

Sponsorship-Linked Attitudes of Employees of Sponsoring Firms: SMEs Versus Large Organisations

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Abstract Corporate sponsorship is often used to develop positive attitudes towards a brand or a firm, among its customers and/or potential customers. Depending on the size of the organisation, corporate sponsorship may involve high-profile entities (such as the Olympics), or smaller local groups or individuals, but the prominence of large entities means that sponsorships by large organisations attract most media and research attention. A less commonly studied effect of sponsorship is the effect on the attitudes of the sponsoring organisations' own employees. In this area, as with consumer-focused sponsorship, large organisations are likely to have substantial advantages. Large firms have the resources to leverage their sponsorship both internally and externally. Large organisations also have the expertise to effectively communicate their sponsorship-relationship to internal audiences. Yet smaller organisations may also be successful in engaging employees by sponsoring local entities at far lower cost, and providing opportunities for employee participation in the sponsorship. This research compares sponsorship-linked attitudes of 405 employees at small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large organisations. Despite large organisations' bigger budgets, sponsorship-linked attitudes were not significantly lower among SME employees. For one measure, sponsorship-linked organisational identification, SME employees rated significantly higher than employees of large organisations. The findings suggest that sponsorship can result in positive employee attitudes, even in SMEs—and may in fact be even more cost-effective for SMEs. These results may be due to increased communication within SMEs, or because SME employees may have stronger affiliations with sponsored entities. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords Sponsorship · Employees · Organisational size · Perceived external prestige · Organisational identification

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Introduction

Corporate sponsorship may have its roots in patronage, but today, it is regarded as being similar to advertising, as an investment made to progress corporate objectives (Meenaghan and Shipley 1999). This view of corporate sponsorship as an investment is reflected in a definition of corporate sponsorship by Quester and Thompson (2001, p. 34) as “*an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, person or event (sponsee), in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity, person or event by the investor (sponsor)*”.

Although, like advertising, sponsorship is generally seen as an investment, a key differentiating factor between sponsorship and advertising is the former’s ability to deliver a benefit to society while assisting in meeting marketing objectives. As a result of this societal benefit, consumers generally receive sponsorship communications in a ‘halo of goodwill’, so sponsorship communications are viewed less critically than advertising messages (Meenaghan 2001). Sponsors can also benefit from the gratitude that arises among audiences who have a strong liking for the ‘sponsee’, that is, for the sponsored event or property (Crimmins and Horn 1996).

In addition to providing benefits by creating positive associations among consumers, a sponsor’s own employees are an important second, internal, audience for sponsorship-related objectives. Just as an external communication tool—advertising—has effects on internal audiences (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998), corporate sponsorship—though primarily aimed at customers—may also have an impact on employees. A company’s sponsorship of a popular event or “worthy cause” can be viewed by different stakeholders, including employees, as making a valuable contribution in strengthening the relationship between the sponsor and the community (Lacey et al. 2010). The benefit of sponsorship can be enhanced by leveraging the sponsorship with employees. For example, Nike-sponsored athletes ‘...give motivational talks, host sales meetings,...play golf with clients and employees and help in product development’ (Amis et al. 1999, p. 6). Thus, a sponsored athlete becomes an integral part of the company, with employees viewing the athlete as more of a ‘colleague’ than a star (Amis et al. 1999).

A key aspect of sponsorship implementation is the sponsor’s investment in the activation or leveraging of the sponsorship-relationship. Activation includes all marketing activities that a company conducts to promote its involvement in sponsorship. Such a marketing expenditure is over and above the rights fee paid to the sponsored property (IEG 2010). According to some estimates, the activation-sponsorship fee ratio can be as high as 8:1 in order to fully reap the rewards from the sponsorship deal (O’Reilly and Horning 2013).

Large organisations, besides bigger budgets, are often able to benefit from the media coverage that comes with high-profile sponsorships. As a result, most public and research attention has focused on sponsorship by large organisations. For example, Nike could afford to sign up Michael Jordan for US\$2.5 million a year

when he was in his senior year at university and still had to prove himself as a professional player (Amis et al. 1999). The sponsorship resulted in Air Jordan shoes and Jordan-related apparel contributing over US\$200 million a year in sales for Nike (Katz 1994).

Although the majority of research has focused on sponsorship by large organisations such as Nike, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may also be able to benefit from sponsorship by supporting activities at a community-level, or by supporting smaller, more affordable entities (Mack 1999). When an organisation is seen as being caring and supportive towards an entity that employees are passionate about (such as a local football team), employees may feel obliged to reciprocate the generosity (Eisenberger et al. 2001). One way of reciprocating is through more favourable employee attitudes and behaviours towards the employer (Jones 2010).

While large organisations may also support neighbourhood entities, their support of local community events is often overshadowed by their support of other more high-profile events. In contrast, over 50 % of SMEs regularly sponsor local events and charities (Webb and Carter 2001), but would rarely, if ever, sponsor major events. Perhaps in part due to their association with community based sponsorships, SMEs have been found to have a more direct connection with the local community (Russo and Perrini 2010). People in the community often know the local small business owners—and their family members—by name. Customers can put a face to the business (Koch 2013). Such deep connections cannot be realised by bigger corporations.

But sponsorships are expensive, and the outcomes often uncertain. For smaller organisations, the benefits of sponsorship are even less certain. Smaller organisations will have lower sponsorship budgets, and so be less able to capitalise on the media attention given to high-profile sponsees. Similarly, a smaller organisation will not be able to offer its employees the chance to get the privileged access to high-profile sportspeople offered by large sponsors such as Nike. Under these conditions, it is not clear whether small organisations can hope to obtain the positive effects on employee attitudes that large organisations can achieve through their more expensive and higher profile sponsorships.

Despite this important challenge for understanding the effects of sponsorship in different size organisations, there has been only limited research attention to sponsorships by small to medium organisations (SMEs), and even less into the effects (if any) of those sponsorships on the employees of SME sponsors. As a result, this research compared the response of employees from large organisations and SME sponsors, to explore whether sponsoring SMEs can achieve equivalent positive responses from their employees, despite considerably lower budgets and lower profile sponsees. In the next section, we discuss examples of sponsorship by large and small organisations, and then describe the study, the results, and the implications for businesses and for research.

Leveraging Corporate Sponsorship

Worldwide, expenditure on sponsorship has been increasing faster than other forms of promotion such as advertising (Meenaghan 2001). According to one estimate, the expenditure on sports sponsorship in Australia and New Zealand alone is approximately A\$927 million per year (IMR Sports Marketing 2013). The 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne were estimated to have involved around \$AUD130 million in associated sponsorship from 50 sponsors (Webb 2006). One of the eight principal corporate sponsors of the Games was the National Australia Bank (NAB), and a spokesperson at the time said that NAB would have recouped the cost of the sponsorship in new business even before the Games started.

However, corporate sponsorship is not limited to large organisations. While SMEs cannot usually afford to sponsor large events or other well-known sponsees, they can be involved in supporting small-scale, local and regional properties at much lower cost. One study found that smaller businesses paid up to \$20,000 to sponsor regional sporting events (Lamont 2005). For example, a real estate agency in Western Australia, Abel McGrath, sponsored an event organised by a primary school's P&C. The event encouraged locals to immerse themselves in culture in a relaxed picnic setting. The firm's owner played auctioneer on the night, auctioning off items donated by the locals. Money raised from the evening went towards an art program at the primary school. Such sponsorship arrangements can be a cost-effective way for SMEs to achieve their communication goals (Gardner and Shuman 1988). Even with a relatively small communication budget, SMEs can therefore reach their publics in a significantly cheaper way than media-based advertising (Lamont 2005).

While the majority of public and research attention has been directed to the effects of high-profile sponsorship on customer attitudes, sport sponsorship can also result in significant positive effects on the staff of the sponsoring organisation. For example, as mentioned above NAB was one of the major sponsors of the 2006 Commonwealth Games. As well as providing what the bank believed was an effective commercial return on its sponsorship, an NAB spokesperson said that the Games proved to be 'a huge staff motivational tool', with 30–40 % of staff involved, and resulting in more than 6500 positive emails from staff (Webb 2006). So while the impact of sponsorship is recognised in large corporate sponsorships, the sponsorship literature has largely neglected any effect of sponsorship on employees in SMEs. This could be partly because a mere 5 % of SME managers report any substantial benefits in terms of improved employee relations resulting from the firm's involvement in corporate sponsorship (Webb and Carter 2001). Another study found that none of the surveyed SMEs listed any employee-related goals in their sponsorship objectives (Lamont and Dowell 2008). However SME employees may still be positively impacted by sponsorship by their employer, particularly if the employer supports an entity that an employee is passionate about.

The effects of sponsorship on external and internal audiences are summarised in Fig. 1. Sponsorship can have a direct effect on the sponsor's external publics (including its existing and potential customers), creating, and/or reinforcing a

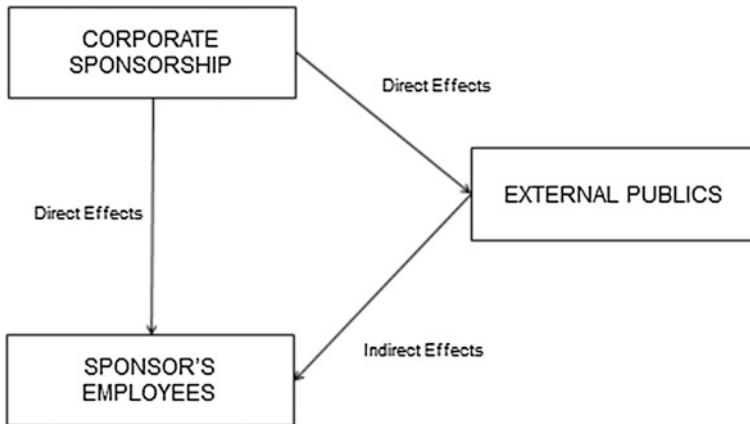


Fig. 1 The effects of sponsorship on employees—adapted from Acito and Ford (1980)

favourable corporate image. At the same time, the sponsorship is likely to have a direct effect on the sponsor’s employees. A direct effect on employees could occur when they are exposed to their employers’ sponsorship messages, by hearing about the sponsorship themselves, or by experiencing the sponsorship firsthand. Employees may experience the sponsorship by getting involved in their organisations’ sponsorship related internal marketing activities—such as Nike’s programs to bring sponsored athletes and staff together, or NAB’s employee volunteering opportunities in its Commonwealth Games sponsorship.

Employees may also be indirectly affected by their employers’ sponsorship activity, as shown in Fig. 1. Indirect effects occur when external stakeholders—such as customers, suppliers, and/or government officials—see or hear about the organisation’s sponsorship activities. When these stakeholders interact with the employees, they may talk about their impressions of the firm’s sponsorship. In this way, employees form an image of how outsiders view their organisation—a ‘construed external image’ (Dutton et al. 1994). Research has shown that individuals can ‘bask in reflected glory’ when associated with successful others, and increase their attachment to that other (Cialdini et al. 1976). Consistent with that effect, if outsiders view a sponsor’s contribution as valuable, the sponsor’s employees may feel more positively about their employer, and thus experience increased motivation at work.

Do Employee Attitudes to Sponsorship Vary Between Large and Small Organisations?

Both direct and indirect effects are likely to be greater for sponsorships by large organisations, since such sponsorships will involve larger sums of money and higher levels of organisational competence in leveraging sponsorship activities.

In addition, sponsees—either individuals, such as sporting stars, or major events—that receive large amounts of sponsorship are likely to receive much more media attention than the lower-profile sponsees typically sponsored by SMEs. The ever-increasing attention by large organisations to leveraging their sponsorship investment is thus likely to result in significant direct effects on employees. Such sponsorships would also have increased indirect effects as more people are likely to notice, and possibly talk about, prominent sponsors (Wakefield et al. 2007).

As a result of the greater ability of large organisations to leverage sponsorship efforts, employees of large organisations might be expected to have more positive attitudes to their employer's sponsorship arrangements, see that sponsorship as more prestigious in the community, and as a result, have greater identification with the organisation, due to the 'reflected glory' effect of the organisation's sponsorship(s) (Cialdini et al. 1976). Alternatively, it is possible that an SME sponsorship that is focused on a local community within which employees live and socialise may be viewed as more effective by the employee because they might see the results of the sponsorship themselves, and possibly accrue personal prestige. For example, the Abel McGrath sponsorship of the primary school discussed above would be very visible to employees whose children go to the school. Such employees, would be likely to see the direct benefit of the sponsorship for a school which otherwise would have limited sponsorship options. Even if an employee does not have any children attending the specific school, he or she may hear about the sponsorship through other community members or friends.

The preceding discussion suggests that an employee's response to their employer's sponsorship arrangement can be assessed with three measures:

(1) *Specific Attitudes toward Employer's Sponsorship*

The first measure assesses employees' specific attitudes toward their employers' sponsorship activity, because measures of specific attitudes offer the greatest explanatory power in understanding behaviour (Zielke and Dobbstein 2007). The construct reflects previous discussion of specific attitudes by Eagly and Chaiken (1993), and in this context, thus reflects employees' predisposition to respond in a favourable or unfavourable way to their employers' sponsorship activity.

(2) *Sponsorship-Linked Perceived External Prestige*

Sponsorship-linked Perceived External Prestige reflects the extent to which an employee feels proud of their organisation's sponsorship program due to recognition and endorsement by important external publics (e.g. customers, friends, family members, media and business associates). The construct is derived from the work of Bergami and Bagozzi (2000).

(3) *Sponsorship-Linked Organisational Identification*

The third measure assesses the extent to which employees see themselves as possessing the same attributes as their employer, reflecting previous research on Organisational Identification (Dutton et al. 1994).

In the following section, we describe the study used to compare the responses of employees from sponsoring SMEs and large organisations to their employers' sponsorships.

Methodology

Data was collected using an online survey. Inclusion criteria were (1) that the employee was working at an organisation employing more than five employees, and (2) that the employee was aware of some activity being currently sponsored by the employer (see definition below).

Screening questions were used to categorise respondents as employed by large or SME organisations, consistent with definitions used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001)—a large organisation being one employing 200 or more workers, a medium-sized organisation having twenty to 199 employees, and a small organisation five to nineteen employees. (Organisations with fewer than five employees are termed micro-enterprises, and micro-enterprise employees were not included in the study). As corporate sponsorship may easily be confused with other marketing and promotional activities, a definition of sponsorship was provided to respondents during the screening process and at the start of the study:

Corporate sponsorship is “the provision of assistance, either financial or in-kind, to an activity by a commercial organisation for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives”. Thus, giving donations purely for philanthropic reasons does not form part of corporate sponsorship. The sponsor must be interested in leveraging the sponsorship-relationship to achieve certain business-related objectives. This could be done by sponsoring a charity or a public service (e.g. the Fire Brigade) as well.

A quota sampling method was used to ensure a sufficient sample from both small and large organisations, resulting in a final sample of 405, with 205 (51 %) from large organisations, and 200 (49 %) from SMEs. The incidence rate for the survey was 19 %. Sample characteristics are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Respondent profile

Variable	Frequency	%	Variable	Frequency	%
Gender			Firm size		
Males	228	56.30	Large	205	50.62
Females	177	43.70	SMEs	200	49.38
Age			Status		
18–35	185	45.68	Full-time	340	83.95
36–50	137	33.83	Part-time	65	16.05
51+	83	20.49			

Measures

Specific Attitudes Toward Employers' Sponsorship

The employees' attitude to their employer's sponsorship was measured with four items, drawn from four different sponsorship studies (Dees et al. 2008; Irwin et al. 2003; Madrigal 2001; Rifon et al. 2004).

1. My employer's sponsorship improves my impression of my company
2. My employer's sponsorship effort makes me feel more favourable toward my employer
3. My employer's sponsorship activity improves my perception of my employer
4. My employer's sponsorship activity makes me like my employer more.

The first item was modified from a previous study that used a single item to measure spectator attitudes to sports sponsorship (Irwin et al. 2003). In view of the recommendation to use multiple items to generate valid estimates of reliability, additional items were included from three studies measuring consumers' specific attitudes (Dees et al. 2008; Madrigal 2001; Rifon et al. 2004).

Sponsorship-Linked Perceived External Prestige

Sponsorship-linked Perceived External Prestige was measured with five items modified from a consumer-focused sponsorship study by Cornwell and Coote (2005), who adapted the scale from Mael and Ashforth (1992). Following these authors, two items were reverse coded, as shown below. However, those items were subsequently dropped from analysis due to poor correlations with other items—presumably due to response errors during the survey completion caused by the reverse coding.

1. People in my community think highly of my employer's sponsorship activity
2. In my community, it is considered positive for my employer to have sponsored an activity
3. My employer is considered to be generous because it sponsors an activity in order to help out
4. As far as support through sponsorship is concerned, my employer does not have a good reputation in my community (Reverse coded)
5. People in other similar businesses look down at my employer's sponsorship activities (Reverse coded).

Sponsorship-Linked Organisational Identification

Sponsorship-linked Organisational Identification was measured with six items modified from the consumer-focused measures used by Cornwell and Coote (2005).

1. If someone criticises my employer's sponsorship efforts, it feels like a personal insult
2. I am very interested in what others think about my employer's sponsorship activities
3. When I talk about my employer's sponsorship, I usually say "we" rather than "they"
4. The successes of such sponsorship activities are my successes
5. If a story in the media criticised my employer's sponsorship activities, I would feel embarrassed
6. When someone praises my employer's sponsorship efforts, it feels like a personal compliment.

General Beliefs and Attitude Toward Sponsorship

Since employees of large organisations may have different general attitudes to sponsorship, which might, in turn, influence their attitude to their employer's sponsorship, a fourth measure, 'General Beliefs and Attitude to Sponsorship' was assessed to ensure there was no systematic difference in attitude to sponsorship between the employees from SMEs and large organisations. This variable was assessed with five items, adapted from Lachowetz et al. (2002).

1. Sponsorship creates a positive image for the sponsoring organisation
2. Sponsorship is a positive thing in organisations today
3. Sponsorship should be a regular part of a company's activities
4. I am positively impressed with an organisation that sponsors anything or anyone
5. I like to see companies supporting worthy causes or events.

All items were measured on a five point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Validity and reliability scores were found to be satisfactory (see Tables 3 and 4 in Appendix). A single, summated scale was computed for each construct by averaging responses to items of each construct (Hair et al. 2010). Thus, the possible range of scores for each measure is from 1.0 to 5.0, with higher scores reflecting stronger attitudes. Independent-samples *t*-tests were used to compare mean differences between the two groups of employees, after testing of appropriate assumptions (i.e. approximately normal distributions and variance for the groups being compared).

Results

General Beliefs and Attitude Toward Sponsorship

General beliefs and attitudes to sponsorship did not vary between employees from SMEs and large organisations, with both groups having the same beliefs and attitude, in general, when rounded to one decimal place (see Table 2). This lack of difference was expected, and is not surprising, since people's general attitudes are likely to have been formed from their experiences outside the workplace, rather than being primarily driven by any experience of their employer's sponsorship programs. The lack of difference in general attitude thus allowed a comparison of employees' attitudes toward their employers' sponsorship under the assumption that the groups had the same general attitude to sponsorship.

Specific Attitudes Toward Employers' Sponsorship

There was no difference in the mean attitude of employees to their employer's sponsorship across large organisations and SMEs ($p > 0.1$). In fact, SME employees had a slightly—but not significantly—more positive attitude to their employer's sponsorship efforts (see Table 2). Thus despite what would be presumed to be much higher sponsorship expenditure by large organisations, the attitude of employees in SMEs to their employer's sponsorship was no less positive—and, as discussed above, was, on average, more positive, though not significantly so. Lower expenditure on sponsorship by SMEs does not therefore appear to be a barrier to achieving any positive effects on employee attitude to sponsorship.

Sponsorship-Linked Perceived External Prestige (PEP)

There was no significant difference in Sponsorship-linked PEP across the respondents from SMEs and large organisations ($p > 0.1$) (see Table 2). Indeed, as with attitudes to their employer's sponsorship, employees from SMEs rated the Sponsorship-linked PEP of their employer higher than those from large organisations (though not significantly higher). As shown in Table 2, SME employees rated

Table 2 Sponsorship-linked employee attitudes—large organisations versus SMEs

Variables	Large		SMEs		Difference	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
General beliefs and attitude	3.41	0.66	3.37	0.60	-0.55	0.58
Specific attitudes	3.43	0.89	3.46	0.86	0.36	0.71
Sponsorship-linked PEP	3.35	0.78	3.46	0.74	1.50	0.13
Sponsorship-linked OI	2.82	0.81	2.99	0.85	-1.98	0.04 ^a

^aSignificant difference between means

the external prestige of their employer's sponsorship 3.46 on the five-point scale, compared to an average rating 3.35 for employees from large organisations. The result is somewhat surprising, since the large corporate events sponsored by large organisations would be expected to have higher visibility in the broad community.

One possible explanation for the higher rating by SME employees may be the repeated reference to 'in my community', and an evaluation of an employer as 'generous' in its sponsorship in the measurement items. These features of the measure may have focused SME respondents' attention on the benefits of local, and less clearly commercial, sponsorship often used by SME sponsors, with a commensurate higher evaluation of the local community's evaluation of that sponsorship. Whatever the reason for the lack of significant difference (and the higher rating by SME employees), the result does suggest that SME sponsorship arrangements are viewed by their employees as resulting in community prestige (at least for the local community) that is at least equivalent to, and possibly even higher than, the prestige associated with much larger and high-profile sponsorships.

Sponsorship-Linked Organisational Identification (OI)

Employees of large organisations had significantly lower average levels of Sponsorship-linked OI than SME employees, as shown in Table 2. Employees of large organisations, on average, rated their identification as 2.82 on the five-point scale, compared to an average of 2.99 for employees of SMEs.

The result is somewhat surprising, since Sponsorship-linked OI would be expected to be higher due to the higher profile of sponsorships by large organisations, and the associated opportunities for promoting those sponsorships, either through advertising, public relations, or employee-directed activities. The result may reflect lower levels of organisational identification among employees of large organisations, but suggest that creating sponsorship-linked identification with an employer is not solely dependent on the firm being a big player in the market or sponsoring more prominent, high profile events. Based on these results, SMEs with smaller budgets and more low-key sponsees can still generate higher levels of OI amongst their employees than large organisations. One possible explanation is the opportunity for SME employees to establish face-to-face interaction with the owner-manager of the firm, possibly resulting in a transfer of values and principles. Such an environment of open interaction and communication is an important factor in building identification toward the firm (Smidts et al. 2001). Given the size and structure of a typical SME, it is also possible that employees participate in deciding which property to sponsor, resulting in higher levels of Sponsorship-linked OI.

Sponsorship-linked OI would be expected to be higher when Sponsorship-linked perceived external prestige is high, consistent with evidence that individuals can 'bask in reflected glory' due to their association with a prestigious entity (Smidts et al. 2001). Consistent with that view, there was a positive linear association between Sponsorship-linked organisational identification and Sponsorship-linked perceived external prestige ($r = 0.665$; $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

The results suggest that organisation size (and by extrapolation, organisational budget) is not a barrier to sponsors achieving positive effects on employee attitudes from their sponsorship. These results showed no significant difference between employees from large and small organisations in Specific attitudes towards their employers' sponsorship, or in Sponsorship-linked perceived external prestige—indeed, ratings of Sponsorship-linked perceived external prestige were higher for SME employees. While the difference was not statistically significant for all but one outcome measure, it shows that sponsorship-related feelings of prestige amongst employees are not just triggered by sponsorship publicity and high-profile events. While smaller firms may not obtain the widespread media coverage of a sponsored event that would be common for larger sponsors, any form of employee-directed communication—such as an organisational newsletter, a brief email, or an informal chat which positively portrays the organisation's position in society—may assist in creating favourable employee perceptions about the sponsorship. As summarised by Collett and Fenton (2011, p. 89), “a small budget should not be perceived as a barrier to sponsorship, (it is) merely a catalyst for greater creativity in activation”.

The results are even more striking in regards to Sponsorship-linked organisational identification. Employees of SMEs had significantly higher levels of Sponsorship-linked organisational identification than those from large organisations, suggesting that even with much lower sponsorship budgets, SMEs can obtain more positive results than large organisations in this area. The result is particularly surprising, since SMEs are likely to be able to only modestly leverage their sponsorship program with their employees compared to large organisations. However, based on these results, scarce resources do not appear to limit the potential effect of sponsorship on employee attitudes. SMEs, in spite of their size and resource limitations, appear to still be able to generate favourable sponsorship-related attitudes amongst their employees. As these results demonstrate, these attitudes can be as strong—or even stronger—than those of individuals employed by large organisations. A possible explanation is that due to the structure and operations of SMEs, employees are in a position to come close to the owner/manager (Longenecker et al. 1989), and thus gain first-hand information regarding the organisation's operations. This more informal environment and flatter hierarchy may result in the higher levels of identification with the employer and/or the firm shown by the SME employees in this study.

Implications

The results have implications for sponsoring organisations and for sponsorship researchers. For sponsors, the results show that sponsorship, which is usually targeted towards customers can result in favourable employee attitudes, even for

SMEs with low sponsorship budgets. The effectiveness of sponsorship has been shown to be related to the degree to which sponsors are willing to leverage their investment with additional promotional activities (Quester and Thompson 2001). These results extend that work, by showing that SMEs can achieve equivalent, or in some cases more favourable, employee attitudes than large organisations. The positive effects of sponsorship on the SME employees in this study also suggest that leveraging sponsorship with employees may be particularly important when employees belong to the community benefitting from the corporate sponsorship.

A direct or indirect focus on employees' communities is increasingly common by sponsoring organisations. For example Telstra, the largest Australian telecommunications company, states that it is "... dedicated to supporting the communities in which our ...employees live and work" (Telstra 2015). The Bank of Melbourne (a regional subsidiary of one of Australia's largest banks) explicitly states that any requests for sponsorship will be evaluated against opportunities for involving bank's employees with the sponsored activity (Bank of Melbourne 2015). Another large Australian B2B agribusiness, Graincorp, states its belief in supporting '... employees and their communities by investing in the things that matter to them' (GrainCorp 2015). However the higher levels of Sponsorship linked OI found in employees of SMEs in this study suggests that community based sponsorships—whether by large or small organisations—may have a more positive effect on employee attitudes if the sponsor can effectively leverage its sponsorship program by ensuring that its employees get involved with the campaign. An example of successful leverage of sponsorship is Vodafone Ireland, which has an integrated internal communications program that informs and engages 1100 employees with the company's external sponsorship activities (Lombardi 2013). The internally-directed program includes sponsorship updates for employees through the firm's intranet, weekly newsletter, and broadcasts to plasma screens located around the office premises. Other methods of increasing employee engagement with the campaign include invitations for employees to 'mini-launches' of sponsored events, internal competitions for event tickets, opportunities for employees to volunteer, and sponsored-artist performances for Vodafone staff.

Campaigns such as Vodafone's, which engage staff with a sponsorship program, have two particular advantages in leveraging the sponsorship internally. Employees are able to get an insight into how the sponsorship investment pays off for the company internally and externally. In addition, employees can be a powerful channel for conveying messages to external stakeholders (Dawkins and Stewart 2003). When employees mention their workplaces positively and with pride, external stakeholders are likely to be influenced to align their perceptions of the organisation with the reported experiences of employees.

Effective leverage of sponsorship can also have the effect of making the sponsor a more attractive employer to both current and potential employees. For example financial firm UBS has sponsored Alinghi, twice winner of the prestigious America's Cup yacht. UBS used sponsorship to highlight values common to both UBS and the Alinghi team—responsibility, informed and rapid decision making, drive to succeed, teamwork and the Swiss identity (Farrelly and Greysier 2007).

When an organisation supports and identifies with a popular sponsored-property such as Alinghi, employees can merge the identity and the success of the property with that of their employer (Hickman et al. 2005). While we did not measure employees' identification with the sponsored property, previous research (Hickman et al. 2005) has shown that employees who have an interest in the company sponsored activity are more likely to have a strong sense of firm identification. Promoting the sponsorship relationship to potential employees can also be beneficial as individuals are more likely to apply for and work for organisations that are likely to possess similar values as them (Maignan et al. 1999).

There has been much debate about adequate measurement of the effects of corporate sponsorship, but with little consensus (e.g. Crompton 2004). Moreover, most of the work on sponsorship measurement has been undertaken with reference to consumer audiences (Cornwell and Maignan 1998). In view of the findings from this research, marketers should ensure that the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness is not limited to consumer audiences. Corporate sponsorship's value to a sponsor can be assessed more broadly—and more accurately—by also taking into account its impact on internal audiences.

This study examined employee attitudes towards corporate sponsorship in general. Future research could investigate the response towards different categories of sponsorship, such as sport, art and social causes. Previous research has shown that different categories of sponsorship carry different levels of goodwill and image with consumer audiences (Meenaghan and Shipley 1999), so it would be useful to see if a similar pattern is seen with employee-audiences. Researchers should also use experiments, as well as pre-sponsorship and post-sponsorship measurements, to explore the different factors influencing the impact of sponsorship.

Conclusion

The growing expenditure on sponsorship, coupled with increasing pressure on marketers to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of their expenditure, will together increase the pressure on sponsors to demonstrate that any sponsorship programs are cost-effective. These results are a reminder that sponsors should ensure their sponsorship program is able to target multiple audiences, including employees, and that the results of sponsorship should be measured for multiple audience groups. For employers, that may mean that before and after measures of employee attitudes are used to assess the effect of any sponsorship program.

For SMEs, however, the results are encouraging: although this study did not assess the effect of sponsorship on external publics, the results show that SME sponsorships can be evaluated by measuring employees' sponsorship-related attitudes. Findings from this study show that sponsorship-related attitudes for SME employees are equivalent to, or in some cases more positive than those of employees of large organisations.

Appendix

See Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 Reliability of variables

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Specific attitudes	4	0.95
Sponsorship-linked PEP ^a	4	0.68
Sponsorship-linked OI	6	0.87
General beliefs and attitude	5	0.89

^aInitially, a 5-item scale. However, two items deleted at EFA and CFA stage

Table 4 Confirmatory factor analysis of variables

Variables	Items	CMIN/df	p	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	CFI
Specific attitudes	4	1.87	0.15	0.05	0.99	0.99	0.99
Sponsorship-linked PEP ^a	3	0.82	0.44	0.00	0.99	0.99	1.00
Sponsorship-linked OI	6	1.49	0.17	0.03	0.99	0.97	0.99
General beliefs and attitude	5	1.18	0.04	0.02	0.99	0.99	1.00

^aInitially, a 5-item scale. However, two items deleted at EFA and CFA stage

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