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Tries and Conversions: Are sports sponsors pursuing the right objectives?

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Abstract

Sports sponsorship is perceived as important in developing relationships with key clients. However, few companies set relationship marketing objectives when sponsoring sports. This paper aims to examine whether sports sponsors are pursuing the right objectives. It concludes that a deeper understanding of the sponsors' relationship marketing objectives could heighten the sponsor's success, thereby, reinforcing and sustaining their own relationship with the sponsoring organisation.

Executive Summary

Since Rugby Union Football in the UK was professionalised in 1985, clubs have increasingly turned to sponsorship as a means of generating revenue, yet are only likely to sustain such revenues if they continue to provide a means of the sponsoring organisation meeting their objectives. Undoubtedly sponsoring such activities can bring benefits to a sponsor, yet these benefits may be in areas unstated by the sponsor as a key objective. With better understanding of what the sponsoring organisation actually wanted to achieve and what benefits were actually accrued, clubs may be able to offer better evidence of cost-effective returns for the sponsor, which may aid the sustainability of sponsorship revenues.

Sports sponsorship is a key element of many organisations' integrated marketing communications strategies. In theory if not always in practice, the achievement of an organisation's marketing communications objectives should aid an organisation's achievement of its corporate objectives. However, the decision to sponsor a sporting event, and therefore set and evaluate the objectives that such an undertaking should achieve, is not always within the functional domain of marketing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while stating broad corporate aims of "enhancing corporate image", in practice many organisations use sports sponsorship to entertain key clients. Although corporate entertainment is often stated as meeting a corporate objective, it could be seen as meeting a marketing objective, built into a strategy for developing meaningful relationships with corporate clients. As sports sponsorship is perceived as so important in developing client relationships, yet few companies set relationship marketing objectives when sponsoring sports, the aim of this paper is to examine whether sports sponsors are pursuing the right objectives.

A review of the evidence gathered from a range of prior studies was undertaken, enhanced with a new empirical investigation into the stated objectives of sponsors of a Welsh Rugby Football Club (RFC). A Mintel report (2000) into sports sponsorship found that Welsh respondents had the greatest interest in

rugby (34.5%) and it is the nation's most popular sport. The club chosen for this study is one of the biggest players in the Welsh rugby sponsorship market; it also has the largest capacity for corporate hospitality. The sponsors who participated in the study ranged across Welsh SMEs in manufacturing and service industries, UK retailers, an international sports clothing manufacturer and an American IT company. These sponsors are involved in activities spanning across local club and event sponsorship to sponsorship of UK sports stadia, UK premiership football clubs and international sporting events. Respondents were asked to rank, in order of importance, their reasons for sponsoring the RFC. The study has found that while sports sponsorship is perceived as playing a key role in developing client relationships, few sponsors had set relationship marketing objectives for their sponsoring activities.

The results of this research have implications for both the sports sponsorship industry and Rugby Union alike. A need for RFC's to develop a deeper understanding of their sponsor's real objectives exists. RFC's should clearly demonstrate how their sponsorship opportunities can assist sponsors in building meaningful and sustainable relationships with their own customers. This could be achieved by setting relationship-based objectives which will enable a more positive evaluation of their investment by sponsors, and not to focus on areas that may be difficult to evaluate, or that fail to come to fruition. This in turn will reinforce the RFC's own relationship with their sponsoring organisations.

Rationale

The advent of professionalism to Rugby Union Football in 1995 ensured that a vast amount of change was required. Clubs were given the "right to control their own commercial destinies within the reasonable parameters set by governing bodies" (Verow, Lawrence and McCormick, 1999). Commercial activities such as sponsorship were targeted as primary means for generating income, and the resulting onset of commercialism created an explosion in business activity within the rugby world. Although rugby union was a late entrant into the market, the sponsorship rise of the late 1980's was evident in the game, and even under the amateur parameters "money was pouring into the game from the sponsors' pockets" (Edwards, 2002). Significant movements included the addition of a sponsor's name on playing kit, followed by

Heineken's sponsorship of the Welsh League from 1990-96 (Chandler & Nauright, 1999). The advent of professionalism, surge in popularity and media attention spurred the growth in sponsorship activity with benefits accruing to both the sponsor and the sponsored. Indeed Rines (2002) reports that when Guinness sponsored the 1999 Rugby World Cup "the brand achieved enormous awareness levels and a dramatic increase in sales as well as greatly improved relationships with key business contacts such as the press and distributors".

Harris and Jenkins (2001) conducted interviews in 25 UK rugby union clubs and found that only 60% of the Welsh Premier League clubs studied were undertaking some form of formalised strategic marketing planning, and some Welsh clubs were not involved in any strategic marketing planning at all. Given the need for professional RFCs to engage in commercial activities, especially in seeking sponsorship deals, it may be that a more strategic approach to communicating the real benefits to sponsors in line with meeting the sponsors' objectives would certainly aid Rugby clubs.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship, the "commercial activity, whereby one party permits another an opportunity to exploit an association with a target audience in return for funds, services or resources" (Fill, 1999) has moved away from its philanthropic origins (Farrelly *et. al.,* 1997) towards a strategic role (Levin, Beasley and Gamble, 2004; Dolphin, 2003) as an economic-based partnership (Quester and Thompson, 2001) with a powerful ability to positively impact upon and persuade consumers (Crimmins and Horn, 1996). The 1980's saw a sharp rise in the popularity of sponsorship, particularly in sport, which

Meenaghan (1991) suggests was primarily due to the "increased cost of media advertising compared with potentially greater coverage of various sports", and which Shannon (1999) credits as arising from the many opportunities offered by the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. As a result, the decade saw sports sponsorship becoming a marketing practice that required sophisticated market research, large investment and strategic planning. Lee, Sandler and Shani (1997) note that sponsorship expenditure in the UK alone had risen from "£4 million in 1970 to £400 million in 1993 (Meenaghan, 1994)". By 1999, the UK sponsorship industry was worth approximately £784 million (Mintel, 2000). Of individual markets comprising arts, sport and broadcast sponsorship, the sports industry received the largest portion of revenue (Mintel, 2000), reflecting the global trend whereby sports events receive "an estimated 65 per cent of sponsorship spending" (Lee, Sandler and Shani, 1997). Fenton (2001) notes that by 2000 this figure had risen to 69 per cent "of all reported deals". There have been claims that there has been a downturn in the sports sponsorship marketplace, yet Fenton (2001) believes that even though "as in all booms, there has been a slowdown followed by steady growth as the fundamental drivers behind sponsorship are still in place". High-price, long-term sponsorship deals are now commonplace, with notable examples being Manchester United's £30 million, 4 year deal with Vodafone (Sharkey, 2002), Barclaycard's 3 year £48 million sponsorship of football's Premier League, AXA sponsoring the FA Cup in an £25 million 4 year deal, and Npower's 3 year £11 million sponsorship of English Test Cricket (Fry, 2001). However, with such expenditure comes increasing concern about cost-effective returns (Dolphin, 2003). Sponsorship can undoubtedly bring great benefits to a sponsoring organisation, but these may not always be in the area stated by the sponsor as its key objective. Therefore evaluations of the benefits brought may not

always be positive. This could be because sponsors are not setting, and therefore evaluating, the right objectives. This paper therefore examines the literature on sponsorship objectives in order to establish if there are inconsistencies between what sports sponsors state they seek to achieve, what they actually seek to achieve, and what benefits they actually gain from sponsoring such events. A review of the literature highlights the inter-functional nature of sponsorship when used to achieve strategic objectives that may be at corporate or marketing levels within an organisation.

Sports Sponsorship Objectives

Lee, Sandler and Shani (1997) note that "past research in event sponsorship has largely focused on the sponsoring company perspective: issues such as identifying the sponsoring companies objectives". Sandler and Shani (1993) summarised these objectives firstly, as corporate objectives; then marketing objectives; followed by media objectives; and finally, personal objectives. Lee, Sandler and Shani (1997) also note that the priority of these objectives has altered over time. Historically these priorities appeared to be in exactly the reverse order, when, at the inception of sponsorship as a concept dating back to ancient Rome, personal objectives were the lead priority (Ukman, 1984; Carrigan and Carrigan, 1997). Early academic studies show media objectives leading the way (see Lee, Sandler and Shani 1997), but by the 1990's, surveys by Shanklin and Kuzma (1992) "find two basic reasons why companies sponsor events: to increase awareness of corporate or brand names, and to maintain or improve the company image. No other purposes come close in terms of importance."

Corporate objectives

Corporate objectives are largely based around image and awareness of the sponsoring brand. Martin (1994) suggests that if there is a "fit" between the image of the sponsored entity and the image of the sponsor, then the sponsor's image can be enhanced through the transfer of the entity's image to the sponsor. Verow, *et. al.*, (1999) state that the entity effectively becomes part of the sponsor's brand image, a view supported by Blythe (2000) who argues that "sponsorship works best when there is some existing link". However, Crimmins and Horn (1996) reflect that to gain an advantage, the link must be one the brand enjoys but competitors do not, and it must be communicated effectively.

It is often evident that a sponsor's aim is to generate public awareness of the company, particularly if it is newly created or recently re-branded. Depending on the scale of the deal and the size of the sponsored activity or brand, a certain amount of public exposure and awareness can be created. For example, following Delta Airlines' status of Official Airline to the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, their global brand awareness rose from 38% to 70% (Nelms, 1996). A further example is the sponsorship of the Six Nations rugby union tournament by Lloyds TSB which resulted in awareness of the recently merged company rising from 4% to 15% in the latter half of 1998 (Brassington & Pettitt, 2000). However, Fill (1999) asserts that while sponsorship does certainly create awareness, it is more likely to reinforce past behaviour than prompt new purchase behaviour, which could well point to the importance of sports sponsorship in developing relationships between the sponsoring company and its target markets.

While sports sponsorship may be used to improve corporate image and public perception, negative perceptions have sometimes been employed to positive effect through sponsorship. For example, in the late 1980's, the cigarette paper manufacturer Rizla, sponsored Pontypridd Rugby Football Club (RFC). Initially, there was a geographical link with the company's factory location near Pontypridd, but there was also the issue of both roll-up cigarettes and Pontypridd RFC being unfashionable at the time. When also considering the 'working class' links and the element of danger with both smoking and rugby, this proved to be a well thought-out use of some quintessentially negative factors to create an effective 'fit' (Chandler and Nauright, 1999). More recently, the sponsorship of professional darts player Richie Davies by pie manufacturer Fray Bentos would also appear to draw upon working class links, as well as the unhealthy image of pies and a game of darts down the pub.

More recently companies are looking towards community involvement and cause-related marketing as a means of improving their brand image, building trust and asserting an air of social responsibility (Till and Nowak, 2000). Thus sponsorship of community schemes and activities is increasingly common, and Mintel (2000) estimated that in 1999 community sponsorship was worth £59 million. McManus (2002) reflects that "as society develops, people's lives and consumers' buying patterns change", through community involvement companies can create stability through anticipating change and reacting rapidly to customer needs, "if the brand is tied up with this emotional experience it makes its disposal more difficult" again allowing for closer bonding and customer loyalty.

One often overlooked corporate objective, particularly in the fight for gaining competitive advantage is corporate exclusivity. Copeland (1991) found that corporate exclusivity was the most important factor for sponsors and would be significant for those sponsors wishing to be the first in their industry to move into sponsorship or a particular area of it. Verow et al. (1999) argue that success is often dependent upon the degree of exclusivity gained by the sponsor.

Marketing Objectives

Many companies seek to reach target markets via sponsorship. However, as well as enabling target specificity, sponsorship, uniquely, can also reach a number of corporate publics in a single campaign (Meenaghan, 1994). Sponsorship is also used as a means of positioning a brand, particularly if it encounters trouble, or a new industry sector or geographic area is entered (Turner, 1987). Low-cost airline, bmibaby, used this tactic by sponsoring both Cardiff RFC and the ITV Wales regional weather reports, following its launch of flights out of Cardiff-Wales Airport in October 2002.

The increase of sales is sometimes argued to be a central marketing objective. Sponsors "sometimes explicitly seek and achieve bottom-line sales results" (Meenaghan, 1996) along with seeking increased market share. However, Sandler and Shani (1993) argue that "consumers favour sponsors but this favourism may not translate into immediate purchase behaviour". This argument is supported by Kitchen (1999) who notes "sponsorship, like brand advertising, is unlikely to generate sales increases". However, the marketing literature has evidenced a shift away from a sales-focused, transaction-based view of marketing objectives aimed at customer or sales

acquisition, towards a focus on building and developing a commitment to longer-term, meaningful, profitable customer relationships (see Gronroos, 1994).

Media Objectives

From a marketing management perspective, sponsorship has traditionally resided within the promotional element of the marketing mix (Tripodi, 2001). Although Shanklin and Kuzma (1992) note that corporate sponsorship "defies neat classification as philanthropy, or as one of the traditional elements of the promotion mix." Most sponsorship will create some level of media visibility, be it in a local newspaper or as an international headline, and media is often perceived as adding real value to the sponsorship deal (Verow *et. al.*, 1999). Generally, the larger the sponsorship fee, the more high profile the sponsored brand or event and thus the higher the media visibility. A further media-based benefit is that sponsorship offers a clutter-free medium (Erdogan and Kitchen 1998).

Personal Objectives

Meenaghan (1991) recognises that the "capacity of sponsorship to fulfil personal objectives is largely unrivalled by other methods of marketing communications". Thus, although it is not an ideal situation, many sponsorship deals are a result of management interest (Sandler and Shani, 1993), often referred to as "Chairman's-Wife Syndrome", (Pringle and Thompson, 2001).

Building Relationships

Olkkonen (2001) notes the "theoretically and methodologically narrow perspective" undertaken by many authors on the subject of sports sponsorship, particularly "in light of the simultaneous 'paradigm shift', or shift of conceptual emphasis, in marketing in

general towards more relational oriented approaches". Yet, the relationships and networks Olkkonen (2001) and Olkkonen *et. al.* (2000) seek to explore are mainly those between sponsor and sponsored, not between sponsor and target market or key customers. Dolphin (2003) discusses the Performance Research (2001) study which "suggests that as cricket sponsorship is reaching saturation point the next step is to build meaningful relations with fans, enabling them to see that sponsorship benefits them as brand users as well as sports fans". Dolphin (2003) also comments that "perhaps another objective is to form relationships with customers", but this perspective is not fully explored. Jowdy and McDonald (2003) believe that sponsorship can help "strengthen relationships with fans" and Levin, Beasley and Gamble (2004) note that "companies commonly cite brand loyalty as a reason for sponsoring sporting events or teams", yet they also note that, before their study there was "scant literature on how sponsorship affects brand loyalty".

One aspect associated with sponsorship that may help link the sponsoring organisation's stated corporate objectives with the relationship marketing benefits that sponsorship can offer is the area of corporate hospitality (Flack, 1999). As Bennett (2003) notes, "liking is known to encourage commitment (see Sears *et al.*, 1991, Ch. 8), and it has been established that people tend to like individuals or organisations that reward them in some way". Corporate hospitality facilities are now widely available within many levels of sport and are thus often utilised by sponsors to entertain a wide variety of stakeholders including government, employees, suppliers and clients. Many sponsors would argue that meeting relevant parties in an informal setting creates

goodwill and allows the development of client relations, as "a hospitality event allows for the host's staff and their clients to develop a relationship beyond that of host and client" (Mullin *et. al.*, 2000), yet this is often seen as aiming to achieve corporate, not marketing objectives. Bennett (2003), noting that corporate hospitality "frequently overlaps with sponsorship", has also found that corporate hospitality "has not been the subject of serious academic (rather than practitioner) research". This may be even more surprising given that Bennett (2003) also notes spending on corporate hospitality "at spectator sports was expected to increase by 18 per cent between 2000 and 2003".

Many authors agree that another problem facing sponsorship surrounds the issue of evaluating its effectiveness, especially given the recent management emphasis on evaluation measures (see Farrelly *et. al.*, 1997; Dolphin, 2003). When measures are proposed, these are based on evaluating the sponsoring organisation's stated corporate objectives, such as measuring attitude, perception and campaign visibility (Stipp and Schiavone, 1996), or measuring attitudinal effects, direct market effects, and impact on stock prices (Kover, 2001).

> *"Sponsors are increasingly concerned about what results they are getting for their sponsorship dollars … The value of sponsorships is being called into question much more often than in the past … In fact, sponsorships are under a particularly strong microscope. And no wonder. The cost of sponsorship can be staggering."*
> Horn and Baker (1999)

This problem is compounded when gauging the level of evaluation organisations apply to their corporate hospitality efforts. Bennett (2003) cites Thatcher's (2000) "survey of 77 UK companies which found that only 34 per cent of them [organisations] actually

evaluated events against marketing objectives; while 35 per cent applied no measurement at all" (Bennett, 2003).

> "*This apparent lack of concern for evaluating the efficacy of CH among UK companies was explained by Baxter (2000) in terms of it being regarded as "the least scientific of all aspects of marketing" (p. 12). The effectiveness of CH was not assessed, Baxter continued, even when sponsorship (especially sports sponsorship) and CH expenditures overlapped because it was "extremely difficult to evaluate with precision what proportion of CH falls under sponsorship, as companies show different patterns and policies in their marketing spending" (p. 9). Another potential difficulty with evaluation is the length of the lead time between a client attending an event and his or her company placing an order with the host firm (McKenzie, 1997). This might be anything up to two years in duration, and circumstances might have changed dramatically in the intervening period.*" (Bennett, 2003).

Are Sports Sponsors Pursuing the Right Objectives?

It would appear that different aspects of the sponsorship deal are used to achieve different objectives at varying corporate and marketing levels within an organisation. Indeed, Dolphin (2003) recognises that a "valuable aspect is sponsorship's ability to contribute to a broad range of objectives". However, Dolphin (2003) also agrees with the current commonly held view that corporate objectives are now stated as the main priority for organisations entering sponsorship arrangements. Historically, a company's or individual's main priority for sponsoring sports tended to be based on personal objectives. More recently, studies have found that corporate objectives, such as improving brand awareness, brand or corporate image, and reputation are now stated as the lead priority. These are followed by marketing objectives that include brand positioning, reaching target markets, increasing sales, and building meaningful long-term relationships with customers. The third priority is achieving media objectives such as enhanced visibility and the use of a clutter-free medium. Personal objectives, otherwise referred to as "Chairman's Wife Syndrome", now come last. In contrast, Zafer

et. al.'s (1998) study reflected that 'press coverage and exposure' are reasons for sponsorship for the largest majority (84.6%) of sponsors with 'TV coverage and exposure' coming second (78.5%) and 'promoting brand awareness' a close third (78.4%). However, this perspective very much depends on whether the sponsoring organisations perceive TV and press coverage as meeting a corporate objective (in the form of creating brand awareness) or a media objective (in the form of creating visibility). "Researchers suggest that one role for sponsorship is the enhancement of corporate identity - but can identity be changed by a form of communication campaign?" (Dolphin, 2003). The issue of sponsorship's contribution to building relationships has also been raised, and its link to the opportunity for providing corporate hospitality to key clients. Sports sponsorship is perceived as important in developing relationships with key clients. However, relationship marketing objectives do not feature prominently in the literature.

Research Method

The club chosen for this study is one of the biggest players in the Welsh rugby sponsorship market, and commands the highest rights fees (it was the first Welsh club to receive a six figure sum for title sponsorship). It also has the largest capacity for corporate hospitality. Of all the UK regions, a Mintel report (2000) into sports sponsorship found that Welsh respondents had the greatest interest in rugby (34.5%) and it is the nation's most popular sport. A purposive sample (Saunders *et. al.*, 2000) of all five 'Title Sponsors' of the RFC were contacted during the 2001-2002 season, as each has long-term commitments to the club, and each receives a range of benefits

from their sponsorship package, including, access to corporate hospitality suites, which allowed for responses about sponsorship objectives to be drawn from a wide range of options. Three seasonal sponsors and one corporate hospitality suite-holder were also contacted. The sample spanned across Welsh SMEs in manufacturing and service industries, UK retailers, an international sports clothing manufacturer and an American IT company. These sponsors are involved in activities ranging from local club and event sponsorship to sponsorship of UK sports stadia, UK premiership football clubs and international sporting events. Saunders *et, al.* (2000) believe that this type of sampling method is viable in situations where the researcher is working with small sample sizes, and when there is an in-depth focus upon key themes. Although this research is broadly interpretive in nature, focus groups and interviewing were both also discounted as data collection methods due to the broad geographical dispersement of the sample. After consideration of the literature, it appeared that companies gave a number of recurring reasons for sponsorship. Given that data was to be gathered on specifically identified issues it was decided to use these previously specified reasons for sponsoring sports as a framework for developing a semi-structured questionnaire that allowed some anticipation of response through closed questions, as well as using open questions to probe into unknown areas. Questions were presented in the form of a Likert Attitude Scale, with respondents rating their objectives as 5 if the reason was of high importance in their decision, or 1 if it was of low importance (see Table 1). A telephone call was made to respondents informing them of the study and that a questionnaire would shortly be arriving by mail. One questionnaire was sent to each of the club's nine sponsors, addressed to the sponsoring decision-maker within each organisation. All questionnaires were eventually returned, with some respondents requiring a telephone call reminder.

Responses were then aggregated and are represented in table format below identifying the overall ranking of sponsoring organisations' objectives.

Findings

Despite the use of a five-point scale, clustering around the mid-point did not occur. Responses bore out the view that sports sponsorship was aimed at meeting corporate objectives, with all but one respondent stating increasing public awareness of the company, and accentuating corporate image as their highest ranked objective. Yet every respondent cited improving client relationships as their main objective. In answer to the open question, the only other reasons given for sponsoring the club were enhancing the "expansive, forward-thinking culture of company" by one sponsor, and to get a return on investment by another.

Discussion and Implications

The literature points to a recent shift in emphasis of objectives for companies sponsoring sports (Lee, Sandler and Shani, 1997). Corporate objectives are frequently stated as the most important by sports sponsors, with marketing objectives cited as the next most important (Sandler and Shani, 1993). However, the exact nature of these corporate, marketing and even media objectives would appear in some cases to overlap, and this may be due to the inter-functional nature of sponsorship. Corporate hospitality and its links with both sponsorship and relationship-building is also a key objective stated by many sponsors, yet little academic research has been conducted into the effectiveness of corporate hospitality programmes (Bennett, 2003). Although sponsorship has been

identified as a cost-effective, clutter-free medium, (Erdogan and Kitchen 1998) the problem of evaluating its effectiveness has been raised by a number of authors (see Bennett, 2003; Dolphin, 2003; Horn and Baker, 1999; Farrelly *et. al.*, 1997) as has the importance of sponsorship in developing client relationships (Levin, Beasley and Gamble, 2004; Jowdy and McDonald, 2003), yet this is also an under-researched area. In light of the perception of sports marketing's importance in developing relationships with key clients, and few companies setting relationship marketing objectives when sponsoring sports, this paper has attempted to explore whether sports sponsors are pursuing the right objectives. The sports sponsorship industry is providing significant opportunities for businesses of all sizes and industry sectors to market their products and services in an unobtrusive, yet effective medium. In the newly professionalised sport of Rugby Union, Edwards (2002) found that many clubs are increasingly relying on attracting sports sponsors as a means of generating commercial income, and our findings suggest that the leading priority of all sponsors surveyed was to improve client relations. This has implications for the sports sponsorship industry in general, and Rugby Union in particular, if the RFC's realise the real objectives of their sponsors and can show how their sponsorship opportunities can help their sponsors build meaningful and lasting relationships with their own customers. By encouraging their sponsors to set relationship-based objectives sponsors are more likely to be able to positively evaluate the deal, and not to focus on transaction-based objectives, areas that may be difficult to evaluate, or that do not come to fruition.

Given the inter-functional nature of sponsorship, further research, including more in-depth qualitative research into sponsors motivations, should be conducted that could

identify the individuals who contribute to setting and evaluating sponsorship objectives at various corporate and marketing levels within organisations, ascertain if there are any significant differences in the type of objectives they each set, and whether or not these results would vary for organisations of different sizes, or those from different industry sectors. This may help highlight those within organisations that value relationship-building, and ensure that organisations seeking sponsorship include these individuals within the sponsoring decision and evaluation process.

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Table 1: Overall Ranking of Sponsoring Organisation's Objectives.

Objective	Ranking
Improve client relations	1
Increase public awareness of company	=2
Accentuate corporate image	=2
Position brand	=2
Generate brand visibility	5
Generate publicity	=6
Reach target market	=6
Improve community relations	=8
Improve employee relations	=8
Counter competitors' involvement as sponsors	10
Enhance advertising campaigns	11