cornwell et al. 2005)—is “to exploit the commercial potential of the association between a sponsee and a sponsor” (Weeks et al. 2008, p. 639). For instance, *Procter & Gamble's* widely recognised “Proud sponsor of moms” advertising campaign that ran during the 2012 and 2014 Olympic Games, was aimed at promoting the link between the corporation, as well as its brands, and this event. Through the use of media vehicles apart from the event itself, *P&G* wanted to communicate to a larger audience the very fact that it was sponsoring the Olympics. Hence, above all, the fees paid to sponsees give a sponsor the right to activate this link and to use exclusive trademarks such as an event's logo, mascot, or taglines. Sponsorship researchers and practitioners alike consider that the bulk of a firm's sponsorship budget ought not to be devoted to the fees required to become

a sponsor, but rather to investments in various sponsorship activations (e.g. Crimmins and Horn 1996; Olson and Thjómóe 2009). Thanks to its empirical investigation, Q&T contributed to shed light on the specific role of sponsorship activations. In doing so, it solidified the conceptual stance initiated by Cornwell (1995) according to which in order to maximise their benefits, sponsorship programs should be supported by various marketing communication activities.

## ***Empirical Breakthrough***

The research question tackled by Q&T was innovative and the results obtained painted a very clear, yet contrasted picture. These findings consolidated a series of results from isolated studies, in which experimental and statistical controls were not as stringent, that had explored the potential benefits of sponsorship activations. In her own previous research, Pascale Quester had already shown a keen interest in the study of activations through two papers based on the Adelaide Formula One Grand Prix. In the first one (Quester 1997), sponsor awareness of residents of the city of Adelaide was higher for those sponsors that engaged in activations than for those that did not. Interestingly, the findings included a breakdown of the different activations that sponsors engaged in. For instance, then General Motors/Holden, enjoyed the highest awareness level of any sponsor performing activations by supporting the ‘celebrity race’; a peripheral event to the main race. These findings were confirmed in the article published the following year (Quester and Farrelly 1998) where the least visible sponsors in terms of activation reaped the smallest benefits from their investment.

Relevant research on activation was conducted by other researchers. Among these precursors, Crimmins and Horns (1996), through their analysis of NBC’s exclusive “Olympic Watch” data, showed that sponsors of the Olympics having invested in activations were generally able to create stronger associations with this event. For instance, 64 % of sponsors that used activations succeeded in creating a link with the Olympic Games in comparison with only 4 % of sponsors that did not. In addition, their results revealed that establishing this link was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for achieving perceptual changes of the sponsor’s brand image. In the same vein, Cornwell et al. (1997) found that sponsors of a basketball team that did not advertise during the game were not recalled by attendees and Otker and Hayes (1987), for their part, observed that sponsors gaining the most from their sponsorship during the 1986 World Cup were those with the greatest advertising presence during the event. However, although relevant, these studies did not allow a systematic investigation of the impact of activations on sponsorship effectiveness as no data were available regarding the type and amount of activation spending.

Building on these important prior findings, Q&T was a landmark empirical contribution to the research domain of sponsorship activation. Above all, the methodology employed was rigorous as well as relevant. For the first time, a study on sponsorship activation was conducted with a tight control on extraneous factors

while taking place in the field, aiming for both internal and external validity. Within the context of a real event, the *Adelaide Festival of the Arts*, a sample of city inhabitants was selected to participate in a two-stage treatment with control design where pre- and post-event measures were obtained from a first group that attended one of the events of the festival (treatment) and a second group that did not attend any of the festival's event (control). Participants in the treatment conditions had bought tickets for an event sponsored by one of three firms who dedicated various budget amounts to the activation of their sponsorship: 75 cents of activation spending for every dollar of sponsorship fee, 25 cents for every dollar, and no activation at all, respectively. The results showed the strongest awareness and attitude gains (pre- vs. post-event measures) among people who had attended an event sponsored by the firm with the strongest investment intensity, followed by the firm with an intermediary level of intensity; whereas the firm that did not activate did not reap much from its sponsorship. This yielded great insights, not only from the point of view of research validity because it was a well-crafted field experiment (i.e. use of a control group, inclusion of a no activation condition, before and after measures, sample of adult consumers, real event and real sponsors), but also because it investigated the effects of sponsorship activation at different levels of intensity (0.75 ratio vs. 0.25). It would be another 8 years before Olson and Thjómóe (2009) would address again the issue of activation budget-sponsorship fee ratio. Critically, using experiments with strong external validity, they found that this ratio can reach decreasing marginal returns in terms of sponsorship effectiveness beyond a certain level. In sum, Q&T's empirical impact on the field of sponsorship was seminal because it offered the first rigorous test of activation's benefits by relying on a stringent experimental design with longitudinal data gathered into the field.

### ***Methodological Advances***

Although Q&T's method did not allow investigating the effectiveness of different type of activation strategies, it nonetheless provided for the first time empirical evidence for the relationship between sponsorship activation intensity and favourable consumer responses. Indeed, before the publication of Q&T's article, the sponsorship research literature had not seen a rigorously controlled field experiment. The majority of empirical papers were either descriptive in nature (e.g. Gardner and Shuman 1987), based on case studies, best practice reports, or post-event surveys that left much insight to guesswork (e.g. Amis et al. 1999; Bennet 1999). Although Pham (1992) as well as d'Astous and Bitz (1995) used an experimental design approach, their stimuli and data collection procedures were modelled on the laboratory experiment. While the work of Meenaghan (1983; 2001) and his collaborators (e.g. Meenaghan and Shipley 1999) had laid the conceptual foundations for what was to come empirically, it was not until Q&T that this became a full-fledged reality. Building on these important previous works, Q&T brought experimental designs to the field.

## Lasting Influence on the Field of Sponsorship

In addition to being a significant contribution in the area of sponsorship activation, many subfields of sponsorship are indebted to Q&T regarding their progress in the advancement of knowledge, either empirically or theoretically.

### *Conceptual Refinements of the Activation Concept*

First and foremost, Q&T led the way to a series of rigorous empirical studies on activation itself. These papers cover a broad array of activation tools such as advertising (e.g. Grohs et al. 2004; Olson and Thjómóe 2009), product packaging (Woodside and Summers 2012), product trials during the event (Sneath et al. 2005), and websites (Weeks et al. 2008). The results of these studies have confirmed the benefits of sponsorship activation across a variety of applications. In addition to spurring researchers to further investigate sponsorship activation and its benefits, Q&T also fostered further conceptual developments of the activation construct. This is particularly evident in the research program of Bettina Cornwell and her collaborators where important refinements to the notion of activation were made. Cornwell et al. (2005) popularised the concept of articulation, a special case of activation, where the activation message is purported not only to strengthen the sponsee-sponsor link, but also to explain the relationship between the sponsee and the sponsor. Message articulation is usually relied upon by sponsors that are incongruent, or lacking natural fit with the sponsee. *McDonald's* campaign articulating its sponsorship of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games offers a good illustration of message articulation. Titled “being together”, the campaign featured a family sharing a meal at a *McDonald's* restaurant while watching the games on TV. A subsequent study by Cornwell et al. (2006) showed the beneficial effects of articulation message on sponsor recall, whether the sponsors are congruent or not with the sponsee. Interestingly, their findings also revealed that the detrimental impact of the presence of competitors of the focal sponsor in the communication landscape can be alleviated by well-conceived articulation messages. The positive impact of articulation messages on sponsor evaluation was confirmed by Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) and Coppetti et al. (2009) who showed that articulation can foster image transfer—that is, whereby the image characteristics of the sponsee rub off the image of its sponsor. More recently, Olson and Thjómóe (2011) showed that articulation can improve the perceived congruence of the sponsee-sponsor pair, confirming that the benefits of articulation are explained in good part by this enhanced congruence.

The concept of activation was further refined by Weeks et al. (2008) who made the distinction between leveraging and activating. While leveraging represents a somewhat passive way to communicate the association between the sponsee and the sponsor, activation reflects a more proactive strategy, a strategy that requires inputs from consumers. This distinction is particularly relevant in an online context

because of the many possibilities for consumers to interact with sponsors through their website (e.g., proactive actions, such as clicking through, can be requested), as compared with merely being on the receiving end of activation messages. Their findings revealed that leveraging is not as good as activation from the point of view of sponsorship effectiveness. In an effort to further examine the impact of the interactivity that online contexts afford, Carrillat et al. (2014b) took the study of activation into the realm of social media by showing that event-related Facebook postings that require more engagement from Facebook users (solving riddles, thinking metaphorically about the objectives of the event, etc.) are more effective at promoting favorable responses.

### ***Repeated Exposures to Sponsorship Activations***

Although in most real-world situations, target consumers are exposed several times to a sponsor's activation initiatives over time (e.g. the multiple exposures to P&G 'Moms' campaign), only a few studies have examined the impact of message repetition in the context of sponsorship activation. Even if it is fair to assume that consumers in Q&T were exposed more than once to activations regarding the sponsored artistic events, their data did not relate systematically message frequency with consumer responses. Several recent papers have however investigated the effect of message repetitions. Mazodier and Merunka (2012) examined the effects of exposing consumers to three activation messages at intervals of 3 or 4 days. Their results showed that repetition leads to significantly more positive consumer responses toward the sponsor than no sponsorship activation at all. Another approach to studying activation message repetition is to rely on activation expenditures as a proxy for message exposure frequency to the target market, such as in Walraven et al. (2014). Their longitudinal data showed that the benefits reaped by *Heineken*, the UEFA Champions' League main sponsor since 2005, in terms of brand name recall and recognition over a 4-year period, were significantly and positively related to the size of the activation budget.

### ***Sponsorship Clutter***

If activation is meant to make the sponsee-sponsor link more vivid among stakeholders, it can also be a way to inoculate against sponsorship clutter, that is, when there are competitors in the perceptual space occupied by a focal sponsor, whether they themselves are sponsors of the same, or another, sponsee (e.g. sponsoring athletes taking part in a sponsored event), or are not sponsors at all. Although Q&T reported a high level of clutter in the sponsorship environment of their study, mentioning for instance 33 different logos of various sponsors in the Festival Booking Guide, they did not systematically investigate whether activation messages

can reduce in some way the possible negative effects of sponsorship clutter. This question was examined in the aforementioned study by Cornwell et al. (2006) who showed that the presence of a competitor in the sponsorship environment creates some clutter that is detrimental to sponsor recall and that articulation can circumvent this problem to some extent. Ruth and Simonin (2006) on the other hand showed that clutter can be detrimental to consumer appreciation of the sponsee when the sponsor's commercial objectives are apparent, but that these evaluations improve when the motivations behind the sponsorship are perceived as benevolent. While the work of Cornwell et al. (2006) and that of Ruth and Simonin (2006) have revealed a negative impact of sponsorship clutter on memory of sponsors and evaluation of the sponsee, its effects on sponsor evaluation were not addressed. Carrillat et al. (2005) did not observe a negative impact of sponsorship clutter on attitudinal responses toward sponsors. However, they found that when clutter results from concurrent sponsorship (i.e. the presence of other brands sponsoring the same event), the image of all the sponsors may transfer between each other; which can be detrimental or beneficial, depending on the sponsor's held images.

### ***Broadening the Scope of Sponsorship Research***

One would be hard pressed to find an empirical study prior to Q&T that investigated something else than sports properties. Although Q&T did not specifically frame their findings within the realm of arts sponsorship, this was noticeably one of the first studies to bring sponsorship research outside of the sports domain. In doing so, Q&T paved the way for subsequent studies to be conducted in the context of the arts and culture. In addition, this prompted questions about the generalisation of sponsorship findings outside of sports, an issue brought up by Meenaghan (2001) who highlighted the importance of accounting for effects associated with different levels of sponsorship, such as the type of activity sponsored (sports, arts, cause, etc.). In this sense, Q&T represents a significant research episode in the debate concerning the generalisability of findings across different sponsored entities. In an article devoted to this issue, Olson (2010) concluded that for the most part, research findings appear to hold across different sponsored activities. However, this is an isolated study that does not account for all possible variations across contexts. A rigorous meta-analysis of the effectiveness of sponsorship using the sponsee's domain of activity as a moderator would allow to address this question systematically.

As shown above, up to the publication of Q&T, many sponsorship studies were plagued with methodological and conceptual fragility. Hence, Q&T not only represented a sharp turn in this regard, but it did so in a domain very sparingly examined previously. One consequence is that more papers on sponsorship began to appear in the arts management research literature. For instance, the *International Journal of Arts Management*, which rarely discussed sponsorship issues before the 2000s, witnessed a growing number of contributions in this area (e.g. d'Astous et al. 2005; Ropo and Sauer 2003) in the wake of the publication of Q&T.

## ***Ambush Marketing***

Q&T also revived important questions related to ambush marketing, that is, when non-sponsor firms attempt to be perceived as actual sponsors by means of diverse strategies, such as sponsoring the broadcast of the event, using non restricted event-themed elements in their communication materials, sponsoring a competing event, etc. (Carrillat et al. 2014a). The issue of ambush marketing was investigated by scholars early on (i.e. Sandler and Shani 1989), but for more than a decade this research topic remained quite dormant. One contribution of Q&T was to present empirical evidence related to involuntary ambushing, that is, when non-sponsor brands become associated with an event although no intended attempt was made at posing as real sponsors. Always in the vanguard of new developments, years later, Pascale Quester and collaborators looked at the so-called 'name and shame' strategy used by sponsors to retaliate against ambushers by unmasking them to the general public (Mazodier et al. 2012).

## ***Activation and Event-Sponsor Congruence***

One of the most often studied concepts in sponsorship is sponsor-sponsee congruence, or the extent to which the sponsee and the sponsor fit well together (e.g. Speed and Thompson 2000). Sponsorship researchers generally distinguish between sponsorships that seem to fit naturally (e.g. *Nike* and sport properties such as events, athletes or teams) and others where fit is not as obvious (e.g. *Visa* and the Olympics or *Nike* and an art exhibit) or downright inexistent (e.g. *Camel* cigarettes and off-road car racing). Pascale Quester made significant contributions in the specific area of sponsor-sponsee congruence as well, specifically regarding the underlying dimensions of congruence (Fleck and Quester 2007). Researchers working in this area are interested in establishing on what bases (image, concrete features, brand concept, geographical match, etc.) is congruence formed (e.g. Carrillat et al. 2013; Olson and Thjómóe 2011). Later, Quester tackled the issue of activation and congruence by examining how they combine to influence sponsorship effectiveness over time (i.e. Mazodier and Quester 2014). This article's contribution resides in its findings that affective reactions toward the brand improves more sharply over time for sponsors that invest heavily in activations. Set during the 2010 FIFA World Cup and the 2012 London Olympics, respectively, the two studies bring important insights to the debate concerning whether congruent or incongruent sponsorships produce the best results. This question essentially opposes human memory associative theorists who argue that congruent sponsorships facilitate the spreading activation of associations in consumers' minds, which is a source of positive affect (Carrillat et al. 2005), and cognitive elaboration theorists who believe that incongruence leads to deeper information processing, which produces greater attitude change and better memory for sponsors (Jagre et al. 2001).



According to Mazodier and Quester (2014), such an opposition might be misguided. What sponsorship researchers and managers should rather look at is whether activating a sponsorship is more or less effective over time as a function of the initial level of sponsee-sponsor congruence. Their results show that the apparent superior effectiveness of congruent sponsorships may be in fact punctual, due to sponsorship research having generally focused on immediate, or short-term effects. Thanks to the longitudinal design adopted in this study, the results show that, over time, the potential for improvement of mildly incongruent sponsee-sponsor associations, through diverse sponsorship activations and articulations, is greater than that of congruent sponsee-sponsor pairs. In addition, the rate of improvement of the effectiveness of mildly incongruent sponsorship is faster than that of congruent sponsorships. The incongruence resolution process that is at the source of the superiority of mild incongruence apparently requires some time to significantly impact consumer's evaluative reactions, a phenomenon that Mazodier and Quester's (2014) design could unearth. With this article, Pascale Quester's work came full circle; starting in 2001 with research on the effectiveness of activations that triggered many contributions, this 2014 paper nicely mixes together, in a longitudinal perspective, activations and sponsee-sponsor congruence, two of the cornerstone concepts of sponsorship.

## Conclusion

Sponsorship research has improved drastically within the last 15 years; there is now greater attention paid to theoretical developments, more rigorous and relevant research designs, better sampling methods, more sophisticated measuring instruments and analyses, and greater consideration of internal and external validity issues. This evolution can be traced to the hard work of many scholars devoted to making sponsorship research a truly scientific enterprise. Among them, Pascale Quester stands as a prominent figure. Her research approach, oftentimes based on longitudinal measurements taken in the field, with a tight experimental control, maximises both relevance and rigor; characteristics that have become more widespread in sponsorship studies. Q&T significantly contributed to bring sponsorship research into its modern phase. At a time when the sponsorship literature was almost exclusively focused on sports events, and when descriptive and non-causal research designs were all too common, this article marked a clear divide between two eras.

Research by Q&T and their followers has brought many important advances in our understanding of sponsorship activation and articulation, but there is still a great deal to accomplish. We would like to conclude this homage to Pascale Quester by suggesting some directions for future research.

To this day research on sponsorship activation and articulation has essentially focused on the reinforcement of the sponsor-sponsee link. While this emphasis is understandable, it must be recognised that activation messages can be articulated

around various dimensions. As a first example, recently we have been interested in our laboratory in looking at a quite common although, strangely enough, understudied phenomenon: sponsor change, that is, the situation where, for some reasons, a current sponsor exits from a sponsorship and is replaced by another. We discovered that when presented with this fact, consumers naturally engage in developing various causal explanations of the behaviors of the former as well as the new sponsors. For instance, they might think that the former sponsor had attained its objectives or, in contrast, that it considered the sponsorship as unprofitable. Inferences are also made in relation with the new sponsor, for example that it was an opportunistic move. In addition we found that, depending on various characteristics of the sponsor change situation, notably, the duration of the former partnership, these inferences vary and are likely to impact consumer responses (e.g. purchase intentions). Managing consumer inferences in this type of situation is therefore critical, and this must be done by communicating adequately with consumers. Hence, new sponsors in this situation should consider the possibility of activating their sponsorship not only to reinforce their link with the sponsee but also, and perhaps, more importantly, with the objective of creating among consumers, through proper articulation, durable impressions of support and continuity.

A second example, issued also from research in our laboratory, concerns the importance of attenuating the inferences that consumers often make about the apparent commercial motivations of sponsors. As discussed elsewhere (Carrillat and d'Astous 2012), the advertising-sponsorship interface is something that sponsorship researchers and practitioners should always consider carefully, and manage, since consumers may sometimes develop impressions that a sponsor is more interested in exploiting an entity (e.g. an event) than supporting it. The goodwill that is often associated with sponsorship is in jeopardy whenever consumers make such inferences and concrete actions should be taken to harness them. Activating the sponsorship with adequate articulation can serve this purpose and could be done with the objective of convincing consumers of the altruistic nature of the sponsor's intentions. Research is needed on this important aspect of sponsorship management. It would be relevant in particular to verify if inferences of commercial exploitation made by consumers depend on the type of property that is sponsored (e.g. arts, sports or cause-related actions) and compare the effectiveness of articulation in attenuating these inferences across these different types. In their research, Q&T found that their participants had positive perceptions of the sponsors of the Adelaide Festival of the Arts, but did not have the data to test or even speculate about possible differences with other sponsorship contexts.

Another relevant direction for future research concerns the important issue of sponsorship portfolio, that is, the situation where a firm sponsors several entities (Chien et al. 2011). To this day, research on sponsorship activation and articulation has mostly centered on single-entity sponsoring. Yet, it is quite common that firms sponsor several entities which may, or may not, be consistent with respect to their domain of activity and their reputation. As recent research in our laboratory has demonstrated, any given sponsor-sponsee link in a sponsorship portfolio might suffer from these multiple connections, because consumers may not only have some

difficulty in establishing several sponsor-sponsee links, but also in giving meaning to these numerous associations, especially when there is high variance among the sponsees. Activating a given sponsorship in the context of a sponsorship portfolio should therefore be made with a consideration of consumers' knowledge of the sponsor's involvement with other properties and the objective of facilitating the establishment of distinctive and coherent sponsor-sponsee associations.

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