

THE LONG AND SHORT OF SPORTS SPONSORSHIP

How to make every sponsorship dollar work harder, before, during, and after the final whistle.

Nick Watson





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LONG-TERM VS SHORT-TERM SPONSORSHIP STRATEGIES

Today fandom has moved beyond the stadium into year-round digital communities. [Data from our *What The Future: Fandom* report](#) shows that 43% of fans engage in passion-related social media groups, a figure rising to 70% among the most active fansⁱⁱⁱ. For brands, a consistent presence in these digital spaces helps cement an association with the sport or event, ensuring relevance long after the final whistle.

This fandom connection is important to keep in mind as not all sponsorships work the same way. Building on the themes in Binet & Field's book "The Long and the Short of It", there is a clear distinction between high-intensity, short-term event-based sponsorships and continuous longer-term sponsorship activities. The challenge for marketers is finding the right balance: should a brand go big in the moment, or play the long game – and does it have to be one or the other? In this article, we show how these different approaches impact sponsorship awareness.

Event sponsorship remains a key part of the marketing agenda. According to the [Ipsos Predictions Survey](#)ⁱ, **59% of people globally** intend to watch the FIFA World Cup, a scale of audience that few other platforms can match.

Yet, for marketers, these sponsorship events present a paradox: the opportunity to reach engaged audiences at scale vs. the challenge of cutting through the sponsorship noise for your brand to be seen and remembered above all others so that you get a return on this premium investment.

Leveraging [Ipsos Brand Health Tracking](#) (BHT) dataⁱⁱ, this paper examines how brands can move beyond passive visibility, ensuring sponsorship spend works harder to drive both short-term behaviour change and long-term brand impact.

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MAXIMISE BRAND AWARENESS WITH CONTINUOUS SPONSORSHIP

Consider sponsorship of a major domestic sports league. With fixtures every weekend and constant media coverage, these regular and seasonal events allow brands to build stable associations. Ipsos Brand Health Tracking data, tracked over two years, shows that prompted awareness of the brand consistently sponsoring the regular activity is remarkably stable throughout the year, with little variation by month or season.

This stability comes from consistency, longevity, and frequency. Crucially, these qualities aren't reserved for regular seasonal events, they can also be achieved through long-term commitment to periodic ones. Coca-Cola has partnered with the Olympics since 1928. By showing up every four years, without fail, they have built permanent mental availability. Recent data confirms they maintain an unaided awareness of 21%, significantly outperforming newer sponsors^{iv}.



Source: UK Sponsorship Tracking Study 2024 | Base: Total Sample. Prompted sponsorship awareness over time



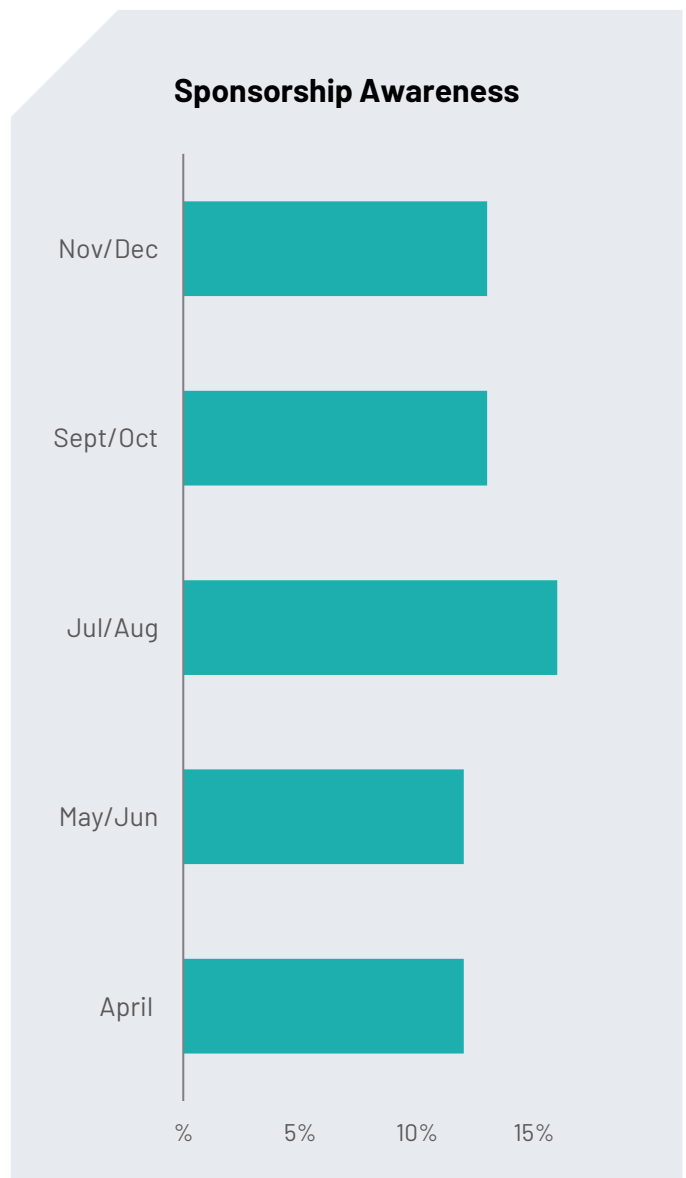
SHORT-TERM SPONSORSHIPS:

Leverage high-intensity events

First-time sponsors of less frequent events, such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympics, see a different pattern. In one BHT study, a brand entering a tournament for the first time saw awareness build as the event approached and marketing activity peaked, before dropping once it was over.

While these short-term bursts are fleeting, they still offer value - provided the brand breaks through the sponsorship noise. [Ipsos analysis of UEFA EURO 2024 sponsors in Germany](#)^v shows that while shifting brand perceptions in such a cluttered environment is a challenge, it is achievable. These events provide a platform to help shift brand identity, helping a brand appear more successful, modern, or international.

Marketers should not view sponsorship opportunities as "one and done" moments. The goal is to use the intense excitement of the event to build a foundation of awareness and build on that. Without a plan to maintain relevance or connection with the sport after the event ends, a brand may have to spend more time to rebuild its position from scratch next time.



Source: UK Sponsorship Tracking Study 2024 | Base: Total Sample. Prompted sponsorship awareness over time



FAN PASSION AND BRAND FIT: The winning combination

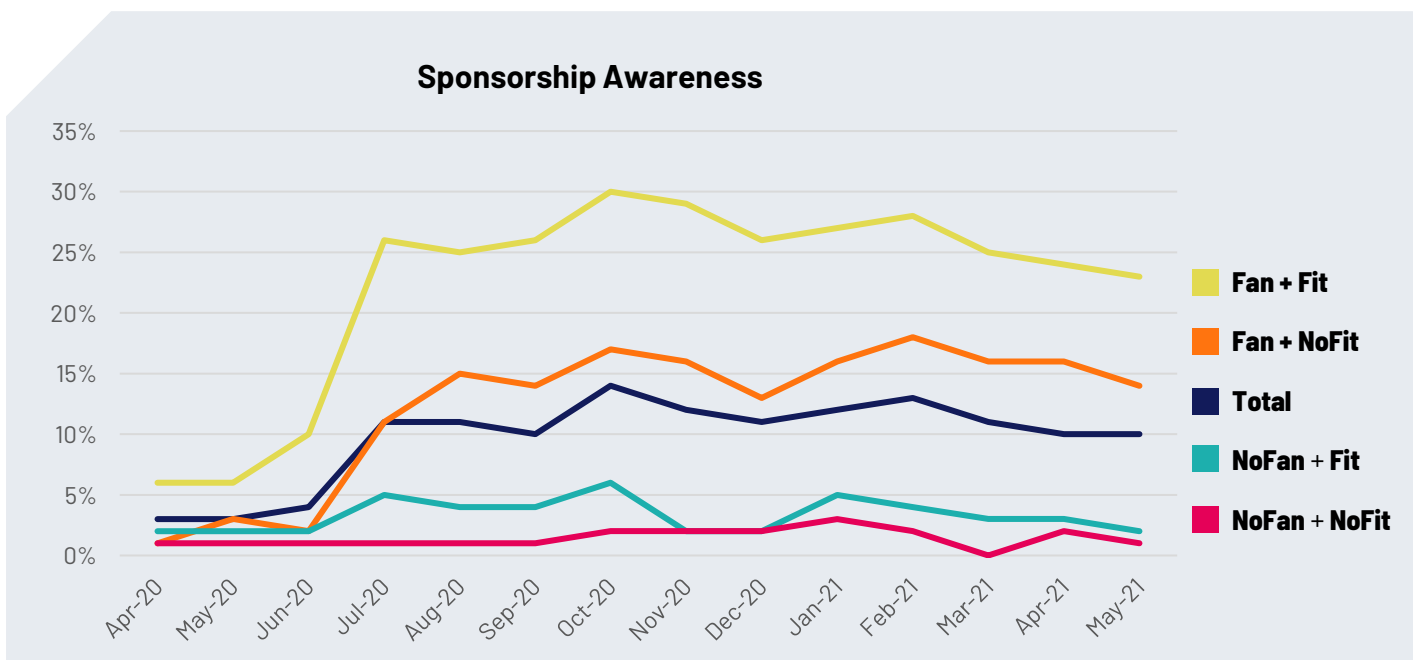
Timing and consistency matter, but successful sponsorship also depends on the audience and how naturally the brand fits the event.

In a study of a brand sponsoring an English Premier League club, we categorised audiences across two dimensions: **Fan Status** (how much they care about the sport) and **Brand Fit** (how

naturally the brand belongs there). The result for this specific case reinforces a broader point:

Fan + Fit is the most effective combination.

When people care about the sport and see a natural connection for the brand, awareness grows rapidly. Where neither is present, awareness remains flat, regardless of sponsorship spend:



Source: UK Sponsorship Tracking Study 2020/21 | Base: Total Sample. Prompted sponsorship awareness over time

How to deliberately build brand fit

“Fit” isn’t a happy accident; it’s something brands need to build and nurture. When the connection is obvious, such as Nike and the Olympics, the association feels natural. When it’s less intuitive, such as a toothpaste brand in Formula 1, the brand must work harder to justify its presence.

There are three routes to building fit:

1. **Functional Integration:** The product directly enables the event, sport or team (e.g. Shell providing fuel for F1).
2. **Emotional and Behavioural Link:** The brand aligns with fan rituals (e.g. Doritos and Super Bowl).
3. **Geographical Ties:** The brand is rooted in the same place and community as the event, sport or team (e.g. Air New Zealand and the All Blacks Rugby Team).

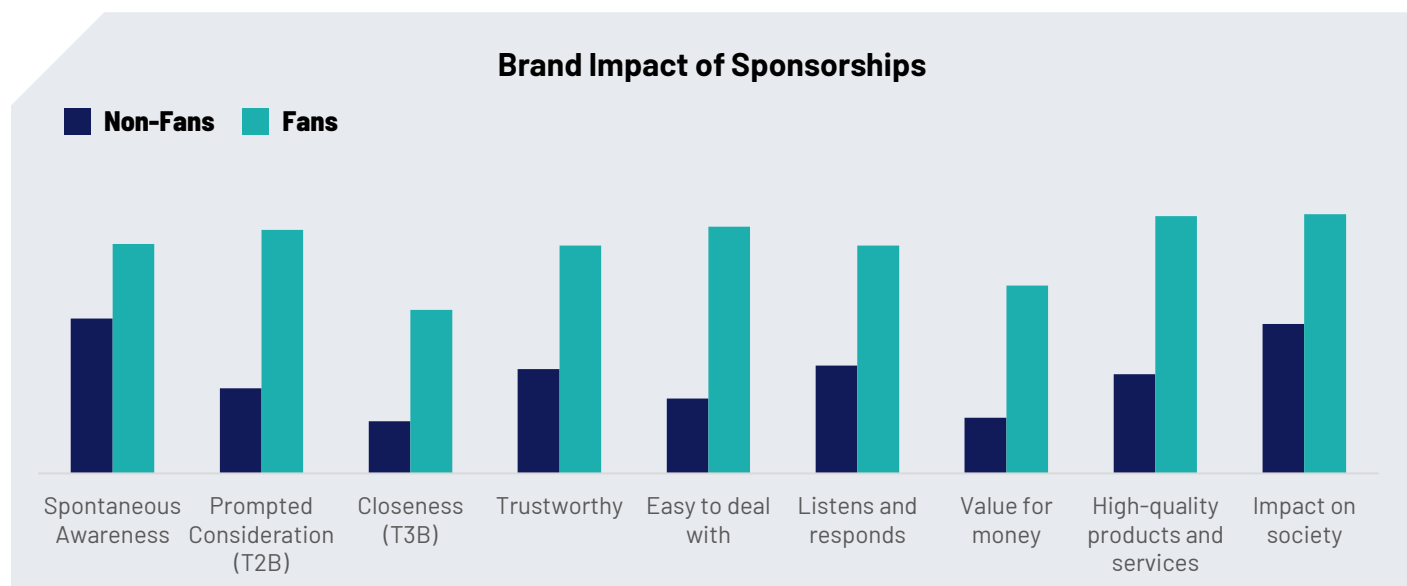
Whichever route a brand takes, **longevity is non-negotiable**. Without a clearly defined link, and the commitment to promote it consistently, brands risk being ignored.

The Fan Multiplier effect

Whilst Fan + Fit helps a brand be noticed more quickly, a key question remains: does sponsorship actually change how people feel about a brand?

Ipsos compared brand perceptions between those aware of a sponsorship and those who were not, across both fans and non-fans, applying statistical modelling to isolate the true effect from pre-existing brand affinity. The results reveal a clear Fan Multiplier effect: when people notice and remember a sponsorship, the positive impact on brand perception is significantly stronger among fans than non-fans.

Engaging fans and demonstrating clear fit delivers far greater returns than reaching a broad audience who may not understand why the brand is there. The goal: **don’t just sponsor the event, make its fans your fans**.



Source: UK Sponsorship Tracking Study 2024 | Activation Impact Modelling | Base: Recognisers of any sponsorship - Fans (n=4083), Non-Fans (n=947)



AVOIDING BRAND BLINDNESS: Make your assets do the work



If your activations lean too heavily on the event rather than your brand, you risk brand blindness. **Essentially, you are paying to act as a high-priced billboard for the event**, rather than building your own brand.

Even with perfect fit, one of the biggest challenges in event sponsorship is simply being seen as yourself, rather than as a backdrop to someone else's story.

Data from our [Creative Excellence database](#) shows us that sports-themed ads are less effective than the average ad at linking back to the brand^{vi}. Viewers have difficulty associating the ad to the brand and these ads are less likely to drive brand impact.

Ipsos Brand Distinctive Assets* data shows that most sponsorship elements (club crests, tournament logos) are weak assets for the sponsoring brand. This means that while they are recognisable, they don't automatically make people think of the brand. An event logo triggers many associations, such as the players, the matches or the venue, but rarely the brand sponsor. If your activations lean too heavily on the event rather than your brand, you risk brand blindness. Essentially, you are paying to act as a high-priced billboard for the event, rather than building your own brand.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR SPONSORSHIP SUCCESS

in 2026 and beyond

To maximise the impact of sponsorship, move away from simply “buying an audience” and focus on these **five principles**:

1. Commit to the long term. Avoid the “one and done” approach. While high-intensity events like the World Cup are great launchpads, brand awareness often erodes quickly once the event ends. Long-term consistency – whether through regular seasonal leagues or multi-decade commitments to periodic events – is what builds permanent mental availability and stable associations.

2. Deliberately prove your brand fit. Do not assume the audience will naturally see the connection between your brand and the sport. Successful sponsorships feel like a natural part of the event. Build this fit through functional integration (product enables the sport), emotional and behavioural links (aligning with fan rituals), or geographical ties (sharing a community with the team or event).

3. Leverage the Fan Multiplier effect. If you can engage true fans and demonstrate a clear fit, the brand rewards are significantly higher than simply reaching a mass audience of non-fans. When people care about the sport and see a natural connection to the brand, awareness grows rapidly and positive brand perceptions are much stronger.

4. Prioritise your own brand assets. Relying too heavily on a tournament’s logo or a club’s crest risks “brand blindness”. Ensure your own distinctive “gold” brand assets – your logos, colours, or characters – lead the communication, so you’re building your brand, not acting as a high-priced billboard for the event.

5. Engage fans beyond the stadium. Fandom has moved into year-round digital communities, including social media groups and fantasy leagues. By showing up consistently in these spaces as an active participant or contributor, brands can maintain saliency and prevent it from evaporating the moment the tournament finishes.



Contact us

Learn more about how Ipsos can help you evaluate the impact of your sponsorship activations on your brand.

If you enjoyed this article, you also might be interested in our [recent Brand Health papers](#), covering the latest thinking on brands. As well as our [Noise to Noteworthy Ipsos Views paper](#), which explores the changing advertising and media landscape and what it means for marketers.

Sources

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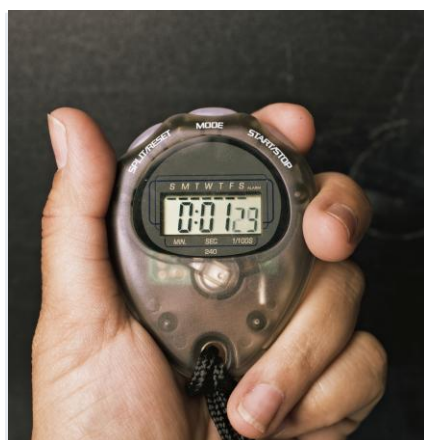
* At Ipsos we use a neuroscience-based solution to identify strong Brand Distinctive Assets. The strongest assets have an intrinsic, implicit association with 'their' brand, and only their brand. This means those assets trigger fast, correct brand recognition.

IPSOS' BRAND TOOLKIT



Brand Distinctive Assets:

Unlock the full value of your Brand Distinctive Assets with Ipsos' MultiChoice Reaction Time (MCRT) technique. MCRT measures the implicit strength of associations consumers have with your assets, going beyond what people say to reveal what they truly recognise, quickly and intuitively. These insights help you prioritise the strongest assets, invest where it matters most, and ensure your brand is both instantly recognisable and consistently memorable across marketing communications.



Brand and Communications Tracking:

Track and evaluate the cumulative cut-through and brand impact effectiveness of your communications and sponsorship activity over time. We reveal unique insights into the campaign's ability to achieve memorable attention and connect to the brand. By analysing the brand impact of that memorable attention, we can unpack its ability to lift key brand KPIs.



Activation Impact Modelling:

Measures the true brand impact of advertising and communications by accounting for consumer affinity and exposure distortion, enabling more precise modelling of how specific activities drive outcomes across the full spectrum of brand relationships, from top-of-mind awareness to brand equity.

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AUTHOR:

Nick Watson,

Research Director,
Brand Health Tracking, Ipsos

CONTRIBUTOR:

Frank Womelsdorf

Associate Director,
Brand Health Tracking, Ipsos