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A case study for NASCAR driver sponsors: Making greatest use of the character traits fans like and dislike in a driver

Abstract

The use of celebrities and athletes as product endorsers has long been the subject of examination by advertising and marketing professionals. The popularity of NASCAR in today's culture has broadened the scope of celebrity athletes to include NASCAR drivers. As marketing and advertising ties to drivers increase, an analysis of the opportunities that exist for sponsors to develop a meaningful promotional campaign that produces the right mix of product and celebrity endorser becomes increasingly important. This case paper reviews the results of an exploratory study which examined the various characteristics fans associate with some of the top NASCAR drivers. The purpose is to investigate more closely the characteristics fans like – and even dislike—in their favorite drivers. The paper offers benefits to marketing and sponsorship practitioners looking to identify the personality traits which may help create the synergy between product and endorser in the development of persuasive promotional campaigns.

Keywords

Marketing Sponsorships, Sponsorships, Fan Affinity Research, Sports Sponsorships Research

Introduction

The use of celebrities and athletes as product endorsers has long been the subject of examination by advertising and marketing professionals. The connection fans associate with the personality and the product has been shown to be effective when the right combination of product and endorser exists (Mittelstaedt, Riesz and Burns, 2000). The popularity of NASCAR in today's culture has broadened the scope of celebrity athletes to include NASCAR drivers. Moreover, loyalty of NASCAR fans has been judged to be extremely high, with as many as 72% of racing fans reporting that they purchase NASCAR sponsors' product and as many as 40% allowing a willingness to switch to brands listed as official promoters (Johnson, 2001; Weissman, 1999).

The growth of NASCAR sponsorships, now exceeding \$1 billion per year (Lowry, 2004), demonstrates the level of interest companies are placing on the sport as a vehicle for reaching out to a large fan base. As marketing and advertising ties to drivers increase, an analysis of the opportunities that exist for sponsors to develop a meaningful promotional campaign that produces the right mix of product and celebrity endorser becomes increasingly important. Formally, car sponsors have a relationship with racing teams, not necessarily the driver, per se. Fans associate the sponsorship with the driver, not the team, however. Consequently, NASCAR's most visible sponsorships—primary car sponsors—also function as celebrity endorsements by drivers.

Over the years, numerous studies have been completed to measure the effectiveness of advertising spokespersons. A number of scales have been developed to measure or define source credibility. McCroskey (1966) determined that authoritativeness and character contribute to

source credibility. However, Ohanian (1990) advocates replacing single-item measures with a multi-trait scale.

Development of characteristics that could factor into a measurement of NASCAR drivers as endorsers may prove useful, as NASCAR has been determined to have its own unique subculture. Howell (1997) and Wright (2002) describe a subculture in which fans create strong associations to their favorite drivers. Moreover, those ties are based on a variety of characteristics valued by NASCAR fans. Some of these traits include the ideas that drivers are seen as working-class, self-made, and family-oriented individuals. At the same time, though, they are valued for being “publicly accessible modern-day outlaws” (Amato, Peters and Shao, 2005). This suggests a willingness on the part of NASCAR fans to accept both positive and negative qualities among the personality characteristics they admire in their favorite drivers.

The notion of this multi-faceted personality make-up was the subject of an exploratory study conducted to review the various characteristics fans associate with some of the top NASCAR drivers. The purpose of this case paper is to review the results of that study to examine the characteristics fans like – and even dislike—in their favorite drivers, for the benefit of practitioners looking to identify the personality traits which may help create the synergy between product and endorser in the development of persuasive promotional campaigns.

Methodology

A web-based NASCAR survey was conducted in early February, 2007--- prior to the official start of the NASCAR season. Respondents were recruited using Survey Sampling Inc.'s Intelligent algorithm, in which panelists who log on to the Survey Spot website are presented with the opportunity to participate in the study. As is standard with online panels, email

invitations were not sent, therefore there is no response rate. The sample consisted of 200 self-identified NASCAR fans, all over the age of 18. The demographic breakout of the respondent base reveals a nearly 50/50 split on respondents by gender and age, with 52.2% being female and 53.7% over the age of 45. To determine the level of fan avidity, respondents were asked to characterize themselves as either a “Big Fan,” an “Average Fan” or a “Casual Fan.” More than 84% of respondents described themselves as either “Average” or “Big” fans, suggesting that respondents in the study share characteristics which are important to sponsors. Results of the open-ended responses were submitted to a qualitative analysis to identify emerging themes and categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Character Trait Ratings Development

The survey asked respondents to rate twenty current NASCAR drivers on a series of character descriptors. Building on the conclusions of Amato, Peters and Shao (2005), the researchers sought to include a range of character traits, both positive and negative, so as to provide driver sponsors with a fuller picture of fan reaction to particular drivers. After conducting expert interviews with a variety of people familiar with both NASCAR drivers and the NASCAR culture, the survey developers arrived at a list of 18 personality traits on which drivers were measured.

Results and Discussion

In terms of how well known the drivers are, seventeen of the 20 drivers included in the measurement were known by more than half of the participants in the study (see Table 1).

Nearly all fans were aware of Dale Earnhardt, Jr. (99%) and nine out of ten were aware of Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart and Bobby Labonte.

Table 1: Best Known Driver

Rank	Driver	Percent Aware
1	Dale Earnhardt, Jr.	99.0
2	Jeff Gordon	96.1
3	Tony Stewart	92.1
4	Bobby Labonte	90.6
5	Dale Jarrett	83.3
6	Jimmie Johnson	82.3
7	Mark Martin	80.8
8	Michael Waltrip	80.3
9	Kurt Busch	73.9
10	Kasey Kahne	73.4
11	Kevin Harvick	73.4
12	Carl Edwards	69.0
13	Matt Kenseth	66.5
14	Greg Biffle	65.5
15	Elliott Sadler	60.1
16	Joe Nemechek	55.7
17	Ryan Newman	54.7
18	Denny Hamlin	43.3
19	Martin Truex, Jr.	40.4
20	Scott Riggs	26.6

Before they were asked to identify any characteristics they associated with the drivers included in the study, participants were first asked to identify one driver as their “Favorite” (see Table 1). Among Total Fans, nearly 80% distribute their preference for a favorite driver among five people. In fact, two drivers (Dale Earnhardt, Jr. and Jeff Gordon) account for more than half of the “favorite” preferences.

Table 2: Favorite Driver

Driver	TOTAL FANS	Big Fans	Casual Fans	Total Men	Total Women	< 45	45 Plus
Dale Earnhardt, Jr.	30.0	30.8	29.5	21.1	37.7	35.1	25.7
Jeff Gordon	22.7	23.1	22.3	28.4	17.0	14.9	29.4
Tony Stewart	9.9	15.4	5.4	8.4	11.3	11.7	8.3
Mark Martin	8.9	6.6	10.7	11.6	6.6	8.5	9.2
Jimmie Johnson	7.4	9.9	5.4	7.4	7.5	6.4	8.3
Kasey Kahne	4.9	3.3	6.2	3.2	6.6	7.4	2.8
Matt Kenseth	3.0	3.3	2.7	2.1	3.8	4.3	1.8
Michael Waltrip	2.5	2.2	2.7	3.2	1.9	1.1	3.7
Carl Edwards	2.5	1.1	3.6	5.3	0.0	0.0	4.6
Dale Jarrett	2.0	1.1	2.7	2.1	1.9	3.2	0.9
Bobby Labonte	1.5	2.2	0.9	2.1	0.9	3.2	0.0
Elliott Sadler	1.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	1.9	1.1	0.9
Ryan Newman	0.5	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.9	1.1	0.0
Martin Truex, Jr.	0.5	1.1	0.0	1.1	0.0	1.1	0.0
Kurt Busch	0.5	0.0	0.9	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.9
Kevin Harvick	0.5	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.9

Women are more likely to name Dale Earnhardt, Jr. as their favorite driver (37.7%). Older fans (45+) are more likely to prefer Jeff Gordon (29.4%). Tony Stewart is more likely to be favored by Big Fans.

Fans were given the opportunity to elaborate on the reason for their “Favorite Driver” selection. An examination of the open-ended responses reveals different reasons why various drivers are favored. Dale Earnhardt, Jr. was identified for a number of positive characteristics, including his overall likeability (“good kid,” “nice personality,” “congenial”); his driving skills (“clean driving,” “good,” “honest,” “clean driver,” “talented”); and his appearance (“good looking,” “cute”—a word used numerous times). The overwhelming references to this driver, though, connect him favorably with his father, the late Dale Earnhardt, Sr. (“his father was my favorite, so he is too,” “he’s tough like his father,” “his family line”).

Jeff Gordon was identified with comments on his appearance (“boyish looks,” “cute,” “clean cut”); and his sponsor connections (“Chevy,” “DuPont” “Pepsi”); and even his personality—both positive and negative (“nice person,” “good guy” “he makes a lot of people mad”). The greatest references to this driver, however, pertained to his driving ability (“skill,” “good driver,” “driving talent on all types of tracks,” “winner”). Comments on Tony Stewart overwhelmingly referenced his driving ability and winning record (“aggressive driving style,” “he wins,” “champion who knows how to drive”).

In general, fans like drivers. The most well-liked is Dale Earnhardt, Jr., with nearly 80% of fans stating they “like” (net: like or like a lot) this driver. NASCAR fans also expressed their “dislike” for drivers (net: dislike or dislike a lot), with Jeff Gordon leading the list at 36.9%. In fact, Gordon was more likely to be “disliked” by Big Fans (45.1%), as were Kurt Busch (38.5%), Greg Biffle (17.6), Matt Kenseth (14.3%) and Kevin Harvick (13.2%). Women were more likely than men to dislike Tony Stewart (32.1%). Table 3 identifies the rank order of the most liked and disliked drivers.

Table 3: Most Liked and Disliked Drivers

Most Liked		
Rank	Driver	Percent
1	Dale Earnhardt, Jr.	79.8
2	Mark Martin	67.0
3	Bobby Labonte	66.5
4	Dale Jarrett	60.1
5	Michael Waltrip	56.2
6	Tony Stewart	54.7
7	Kasey Kahne	54.2
8	Jimmie Johnson	48.8
9	Jeff Gordon	48.3
10	Carl Edwards	45.8
11	Kevin Harvick	42.9
12	Matt Kenseth	34.5
13	Elliott Sadler	32.0
14	Greg Biffle	27.6
15	Kurt Busch	25.6
16	Joe Nemechek	24.1
17	Denny Hamlin	23.6
18	Martin Truex, Jr.	18.7
19	Scott Riggs	7.4
20	Ryan Newman	3.9

Most Disliked		
Rank	Driver	Percent
1	Jeff Gordon	36.9
2	Kurt Busch	26.6
3	Tony Stewart	26.1
4	Jimmie Johnson	15.3
5	Dale Earnhardt, Jr.	12.3
6	Greg Biffle	10.3
7	Matt Kenseth	9.4
8	Kevin Harvick	8.4
9	Carl Edwards	7.4
10	Michael Waltrip	6.9
11	Ryan Newman	5.4
12	Dale Jarrett	4.9
13	Kasey Kahne	4.9
14	Joe Nemechek	3.4
15	Denny Hamlin	3.0
16	Bobby Labonte	2.5
17	Elliott Sadler	2.5
18	Mark Martin	2.5
19	Martine Truex, Jr.	2.5
20	Scott Riggs	0.5

According to Amato, Peters, and Shao (2005), “virtually all fans chose a favorite driver based on his personality.” Where that study did not attempt to identify specific personality classifications, fans in this study were given the opportunity to further evaluate drivers based on a number of character traits developed by NASCAR experts-- terms respondents could select as descriptive of a particular driver. The list of terms included an equal number of categories that could provide additional insight into the “like” and “dislike” preferences also identified by fans.

In Table 4, the overall mean average of all 20 drivers studied provides a useful benchmark against which individual drivers' percentages in a particular trait may be compared.

Table 4: Character Trait Ratings Among Top Five “Favorite” Drivers by Total Fan Participants

Traits	Dale Earnhardt, Jr.	Jeff Gordon	Tony Stewart	Mark Martin	Jimmie Johnson	<i>Mean Avg. of All Drivers Studied</i>
COMPETITIVE	76.8	67.0	67.0	68.0	60.1	47.8
SKILLED	71.4	57.1	56.2	63.1	49.8	40.0
CONFIDENT	62.6	57.1	59.1	56.7	49.3	38.1
SUCCESSFUL	62.1	54.7	58.6	59.1	48.8	32.5
AGGRESSIVE	59.1	57.6	71.4	43.3	43.3	30.0
WINNER	57.6	58.6	57.6	53.7	51.7	27.9
CREDIBLE	49.3	36.5	35.5	54.7	35.0	28.1
YOUTHFUL	48.3	18.7	10.8	0.5	21.7	18.1
HONEST	44.3	30.0	28.1	54.7	29.6	26.4
SINCERE	44.3	27.6	25.1	53.7	31.0	25.1
DISTINGUISHED	30.0	29.6	18.7	49.3	20.2	15.9
TRADITIONAL	30.0	21.7	22.7	59.1	19.2	19.4
STYLISH	28.1	27.1	17.7	18.7	19.7	11.7
ARROGANT	21.2	44.3	50.2	2.5	9.4	13.9
BAD-ASS	15.3	10.8	38.9	1.5	9.4	6.7
RECKLESS	13.8	17.7	36.9	0.0	11.3	8.53
JERK	8.9	34.5	29.1	0.5	8.4	7.5
CHEATER	6.4	20.7	18.7	0.0	11.3	4.93

NOTE: Bolded percentage in each column denotes top-rated characteristic for each driver.

Apart from the information the results can provide the teams and sponsors affiliated with particular drivers, there can be useful information for marketers seeking to further understand the endorsement potential of NASCAR drivers. As marketers look to assemble the right

combination of driver to sponsor, as suggested by Amato, Peters and Shao (2005), an overall examination of the characteristics fans appreciate about a driver is important. A simple listing of “favorite driver” could possibly lead other drivers to be overlooked. In addition, certain drivers, who may rate high on the “favored” list, may also carry with them a mix of traits that could be potentially considered negative.

While Jeff Gordon ranks as the second most favored driver (by 22.7% of respondents), it is even more important to note that his “like” and “disliked” ratings among respondents are among the most polarized of any driver in the study. He ranks ninth in “Most Liked” but first as “Most Disliked.” This polarizing effect could be the result of a number of causes. Is Gordon someone people “love to hate?” Is he loved by Casual Fans because he is considered a “Winner” but hated by Big Fans because he is considered a “Cheater?” At number two on the “Favorite” list, Gordon can be considered popular and well-known, thus making this extreme reaction to him among fans a phenomenon worth additional investigation.

Table 5 compares the character-trait ratings by those respondents who “Like Gordon” and “Dislike Gordon.”

Table 5: Comparative Trait Ratings Among Those Who “Like” or “Dislike” Jeff Gordon

TRAITS	“LIKE GORDON”	“DISLIKE GORDON”
AGGRESSIVE	63.3	52.0
ARROGANT	11.2	86.7
BAD-ASS	7.1	17.3
CHEATER	1.0	52.0
COMPETITIVE	85.7	45.3
CONFIDENT	83.7	26.7
CREDIBLE	66.3	2.7
DISTINGUISHED	50.0	6.7
HONEST	57.1	1.3
JERK	0.0	89.3
RECKLESS	3.1	38.7
SINCERE	52.0	0.0
SKILLED	80.6	28.0
STYLISH	43.9	6.7
SUCCESSFUL	74.5	29.3
TRADITIONAL	35.7	5.3
WINNER	76.5	36.0
YOUTHFUL	25.5	10.7

Not surprisingly, fans who like Gordon had a greater tendency to characterize him in more favorable terms, relative to the depiction provided by those who dislike him. Nonetheless, the percentages reinforce the extremely opposite reactions NASCAR fans have to Jeff Gordon.

Implications for Marketers

The value of the research for sponsors comes in examining both the positive and negative attributes of a driver. For many marketers involved with famous personalities, the presence of a negative characteristic is cause for the immediate development of a positive spin campaign. However, as has been discussed, in the NASCAR culture, marketers enjoy a broader acceptance among fans of the negative traits possessed by drivers. Marketers looking to include event sponsorships and other promotional ties to NASCAR drivers in their overall integrated marketing

communications (IMC) plan will want to consider both the value and the impact of the activities being incorporated into their program. Events and sponsorships can be “viewed as an important component of an IMC strategy, rather than a stand-alone tool. Synergy is as crucial as a strategic component” (Sneath, Finney, Close, 2005). With that in mind, the key for marketers looking to integrate any sort of driver sponsorship into their IMC program comes in carefully examining the fuller picture of the driver-- one based on both the positive and negative traits—as well as developing a marketing strategy that effectively deals with each.

When considering Jeff Gordon, who produces this polarizing reaction among fans, sponsors will want to further scrutinize this driver on many levels. On the most basic plane, Gordon is— Well-known (96% awareness level); Liked (48.3% -- ranked 9th in most liked and was the second most “Favorite” driver) and Disliked (36.9% -- ranked first in most disliked). However, Gordon’s existing and potential sponsors are in the unique position of not wanting to risk the creation of negative brand associations, based on their ties to a potentially disliked driver. This is where the comparison of cross-tabulated character ratings among those who like and dislike Gordon proves valuable, providing a fuller depiction of how Gordon is regarded by a larger base of NASCAR fans.

As stated previously, those who liked Gordon were more likely to rank him high on positive traits and those who disliked him were more likely to rate him high on negative traits. In some cases, the results were completely contradictory, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Comparison of Extreme Positive or Negative Traits among those who “Like” or “Dislike” Jeff Gordon

TRAITS	“LIKE GORDON”	“DISLIKE GORDON”
JERK	0.0	89.3
SINCERE	52.0	0.0
HONEST	57.1	1.3
RECKLESS	3.1	38.7

However, there are several characteristics where the responses were less extreme, as seen in Table 7.

Table 7: Comparison of Less- Extreme Positive or Negative Traits among those who “Like” or “Dislike” Jeff Gordon

TRAITS	“LIKE GORDON”	“DISLIKE GORDON”
AGGRESSIVE	63.3	52.0
COMPETITIVE	85.7	45.3
CONFIDENT	83.7	26.7
SKILLED	80.6	28.0
SUCCESSFUL	74.5	29.3
WINNER	76.5	36.0

Using the information in the table above, along with the open-ended responses as to why fans liked Gordon (overwhelmingly skewed toward his driving ability), sponsors can begin to build a strategy that plays to the consistent strengths of Jeff Gordon rather than to the more counter attributes.

For example, a marketing message that pokes fun of Gordon as a Jerk might play well to those who don’t like him to begin with but could alienate those who do like him. Meanwhile, a

message that makes reference to his aggressiveness, competitiveness and overall effectiveness as a driver would be likely to resonate with a greater number of NASCAR fans. In the latter case, fans who like him will view the communication as reinforcing while those who don't like him would be less likely to argue with the characteristics being highlighted.

Limitations and Future Directions

In a sport where the pace of changes in driver fortune and acceptance can rival the speed of the cars on the track, NASCAR sponsors—like many other sponsors and advertisers—rely heavily on awareness and favorability ratings of the various celebrities they may consider using as a spokesperson. The value of this study is that it allows marketers to drill down to a deeper level and create a fuller picture of a personality, one which includes both the positive and negative characteristics of the individual. The results further allow for comparisons of those character traits, even among respondents whose opinion of a particular driver is less-than-favorable.

Where marketers should use caution in the broader application of these results lies in the unique culture that has been shown to exist in the sport of NASCAR racing. Marketers operating in other categories, outside of NASCAR, will not want to rely on this case analysis, as its premise relies heavily on the characterization of the overall NASCAR culture, including fans' ability to accept negative traits among the drivers they admire. While the premise of the measurement technique may prove useful, personality trait ratings for notable figures in other categories such as politics, pop-culture--- or even other sporting categories—will first need to be identified by experts familiar with those cultures. Managing negative perceptions, however, could be relevant across a variety of categories.

Furthermore, regardless of the measurement scale, there exists an inherent problem with the static nature of a ratings scale which measures only awareness levels, familiarity and level of appeal. Such scales do not measure the historical circumstances which have lead up to the rating. Take, for example, the case of Dale Earnhardt, Jr. Though a popular driver in his own right, it is also highly possible that his personal equity is the result of the awareness and appeal of his father, the late Dale Earnhardt, Sr. Future research in the area of celebrity endorsers should attempt to measure the historical context that impacts fan ratings or extend beyond perceived personality traits in general.

Future study into this area should also include an analysis of the character traits used to measure the drivers. Where this study relied on the experience of NASCAR racing and culture experts to develop the list of character traits against which drivers were measured, forthcoming studies may seek to structure a questionnaire which allows NASCAR fans to use their own evoked set of character descriptors.

Additionally, practical advertising research would also be useful in assessing the marketing communications recommendations discussed in this case analysis. A creative concept test could focus on a comparative measurement of the message effectiveness utilizing the characteristics which were highlighted in the research. For example, a focus group study could examine the impact of a commercial advertisement incorporating the character qualities provoking more extreme reactions among fans, relative to one featuring traits where fan reactions were not as severe.

Future research into all these areas will further assist NASCAR sponsors in the development of effective integrated marketing communications strategies that take the greatest advantage of the personality characteristics of the drivers they support.

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