Achieving Marketing Objectives Through Social Sponsorships

The corporate social responsibility literature has focused on creating broad associations, such as simply being "socially responsible," and on the simple transfer of positive affect from sponsored causes to sponsoring firms. Both views fail to recognize the power of social initiatives as a means for differentiating among socially responsible firms and, in particular, for reinforcing the brand's positioning. The authors adopt a more traditional branding perspective and show that the fit between a firm's specific associations and a sponsored cause can reinforce or blur the firm's positioning, influence liking for the sponsorship, and bolster or undermine the firm's equity. They also show that communications decisions can mitigate the negative effects of low fit. Finally, they show that sponsorship effects can persist for as long as a year despite day-to-day exposure to other brand communications.

Corporate support of social causes has emerged as a popular promotional tool. The logic is that consumers will view a firm more favorably if it supports social causes, and surveys suggest that this is true. For example, 80% of respondents to a national survey report that social sponsorships create a more favorable impression of the firm; two-thirds of respondents also report that they would be more likely to purchase from a firm that supports social causes (Reilly 2000). However, a variety of theory and evidence indicate that the impact of social sponsorships may be more complex (Hoeffler and Keller 2002; Jagre, Watson, and Watson 2001; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004; Pracejus and Olsen 2004; Rifon et al. 2004; cf. Sen and Bhattacharya 2001) and that when the sponsored cause is viewed as not fitting with the firm's image, sponsorships may even be harmful (Speed and Thompson 2000).

We test this proposition and show that high-fit sponsorships (i.e., those for which partners are perceived as congruent on some key dimension) can increase brand equity, whereas low-fit sponsorships (i.e., those for which partners are perceived as incongruent) can dilute brand equity. Furthermore, we show that these effects occur because low fit blurs the firm's positioning and decreases the favorability of attitudes toward the sponsorship. Recognizing that not all firms have a natural high fit with a chosen cause, we also show that the negative effects of low fit can be reduced (1) through communications decisions that create perceived fit and (2) by altering the message source. Creating fit—that is, making salient how the two organizations are congruent—may be as effective as a naturally high-fit cause, whereas communicating through the sponsored organization rather than through the firm can reduce the perception of low fit and its associated risks. Finally, we show that fit effects may persist for as long as a year.

Contribution

The idea that low fit between a brand and other entities with which it is associated (e.g., extensions, alliance partners) can be harmful is not a new one (e.g., Aaker 1990; Keller and Aaker 1992; John, Loken, and Joiner 1998; Milberg, Park, and McCarthy 1997). However, we make several contributions. First, it might be expected that intrinsically positive activities, such as social sponsorships, are less likely to suffer from low fit than are purely commercial activities, such as brand extensions or alliances. In contrast, we show that the benefits of intrinsically favorable actions can be mitigated and even reversed by low fit (cf. Hoeffler and Keller 2002). Second, the corporate social responsibility literature has focused on creating broad associations, such as being "socially responsible," and on the simple transfer of positive affect from sponsored causes (Brown and Dacin 1997; Rifon et al. 2004; Smith 2004; cf. Sen and Bhattacharya 2000). We adopt a more traditional branding perspective and show that the fit between a firm’s specific associations and a sponsored cause can reinforce or blur the firm’s positioning. We also show that the unpredictedness of low fit leads to increased elaboration on the sponsorship and that this elaboration is negatively biased, leading to less favorable attitudes toward the sponsorship. Third, we extend work on how message variables moderate the effects of fit (Bridges, Keller, and Sood 2000), showing that message content and source can each reduce the unfavorable effects of low fit. Fourth, we offer the first experimental evi-

Carolyn J. Simmons & Karen L. Becker-Olsen

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Theoretical Background

What Is Fit, and Why Does It Matter?

In the management literature, the fit construct embodies the idea of transferability of expertise or synergies in activities, such as when there is similarity in products, technologies, or markets (Rumelt 1974) or complementarity of skills and activities (Porter 1987). A similar conceptualization underlies Sen and Bhattacharya’s (2001) examination of fit in the domain of internal social initiatives. In the brand extension and brand alliance literature, the focus is often on consumers’ perceptions of fit. Although it is assumed that ideas of transferability and synergy often underlie perceived fit, it is recognized that what is transferred or enhanced may be intangible associations (Aaker and Keller 1990; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; John, Loken, and Joiner 1998; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004; Loken and John 1993; Simonin and Ruth 1998). We adopt a similar consumer-based conceptualization. Fit between a firm and a sponsored cause is high when the two are perceived as congruent (i.e., as going together), whether that congruity is derived from mission, products, markets, technologies, attributes, brand concepts, or any other key association (Bridges, Keller, and Sood 2000; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991).

Fundamentally, fit matters because high-fit sponsorships are consistent with what would be expected from the firm, whereas low-fit sponsorships are not. As we discuss in greater detail subsequently, this difference affects the clarity of the firm’s positioning, and it alters processing of sponsorship information to influence how well the sponsorship is liked. In turn, clarity and attitude toward the sponsorship influence affective and behavioral responses to the firm, two key components of equity (Keller 1993). We outline these propositions in Figure 1.

Clarity of positioning. Consistency in communication helps build clarity, or the extent to which people know what to expect from the firm (Erdem and Swait 1998; Keller 1993; Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986). Because high-fit

![FIGURE 1](image)

**Notes:** Path estimates are standardized regression coefficients (b*). All ps < .001. We also examined elaboration as a mediator of the effect of fit on attitude toward the sponsorship. We find that the effect of fit on attitude is partially mediated by elaboration on the sponsorship (b\(_{fit\_elaboration}\) = .49, p < .001; b\(_{elaboration\_attitude}\) = .15, p < .01; and b\(_{fit\_attitude}\) = .70, p < .001). The direct effect of fit may occur because low fit is negatively valued; however, this result may simply reflect that our thought measures do not capture intensity in the way that our scaled measures do (i.e., thoughts are coded as positive, neutral, or negative).
sponsorships are consistent with what people expect from the firm, such sponsorships should increase clarity. Because low-fit sponsorships are inconsistent with what people expect from the firm, such sponsorships should reduce clarity.

**Attitude toward the sponsorship.** On its surface, a social sponsorship is an intrinsically favorable action, one that we expect consumers to like. However, the interpretation of marketing activities, as in the case with the interpretation of any behavior, often involves two stages (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Gilbert 1989; Johar and Simmons 2000). People first make a relatively effortless inference based on a surface interpretation (e.g., a salesperson’s flattering remark reflects his or her true beliefs, a product with an unfamiliar brand name is of low quality). Then, and only if they allocate sufficient processing capacity, people may “correct” this inference through a more effortful process that accounts for other accessible inputs (e.g., the salesperson has an interest in ingratiating him- or herself with the customer, an unfamiliar brand is made by a well-respected firm). Similarly, we expect that a social sponsorship will be interpreted according to its surface meaning—that is, as a good act that is worthy of liking—unless people engage in further elaboration, in which case they may consider any other accessible inputs to judgment. Low fit plays a dual role in this process: (1) It increases cognitive elaboration, and (2) it makes counteracting (negative) inputs accessible.

Why would these effects occur? Low fit should increase elaboration because unexpected events engender thought, often in the form of an attributional search to understand the reasons for the event (Weiner 1985). Low fit should make counteracting inputs accessible because low fit (i.e., incongruity, unexpectedness) is negatively valued (Mandler 1982). Through a process of attitude priming (Fazio and Williams 1986; Houston and Fazio 1989), this negative affect should engender other negative thoughts, leading to a less favorable attitude toward the sponsorship. Similar effects of fit on attitudes have been found for brand alliances and extensions (Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Simonin and Ruth 1998), but in neither of these domains have increased elaboration and specific negative cognitions been demonstrated.

**Firm equity.** In turn, clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship should influence affective and behavioral responses to the firm, two key components of equity (Keller 1993). Clarity should have an effect because it alters the value of the brand as a signal. When clarity is high, buyers who value the brand’s benefits perceive less risk in choosing the brand and feel less need to gather information to make that choice (Ertem and Swait 1998). Attitude toward the sponsorship should have an effect because it is a new affective association for the firm. Consistent with this prediction, responses to brands have been shown to be correlated with attitudes toward brand alliances (Simonin and Ruth 1998) and extensions (Ertem 1998; Sullivan 1990). In summary, we expect that the firm’s equity increases with high-fit sponsorships and decreases with low-fit sponsorships and that clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship mediate these effects.

**Hypotheses**

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, we propose the following two hypotheses:

H1: Low-fit (versus high-fit) sponsorships lead to (a) decreased clarity of positioning, (b) greater cognitive elaboration (i.e., more thoughts), (c) less favorable thoughts, (d) a less favorable attitude toward the sponsorship, and (e) reduced equity, as measured by affective and behavioral responses to the firm.

H2: Clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship mediate the effect of fit on equity.

**Study 1: Natural Fit**

We tested these hypotheses in an experiment in which we asked respondents to read a press clipping that contained four business news items. One item reported on the opening of an expanded online store by one of two firms and either did or did not mention the firm’s sponsorship of a nonprofit organization. When a sponsorship was mentioned, the sponsored organization was either high or low in fit with the company’s image, as revealed by pretests. After respondents read these items, they responded to our dependent measures.

Because we are interested in the ability of sponsorships both to dilute and to enhance equity, we focus on familiar, well-liked firms. Furthermore, we focus on the effects of “natural fit”—that is, the extent to which the sponsored event is perceived as being congruent with the image of the sponsor, independent of efforts to create a perceived fit between the organizations. For example, Alpo and the Humane Society are high in natural fit because both are strongly associated with pets; this association readily comes to mind. In contrast, Alpo and the Special Olympics are low in natural fit because they share no highly accessible association. Alpo is associated with pet food, and the Special Olympics is associated with athletic competitions for the mentally disabled.

Natural fit is of interest for several reasons. First, firms may engage in low-fit sponsorships because of a sincere interest in the cause or a belief that fit is irrelevant. Second, cost efficiencies are greater if there is no need to spend on efforts to create fit. Finally, because marketers do not control all the contexts in which consumers encounter information about their activities, a sponsorship that does not depend on such control for its effectiveness is highly attractive.

**Method**

**Pretests.** We attempted to identify a pair of equally well-liked, familiar companies (C1 and C2) that we could pair with a set of equally well-liked, familiar nonprofits (N1 and N2), such that for C1, N1 would be a high fit and N2 would be a low fit, whereas for C2, N1 would be a low fit and N2 would be a high fit. Thus, our fit manipulation would not be confounded with any differences between nonprofits.
Alpo and Sports Authority paired with the Humane Society and the Special Olympics met our criteria. The two firms were equally well liked (Ms = 6.10 and 6.17; F1, 27 < 1) and familiar (Ms = 6.50 and 6.57; F1, 27 < 1); we measured both liking and familiarity with three (seven-point) semantic differential items: “negative/positive,” “unfavorable/favorable,” and “bad/good” (Cronbach’s α = .97), and “unfamiliar/familiar,” “did not recognize/recognized,” and “had not heard of/had heard of” (Cronbach’s α = .96). Furthermore, the two nonprofits were also equally well liked (Ms = 6.25 and 6.36; F1, 21 = 1.63, p > .21) and familiar (Ms = 6.13 and 6.15; F1, 21 < 1). Fit, which we measured as “dissimilar/similar,” “inconsistent/consistent,” “atypical/typical,” “unrepresentative/representative,” “not complementary/complementary,” “low fit/high fit,” and “does not make sense/makes sense” (Cronbach’s α = .99), varied as we expected (Ms = 6.45 and 1.80; F1, 25 = 500.09, p < .0001), and this effect did not differ by firm (F < 1). Furthermore, fit did not differ between firms for high-fit nonprofits (Ms = 6.65 and 6.25; F1, 25 = 1.57, p > .22) or for low-fit nonprofits (Ms = 1.84 and 1.75; F1, 25 < 1).

Respondents and design. Two hundred thirty-six students in nonmarketing professional seminars participated in the study without compensation. Their average age was 35, and 52% were male. The design is a 2 (fit: high versus low) × 2 (sponsorship: present versus absent) × 2 (company: Alpo versus Sports Authority) × 2 (measurement order: sponsorship questions before versus after equity measures) completely randomized between-subjects design. This design provides different controls for the low-fit and high-fit conditions (sponsorship: present versus absent is crossed with fit) to ensure that we isolate the effects of sponsorship per se. Particularly in the high-fit condition, simply thinking about the nonprofit and the firm at the same time may lead to more favorable thoughts about the firm, for example, being exposed to the Humane Society might make a person think about how much he or she likes dogs, which may make this person think more favorably about a firm such as Alpo, which produces dog food. Our control conditions isolate this effect from the effect of sponsorship because they expose respondents to both organizations in the absence of a sponsorship relationship. The measurement order factor allows us to determine whether effects on firm equity occur spontaneously or whether they occur only if consumers are directed to think about and evaluate the sponsorship.

Materials. The materials we used appear in Appendix A. Each clipping contains four news items. The first two items are constant across conditions. The third item varies across conditions and describes the promotion of an employee of either the Humane Society or the Special Olympics. The last item also varies across conditions and describes a new Web site for either Alpo or Sports Authority. In the sponsorship condition, it also announces the sponsorship program. There is a no-sponsorship control for every pairing of a company with a nonprofit. The only difference between no-sponsorship and sponsorship conditions is the presence of the sponsorship.

Measures. We measured fit as we did in the pretest. We measured elaboration by asking respondents to list all the thoughts they had while thinking about the sponsorship. Two coders, who were blind to the conditions, categorized thoughts as thoughts about fit (e.g., “The organizations seem to go together,” “Pet food and the Special Olympics have nothing to do with each other”), the sponsorship (e.g., “This is a great thing,” “It is actually a little offensive”), efficacy for the firm (“They may open more of a market for themselves,” “I feel that Alpo will not sell more food”), the firm’s motivation (e.g., “Seems as though Alpo is trying to help,” “What a cry for publicity”), and other thoughts (e.g., “My dog eats Alpo,” “I like pets”). Fit thoughts were further classified as high, uncertain, or low fit. Inferences about the firm’s motivation were classified as social, uncertain, or self-interested motivation. All other thoughts were classified as favorable, neutral, or unfavorable. Agreement between coders was 81%, and there were no significant differences in their coding for any thought category (ps > .45). Discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

We measured clarity of positioning by rated agreement (seven-point scales) with the items “clearly communicates what it stands for,” “has an image that is difficult to understand,” and “conveys a clear image in all its actions” (Cronbach’s α = .94). We measured attitude toward the sponsorship with the same attitudinal items used in the pretest for companies and nonprofits. We measured firm equity with these same three attitudinal measures and three behavioral intention measures, the rated likelihood to “consider,” “purchase,” and “recommend” (Cronbach’s α = .96).2

Procedure. We told respondents that we were interested in their responses to news stories. They read the clipping and then responded to our dependent measures. We presented questions about the sponsorship and the firm in counterbalanced order, followed by all other measures. We then debriefed respondents and told them that the articles were fictitious.

Results
The results conform to our predictions. When fit is low versus high, clarity of positioning is lower, more thoughts are generated in response to the sponsorship, these thoughts are less favorable, attitude toward the sponsorship is less favorable, and firm equity (operationalized as affective and behavioral responses to the firm) is lower. Furthermore, clarity and attitude toward the sponsorship mediate the effect of fit on firm equity. Except where we subsequently note, none of these effects vary as a function of measurement order (ps > .11) or company (ps > .30). We present means in Table 1.

Manipulation check. Perceived fit varies as we expected (Ms = 1.59 and 6.45; F1, 152 = 3574.97, p < .0001), and it does not vary by firm (F1, 152 = 1.83, p > .17). Furthermore, perceived fit does not vary by exemplar in the high-fit condition (Ms = 6.48 and 6.42; F1, 76 < 1) or in the low-fit condition (Ms = 1.51 and 1.67; F1, 76 = 1.61, p > .20).

Because not everyone buys pet supplies or sports-related products, we asked these questions as follows: “If you or a friend had the need to buy the kind of products sold by (Alpo, Sports Authority), how likely would you be to...?”

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### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study 1 Means</th>
<th>Low Fit</th>
<th>High Fit</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sports Authority</td>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Fit</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Fit</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
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#### Alpo

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Scaled Measures</th>
<th>Low Fit</th>
<th>High Fit</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity of positioning</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>6.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude toward the sponsorship</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Firm equity</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>5.62</td>
</tr>
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#### Number of Thoughts

<table>
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<th>About …</th>
<th>Low Fit</th>
<th>High Fit</th>
<th>Combined</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferred efficacy</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferred motivation</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Favorability of Thoughts About …

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Low Fit</th>
<th>High Fit</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
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<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferred efficacy</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferred motivation</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Notes:

High-fit and low-fit means with different alphabetical superscripts differ from each other (p < .0001). Control and sponsorship means with different numerical superscripts differ from each other (p < .001). When effects generalize across companies (no interaction with company), we summarize statistical tests with the use of alphabetical superscripts in the “Combined” column. When effects do not generalize across companies, we also summarize simple effects tests with the use of alphabetical superscripts in each company column.
Clarity of positioning. As H₁₈ predicted, when fit is low rather than high, respondents perceive the firm’s positioning as less clear (Ms = 2.86 and 6.17; \( F_{1, 151} = 744.70, p < .0001 \)). Furthermore, control group comparisons show that clarity is lower with a low-fit sponsorship than with no sponsorship (Ms = 2.86 and 5.15; \( F_{1, 113} = 205.75, p < .0001 \)) and is higher with a high-fit sponsorship than with no sponsorship (Ms = 6.17 and 5.09; \( F_{1, 114} = 91.98, p < .0001 \)).

Number and favorability of thoughts. As H₁₉ predicted, more thoughts are generated when fit is low than when it is high (Ms = 3.53 and 2.07; \( F_{1, 147} = 34.88, p < .0001 \)). Because low fit is unexpected, we expect that low fit is noted more often than high fit, but the overall increase in thoughts is not attributable only to thoughts about low fit. When we omit fit thoughts, the total number of thoughts remains higher with low fit (Ms = 2.64 and 1.82; \( F_{1, 147} = 12.84, p < .0005 \)). An examination of individual thought categories shows that low fit leads to more thoughts about fit (Ms = .89 and .25; \( F_{1, 147} = 32.76, p < .0001 \)), but it also leads to more thoughts about the sponsorship (Ms = 1.10 and .79; \( F_{1, 147} = 4.60, p < .03 \)). Thus, the increased elaboration associated with low fit is focused not solely on fit but on other aspects of the sponsorship as well. No other effects on the number of thoughts are significant.

As H₂₀ predicted, thoughts are less favorable overall when fit is low than when it is high (Ms = –.16 and 1.12; \( F_{1, 147} = 39.65, p < .0001 \)). Furthermore, this difference is not attributable solely to thoughts about fit. Thoughts remain less favorable with low fit when we omit fit thoughts (Ms = .41 and .93; \( F_{1, 147} = 7.54, p < .006 \)). Consistent with the idea of attitude priming, individual thought categories reveal relatively little else systematic other than the overall pattern of less favorable thoughts with low fit. Low fit leads to less favorable thoughts about fit (i.e., more thoughts about low fit; Ms = –.57 and .19; \( F_{1, 147} = 59.08, p < .0001 \)), the sponsorship (Ms = .11 and .48; \( F_{1, 147} = 9.11, p < .003 \)), and the efficacy of the sponsorship for the firm (Ms = –.14 and .21; \( F_{1, 147} = 20.93, p < .0001 \)). This last difference is marginally greater for the offense (\( F_{1, 147} = 2.69, p < .10 \)) but is significant for both companies (\( p < .02 \)). The effect on sponsorship thoughts varies by company (\( F_{1, 147} = 3.77, p < .05 \)) and holds only for Sports Authority (\( p < .001 \)) but not for Alpo (\( p > .43 \)). Thoughts about motivation vary by company (\( F_{1, 147} = 10.08, p < .001 \)), becoming less favorable (i.e., more about self-interest) with low fit for Alpo (\( F_{1, 74} = 5.86, p < .01 \)) but more favorable (i.e., more about social motivation) with low fit for Sports Authority (\( F_{1, 73} = 4.59, p < .03 \)).

Attitude toward the sponsorship. As H₉ predicted, when fit is low rather than high, attitude toward the sponsorship is less favorable (Ms = 4.17 and 6.52; \( F_{1, 148} = 195.06, p < .0001 \)). The effect is marginally greater when the attitude measure is taken before the firm equity measure (\( F_{1, 148} = 2.72, p < .10 \)), but it is significant in either case (\( p < .0001 \)).

Firm equity. As H₁ predicted, when fit is low rather than high, the firm’s equity is lower (Ms = 4.93 and 6.50; \( F_{1, 148} = 260.21, p < .0001 \)). Furthermore, control-group comparisons show that firm equity is lower with a low-fit sponsorship than with no sponsorship (Ms = 4.93 and 5.60; \( F_{1, 114} = 15.12, p < .0002 \)) and is higher with a high-fit sponsorship than with no sponsorship (Ms = 6.50 and 5.62; \( F_{1, 114} = 72.99, p < .0001 \)). The effect of a high-fit sponsorship on firm equity is marginally greater for Alpo (\( F_{1, 114} = 2.80, p < .09 \)), but it is significant for both firms (\( p < .0001 \)).

Mediation. H₂ predicted that the effect of fit on equity is mediated by clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship. Our measurement model includes four latent variables: fit, clarity, attitude toward the sponsorship, and firm equity. Fit is represented by three composite measures, which we constructed by randomly dividing our seven items into one three-item parcel and two two-item parcels (Kishon and Widamon 1994; Marsh et al. 1998). Clarity and attitude toward the sponsorship are represented by our three single-item measures in each case. Firm equity is represented by two composite measures, our three-item measure of attitude toward the firm and our three-item measure of behavioral intention toward the firm.

The measurement model provides a strong fit to our data. Although the chi-square is significant (65.79, d.f. = 38, \( p < .003 \)), the comparative fit index (.99; Bentler 1989) and the nonnormed fit index (.98; Bentler and Bonett 1980) are both acceptably high. Composite reliabilities for the latent factors all exceed .91, indicating high internal consistency (Hatcher 1994, adapted from the work of Fornell and Larcker 1981). Variance extracted estimates for the latent factors all exceed .84, indicating a high amount of variance captured by the factors, compared with error variance (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Furthermore, all factor loadings are high (> .87) and highly significant (\( p < .001 \)), indicating convergent validity. Although the factors are highly correlated, as our model predicts, discriminant validity is also good. All factors exhibit discriminant validity, as a chi-square difference test (\( p < .001 \)) and a confidence interval test (\( p < .001 \); Anderson and Gerbing 1988) indicate. A variance extracted test shows discriminant validity for all pairs of variables except fit and clarity, for which the squared correlation between factors (.89) slightly exceeds the variance extracted for clarity (.86). Thus, only 1 of 18 tests fails to show good discrimination; this is about the rate that would be expected to occur by chance at the standard alpha of .05. Furthermore, the one exception is for the method (variance extracted) that does not employ a significance test. For the other two methods, we employ the highly stringent alpha of .001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Attitude Toward the Sponsorship</th>
<th>Equity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude toward the sponsorship</td>
<td>—</td>
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3We coded thoughts about low fit and self-interested motivation as unfavorable thoughts.

4Factor correlations:
Our theoretical model, which we illustrate with the ovals and paths in Figure 1, also exhibits strong fit. Although the model chi-square is significant ($\chi^2 = 67.73, \text{d.f.} = 40, p < .005$), both the comparative fit index (.99) and the nonnormed fit index (.98) indicate acceptably high fit. Each standardized path coefficient ($b^\ast$) is nontrivial ($>.36$) and significant ($p < .001$). Furthermore, the R-square for all latent endogenous variables is sizable (.89, .61, and .77 for clarity, attitude toward the sponsorship, and firm equity, respectively). Finally, clarity and attitude toward the sponsorship completely mediate the effect of fit. When a direct path from fit is added to the model, this path is not significant ($b^\ast = .16, p > .332$), and model fit is not improved ($\chi^2 = .93, p > .334$).

When we measure all variables with scaled measures collected at the same point in time, common methods variance is a potential problem (Doty and Glick 1998). Although we cannot completely rule out common methods variance, we use methods to limit such bias. First, we vary measurement order, so that respondents do not always evaluate firm-related measures before sponsorship-related measures, or vice versa. Second, we use thought data to validate our process model, as described previously. Finally, in a regression-based mediation analysis (Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger 1998), we employ a nonscaled measure of fit (i.e., our fit manipulation), and again, we find that the effect of fit on equity is mediated by clarity of positioning ($z = 2.90, p < .003$) and attitude toward the sponsorship ($z = 4.58, p < .001$). Because this analysis employs our fit manipulation, it also confirms fit as a causal variable within the context of the mediation analysis.

**Discussion**

A social sponsorship can be an effective way to enhance the firm’s equity; however, a poor choice of a cause can eliminate and even reverse this effect, creating actual harm, as is shown by our comparisons with a no-sponsorship control group. Low fit decreases clarity, leads to negative elaboration on the sponsorship and a less favorable attitude toward the sponsorship, and dilutes the firm’s equity, as measured by affective and behavioral responses. These results have generality across exemplars and measurement contexts. The same firm benefits or is harmed, depending on which of two equally well-liked and familiar nonprofits (i.e., high fit or low fit) it sponsors. The same nonprofit organization can either have a favorable or an unfavorable effect, depending on which of two equally well-liked and familiar firms (i.e., high fit or low fit) it is a sponsor. The effects of fit on thoughts, attitude toward the sponsorship, and firm equity occur regardless of whether equity or sponsorship measures are taken first; thus, these effects do not depend on thoughts engendered by previous measures (Feldman and Lynch 1988). Furthermore, our thought data validate our process interpretation. Even without the prompting provided by scaled measures, people think about whether a sponsorship is consistent with the firm’s image, they have more favor-

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5We also tested a model in which the effect of fit on attitude toward the sponsorship is mediated by clarity. It yielded significantly poorer fit than our theoretical model: $\chi^2 = 67.73, p < .001$.

**Study 2: Created Fit, Message Source, and the Persistence of Effects**

Many firms may not have a high natural fit with many causes or may have an ongoing relationship with a low-fit cause, particularly with the current interest in corporate social responsibility and the common practice of sponsoring a standard set of causes (e.g., education, housing, health care). We now examine strategies that may help counter the negative effects of low fit. Specifically, we consider how message content can be used to create perceived fit and how message source may reduce the risks associated with low fit. We also examine how well the effects of the sponsorship persist over a one-year period.

**Created Fit**

Bridges, Keller, and Sood (2000) describe a relational communication strategy for brand extensions that is intended to increase perceived fit. When salient parent-brand associa-
tions are not relevant to the extension category but nonsalient associations are, the relational strategy involves emphasizing the relevant nonsalient associations. In the context of social sponsorships, there are at least two ways that a nonsalient shared association can be made salient and thus create perceived fit: (1) with product-related donations that evoke a shared association and (2) with messages that explain how the firm fits with the cause. As an example of using product-related donations to create fit, the Ford Motor Company (2002) recently helped make the vintage Red Bus Fleet of Glacier National Park safe for continued use. Without this donation, there is no apparent link between Ford and national parks; with it, the idea that parks require transportation services becomes salient. As an example of using a message to create fit, DenTek Oral Care (2006), a sponsor of the American Diabetes Association, includes in its sponsorship communications the information that diabetes can lead to tooth decay, bad breath, dry mouth, and gum disease. Because many people may not know about diabetes-related dental problems, the sponsorship might otherwise seem to be a bad fit.

To maximize the probability of successfully creating perceived fit, we use both strategies to create fit for one of our low-fit sponsorships from Study 1, namely, Alpo’s sponsorship of the Special Olympics. Specifically, the sponsorship announcement includes the information that the Special Olympics participants will receive pet-related gifts, and it also explains that caring for pets increases the self-esteem of mentally disabled children. We expect that if we are successful in creating fit, we will observe benefits similar to those of natural fit.

**Message Source**

People are less critical of messages from sources they regard as unbiased or disinterested (Artz and Tybout 1999; Birnbaum and Stegner 1979; Weiner, LaForge, and Goolsby 1990). We expect that people will perceive the firm as more self-interested than the sponsored nonprofit in communicating its sponsorship activity. Study 1’s thought listings show that people are aware that sponsorships help achieve marketing goals; many respondents commented on the efficacy of the sponsorship for increasing sales, gaining publicity, and so forth. Although the sponsorship benefits the nonprofit as well, that organization apparently has less to gain from communicating that the firm has given it support. Therefore, we expect that sponsorships are evaluated less critically when the message source is the sponsored nonprofit than when it is the sponsoring firm.

Because the issue of source bias has received relatively little systematic investigation, we consider alternative hypotheses about the form of this effect. Birnbaum and Stegner (1979) examine source bias in a study in which respondents estimated the value of a used car on the basis of its blue book value and the source’s estimate. When they perceived the source as self-interested, their estimates were lower than when they perceived the source as disinterested. That is, source bias had a main effect on judgments. Thus, we might expect that a nonprofit message source will have a main effect on the favorability of responses to the sponsorship (i.e., a positive effect regardless of fit).

In contrast, Artz and Tybout (1999; see also Wiener, LaForge, and Goolsby 1990) examine source bias as a moderator of responses to message content. People expect experts to speak in quantitative terms, whereas they expect nonexperts to speak in more qualitative terms. Messages that violate these expectations are less effective in creating positive attitudes but only if people perceive the source as self-interested. If people perceive the source as disinterested, they do not “penalize” the message when it violates their expectations. Thus, source bias moderates the effect of violated expectations on judgments. This finding is particularly relevant to our situation because low-fit sponsorships violate expectations, whereas high-fit sponsorships do not. Thus, we might expect a nonprofit source to increase the favorability of responses only when fit is low.

**Persistence of Sponsorship Effects**

Whether sponsorship effects endure is of crucial interest to sponsoring firms. We examine effects on firm equity and sponsorship recall after a one-year delay, during which respondents were exposed to brand messages only as they occurred routinely in their daily lives. Although our examination of the persistence of effects on firm equity is largely exploratory, we expect that sponsorship recall is greater with created fit than with low fit. Prior research has shown that recall of sponsorship partners is not only based on pure recollection but also incorporates constructive processes (Johar and Pham 1999). When attempting to recall a sponsorship, people use heuristics such as market prominence or semantic relatedness to help them identify sponsorship partners. A result of this partially constructive process is that people recall high-natural-fit sponsorships better than low-fit sponsorships. Because created fit involves creating a semantic link between otherwise unrelated organizations, we expect that people will recall created-fit sponsorships better than the same low-fit pairing. Both low fit and created fit begin with low-natural-fit pairings and thus engender elaboration, but the created-fit sponsorship gains an advantage from the creation of this associative link. Study 1’s data suggest that this is not a common outcome of the elaboration for low-fit sponsorships. Only 6% of Study 1’s low-fit respondents reported finding such a link.

**Hypotheses**

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, we propose the following three hypotheses:

H3: Low-fit (versus created-fit) sponsorships lead to (a) decreased clarity of positioning, (b) a less favorable attitude toward the sponsorship, and (c) reduced equity, as measured by affective and behavioral responses to the firm.

H4: A nonprofit message source (versus a company message source) leads to a more favorable response. This effect takes one of two forms: (a) greater clarity, a more favorable attitude toward the sponsorship, and higher firm equity with a nonprofit message source, regardless of fit, or (b) greater clarity, a more favorable attitude toward the sponsorship, and higher firm equity, but only when fit is low.

H5: A created-fit sponsorship is better recalled than the same low-fit pairing.
Method

Materials (see Appendix B) and procedures are similar to those of Study 1. The design is a 2 (fit: low versus created) × 2 (message source: company versus nonprofit) factorial with a separate-sample, no-sponsorship control. Because Study 1 showed high generality of effects across exemplars and no substantive effects of measurement order for the effects of interest, we examine effects for only one company and always take sponsorship measures before company measures. We selected Alpo as the company and the Special Olympics as the nonprofit. The low-fit condition is identical to the low-fit condition in Study 1. In the created-fit condition, the sponsorship includes a gift of a pet and pet food to the Special Olympics participants. The gift of a pet is intended to evoke a connection of Alpo to pets and children; its products nourish the pets that are part of many happy childhoods. The announcement also offers an explanation of how the organizations fit together, noting that caring for pets increases the self-esteem of the mentally disabled. We collected all measures, except sponsorship recall, just after exposure to the sponsorship. We measured firm equity again after a one-year delay; we collected recall, just after exposure to the sponsorship. We measured firm equity again after a one-year delay; we collected recall at the same time. One hundred twenty students from non-marketing professional training seminars participated in the study without compensation. Their mean age was 36, and 49% were male.

Results

In general, the results conform to our predictions. As we expected, created fit offers benefits similar to those of natural fit. Furthermore, a nonprofit message source (versus a company source) can increase clarity, the favorability of attitude toward the sponsorship, and firm equity. Evidence from our thought measures suggests that these effects are more reliable when fit is low. In addition, recall of the sponsored cause is greater with created fit than with low fit. We made no prediction about the persistence of effects, but we find that the effect of fit on firm equity persists over a one-year period.

Manipulation checks. As we expected, perceived fit is greater when fit is created than when it is low (Ms = 4.81 and 2.17; F1,76 = 125.98, p < .0001); this effect is not moderated by message source (p > .20). Perceived fit is also greater with a nonprofit than with a company as the source (Ms = 4.09 and 2.89; F1,76 = 26.06, p < .0001). Although we did not predict this effect, it is consistent with the idea that low-fit sponsorships are not judged as harshly with a nonprofit message source.

Clarity, attitude toward the sponsorship, and firm equity. We present means in Table 2. As H3 predicted, clarity is lower, attitude toward the sponsorship is less favorable, and firm equity is lower with low fit than with created fit (Ms = 3.72 and 5.96; F1,76 = 119.69, p < .0001; Ms = 3.87 and 6.15; F1,76 = 79.19, p < .0001; and Ms = 4.77 and 6.25; F1,76 = 67.87, p < .0001). As H4a predicted, these judgments are more favorable with a nonprofit message source than with a company source (Ms = 5.43 and 4.25; F1,76 = 32.88, p < .0001; Ms = 5.62 and 4.40; F1,76 = 22.96, p < .0001; and Ms = 5.74 and 5.27; F1,76 = 6.79, p < .01). For clarity, there is also a fit × source interaction (F1,76 = 6.15, p < .01), but it is not of the exact form that H3 predicted, namely, that the simple effect of source will be significant only for low fit. Instead, the effect is larger for low fit, but it is significant in any case (F1,38 = 27.32, p < .001 and F1,38 = 6.92, p < .01). No other fit × source interactions are significant.

We made no predictions with regard to control-group comparisons; however, clarity is greater with created fit than with no sponsorship (for company source: Ms = 5.63 and 5.19; F1,58 = 4.66, p < .03; for nonprofit source: Ms = 6.30 and 5.19; F1,58 = 79.48, p < .0001) and is lower with low fit than with no sponsorship (for company source: Ms = 2.88 and 5.19; F1,58 = 276.09, p < .0001; for nonprofit source: Ms = 4.56 and 5.19; F1,58 = 6.80, p < .01). Firm equity exhibits a similar pattern (created fit: for company source: Ms = 6.00 and 5.45; F1,58 = 5.13, p < .02; for nonprofit source: Ms = 4.64 and 5.45; F1,58 = 27.68, p < .0001; low fit: for company source: Ms = 4.55 and 5.45; F1,58 = 15.07, p < .0003; for nonprofit source: Ms = 5.00 and 5.45; F1,58 = 3.97, p < .05). Note that though a nonprofit source increases the favorability of these judgments, it never completely overcomes the negative effects of low fit.

Thought listings. Again, we use respondents’ undirected thoughts to validate our process explanation. The effects of

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<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td><strong>Created</strong></td>
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<td>Clarity of positioning</td>
<td>5.19</td>
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Notes: We indicate significant main effects of fit and source by pairs of means with different alphabetical superscripts under the “Fit Means” and “Source Means” headings, respectively. When there is a fit × source interaction, we indicate any significant simple effects by pairs of means with different alphabetical superscripts under the headings “Low fit” and “Created fit.” All simple-effect means that differ significantly from the no-sponsorship control mean have a different numerical superscript from the control mean. All ps < .05. NPO = nonprofit organization.
created fit substantially replicate the effects of natural fit from Study 1; however, we do not report these effects in greater detail. With regard to the effects of message source, thought listings are consistent with the idea that a nonprofit message source makes respondents less critical of low fit. Fit thoughts exhibit a fit × source interaction (F1, 75 = 3.76, p < .05); only when fit is low, a nonprofit source leads to marginally less unfavorable thoughts about fit than does a company source (Ms = −.10 and −.42; F1, 37 = 2.99, p < .09). For both number and favorability of thoughts about the sponsorship, there is a fit × source interaction (F1, 75 = 4.66, p < .03 and F1, 75 = 3.73, p < .05); only when fit is low, a nonprofit source leads to more thoughts and more favorable thoughts about the sponsorship (number: Ms = .42 and 1.20; F1, 37 = 6.47, p < .01; favorability: Ms = .05 and .60; F1, 37 = 7.86, p < .008); again, only when fit is low (fit × source: F1, 75 = 4.34, p < .04), there is a decrease in the favorability of other thoughts with a nonprofit source (Ms = .52 and .05; F1, 37 = 8.44, p < .006). Although this proposition is highly speculative, it may be that the negative attitude priming associated with low fit becomes diverted from the sponsorship when a nonprofit source engenders less critical processing. There are no other effects on number or favorability of thoughts.

**Separate-sample tests.** We conducted additional tests to increase our understanding of the created-fit and message source variables. Because the gift in the created-fit condition increases the economic value of the sponsorship, we conducted a separate-sample test to determine whether the results for created fit are attributable to the gift. We find that the gift has little or no effect on perceived fit, attitude toward the sponsorship, and firm equity, whereas the fit explanation (i.e., caring for pets increases self-esteem) accounts for most of the variance in these measures. For clarity, the gift has an effect only when the fit explanation is given. Thus, the effects of created fit are not attributable to increased value but rather to fit per se. The design is a 2 (fit explanation: present versus absent) × 2 (gift: present versus absent) factorial; we randomly assigned 76 respondents to conditions. Both the fit explanation and the gift increase perceived fit; however, the effect of the gift is much weaker (fit explanation: Ms = 2.84 and 4.39; F1, 71 = 62.79, p < .0001; gift: Ms = 3.42 and 3.81; F1, 71 = 3.83, p < .05). For attitude toward the sponsorship and firm equity, the gift has no impact (ps > .43), whereas the fit explanation increases favorability (attitude: Ms = 5.08 and 6.25; F1, 71 = 16.30, p < .0001; firm equity: Ms = 4.92 and 5.59; F1, 71 = 10.01, p < .002). For perceived clarity, there is a fit explanation × gift interaction (F1, 70 = 4.10, p < .04) such that the gift has an impact only if the fit explanation is given (no explanation: Ms = 3.90 and 4.08; F1, 34 < 1; explanation: Ms = 4.06 and 5.33; F1, 36 = 13.34, p < .0008).

For message source, we conducted a second separate-sample test to determine whether respondents view the sponsored nonprofit (versus the sponsoring firm) as less self-interested in announcing the sponsorship. In a within-subjects design, 60 respondents reported how they would perceive the motivations of Alpo and the Special Olympics as a message source. They rated (on seven-point scales) the likelihood that the source would “have self-serving motives,” “be trying to win people’s liking or patronage,” “be a trustworthy source of information,” “make the sponsorship sound better than it is,” “have unselfish motives,” and “be simply trying to inform the public” (we reverse-scaled some items; Cronbach’s α = .70). As we expected, respondents viewed the nonprofit as less likely to have self-interested motives (Ms = 3.15 and 4.42 for the Special Olympics and Alpo, respectively; F1, 48 = 44.96, p < .0001). Nonetheless, further investigation into the antecedents of the favorable nonprofit source effect is needed. Study 2’s respondents did not note any difference with regard to motives in their undirected thoughts, so it remains possible that the beneficial effect of the nonprofit source is derived purely from affect transfer or some mediating cognition other than thoughts about self-interest. However, that there are beneficial effects is not in question; benefits show up in both scaled measures and undirected thoughts.

**Persistence of effects.** One year later, we met with 47 of the original 120 respondents, again during professional training seminars. They were evenly spread across conditions. Given this small sample, we examine only effects that are significant on our immediate measures for our whole sample and for the portion that constitutes our follow-up sample. We then use a repeated measures analysis (immediate versus delayed) to track changes in our follow-up sample over time. Otherwise, we might mistakenly conclude that an effect decays over time when, instead, it is absent in our delayed measures because of low power or sample bias. Using this criterion, we are able to examine only effects of fit and cannot examine control-group comparisons.

The impact of fit on firm equity lessens over time (F1, 34 = 5.89, p < .02), but it remains highly significant after a delay of one year. Immediately after exposure to the sponsorship information, this sample’s equity scores for Alpo were 4.96 for low fit and 6.39 for created fit (F1, 35 = 35.16, p < .0001). One year later, these equity scores were 5.19 and 5.96 (F1, 34 = 10.52, p < .002).

We also collected sponsorship recall measures. As H5 predicted, recall is greater with created fit than with low fit. This effect occurs for both free recall and aided recall. Furthermore, the previously documented tendency (Johar and Pham 1999) to incorrectly recall semantically related pairings (i.e., false hits) is reduced by created fit. Free recall is scaled as follows: When a respondent recalled no sponsorship or recalled only that the sponsored cause “had something to do with pets,” we code recall as incorrect, or as 0. Although the sponsorship involved the gift of pets and pet food, the Special Olympics is not an organization that “has something to do with pets.” When a respondent recalled that the sponsored cause “had something to do with the mentally disabled” or “had something to do with athletics,” we scored this response as partially correct, or as 1, because the Special Olympics deals with both. When the respondent recalled that the sponsored cause was the Special Olympics, we scored this response as accurate, or as 2. No one recalled a specific nonprofit other than the Special Olympics. As we predicted, free recall is better with created fit than with low fit (Ms = .60 and .09; F1, 35 = 4.78, p < .03). We reach the
same conclusion if we simply compare the proportions of respondents correctly recalling the Special Olympics (35% versus 5%; $\chi^2 = 5.28, p < .02$).

For the aided-recall task, multiple-choice options were “no sponsorship,” “the Special Olympics,” and “the Humane Society.” We coded aided recall as incorrect if respondents indicated that there was no sponsorship or that the sponsored nonprofit was the Humane Society and as correct if they indicated that the sponsored nonprofit was the Special Olympics. The proportion of respondents who recalled correctly is significantly greater with created fit than with low fit (68% and 26%; $\chi^2 = 5.84, p < .01$). Furthermore, the proportion of respondents who incorrectly identified the semantically related Humane Society as the sponsored nonprofit is marginally lower in the created-fit condition than in the low-fit condition (30% and 57%; $\chi^2 = 3.08, p < .07$).

**Discussion**

*Created fit and the persistence of effects.* As is the case with high natural fit, created fit increases the favorability of responses relative to low-fit sponsorships and to no sponsorship, at least for familiar, well-liked firms. Furthermore, the created-fit-sponsorship was better recalled than the identical low-fit pairing, consistent with previous work that shows that semantically related pairings are better recalled. When recall is high, we might expect that less communication is required to maintain sponsorship effects over time. As a rough test of this possibility, we examined the extent to which an aided-recall question helped respondents who had previously free-recalled the sponsorship. Although an aided-recall question helped only 21% of the low-fit respondents, it helped 57% of the created-fit respondents ($\chi^2 = 3.74, p < .05$). Thus, simple communication reminders or point-of-purchase cues may be effective in keeping created-fit (and perhaps high-fit) sponsorships salient. Given the strong effects we observed, further investigation of created fit is warranted. For example, although it seems unlikely, it is possible that the heightened recall resulted from the provision of additional interesting information in the sponsorship announcement rather than from the creation of fit, per se.

Notably, one-year follow-up measures of firm equity indicate that low-fit sponsorships may also have enduring effects, even though they are not as well recalled. Equity means for both low fit and created fit changed little over time. That the effects of fit remained strong over a year during which respondents were likely exposed to other brand messages is impressive.

*Message source.* Communicating through the sponsored nonprofit can also be beneficial, though it does not completely overcome the negative effects of low fit. The main benefit is a reduction in the impression of misfit and inappropriateness for low-fit sponsorships, as is shown by the perceived fit and clarity measures and by the respondents’ undirected thoughts. We also observed benefits of a nonprofit source for high-fit sponsorships, but the absence of these effects in our thought measures leads us to interpret these benefits more cautiously. However, this lack of verbalization may reflect a ceiling effect; high-fit sponsorships are viewed favorably even when the company is the message source.

**General Discussion**

Much interest in recent years has centered on building, maintaining, and leveraging brand equity. Although much of the brand extension (e.g., Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; John, Loken, and Joiner 1998; Loken and John 1993), brand alliance (e.g., Simonin and Ruth 1998), and cobranding (e.g., Samu, Krishnu, and Smith 1999) literature has focused on brand-specific associations, the corporate social responsibility literature has focused on creating broad associations, such as being “socially responsible,” and on the simple transfer of positive affect from sponsored causes (Brown and Dacin 1997; Rifon et al. 2004; Smith 2004; cf. Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). We adopt a more traditional branding perspective and show that the fit between a firm’s specific associations and a sponsored cause can reinforce or blur the firm’s positioning. We also show that the unexpectedness of low fit leads to increased elaboration on the sponsorship, that this elaboration is negatively biased, and that it is accompanied by less favorable attitudes toward the sponsorship. Finally, we examine the effects of message content and source and offer the first experimental evidence of the persistence of sponsorship effects over an extended time.

**Overview of Results and Managerial Implications**

In Study 1, we show that sponsorship fit can blur or reinforce the firm’s positioning, influence liking for the sponsorship, and, through these effects, influence firm equity. These results have straightforward implications for sponsorship management. First, fit should be a key consideration in the development of sponsorships. Supporting a familiar, well-liked cause is not enough to ensure a good outcome and may even be harmful. Low fit, even with a well-liked cause, can dilute the firm’s positioning, create dislike for the sponsorship, and, as a result, lower firm equity. In contrast, high fit reinforces the firm’s positioning, creates favorable attitudes toward the sponsorship, and builds firm equity.

Second, management should pay special attention to factors that influence liking for the sponsorship. Sponsorships influence firm equity through their effects on clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship. Although high fit reinforces the firm’s positioning, it may be only one of many inputs to liking for the sponsorship. For example, choosing a well-liked cause, avoiding unattractive elements (e.g., heavy-handed promotions), and providing engaging ways for consumers to participate (e.g., walkathons, social events) may all contribute to a more favorable attitude toward the sponsorship.

In Study 2, we show that message content and source can mitigate the negative effects of low fit, including poor sponsorship recall, and we demonstrate that sponsorship effects can persist for as long as a year despite day-to-day
exposure to other brand communications. Again, managerial implications are straightforward. First, if the firm wishes to sponsor a low-natural-fit cause, management should create fit by making shared associations salient. Created-fit sponsorships can obtain essentially the same benefits as high-natural-fit sponsorships, including good recall, increased clarity of positioning, more favorable attitudes, and greater firm equity. There is plenty of room for creativity here. We created fit between Alpo and the Special Olympics by explaining that caring for pets increases the self-esteem of the mentally disabled. The Ford Motor Company likely created fit with a national park when it explained that it used its expertise in transportation to support the park’s transportation needs.

Second, it is risky to assume an understanding of which causes people will perceive as high fit. Instead, it is important to verify how the intended audience will view the relationship. DenTek Oral Care’s sponsorship of the American Diabetes Association probably seems logical (i.e., high fit) to people within these two organizations but not to people who are unfamiliar with the dental health effects of diabetes. For this audience, fit needs to be created. The caveat to verify fit also applies to actions that are intended to create fit. We expected that the gift of a pet and pet food to the Special Olympics participants would have a substantial impact on perceived fit with Alpo. The gift did increase perceived fit, but its effect was small compared with that of the explanation that caring for pets increases self-esteem.

Third, firms should consider using the sponsored cause as a message source. This decision may boost the effectiveness of high-fit sponsorships and can reduce some of the risk if the firm is committed to a low-fit sponsorship for which it is difficult to create fit. This strategy may be particularly helpful when transitioning into a high-fit sponsorship portfolio. Finally, it appears that sponsorships do not require extensive ongoing communications support to have enduring effects. We show that sponsorship effects can remain strong for up to one year with no interim reinforcement and as consumers are subject to ordinary day-to-day exposure to brand communications. Particularly for created-fit sponsorships, simple reminders may have strong effects. Free recall of these sponsorships was high, but aided recall, which provided reminders in the form of multiple-choice options, was considerably higher.

Limitations and Research Issues

We examined the effects of one brief exposure to a sponsorship. Given that we find effects on firm equity one year later, the real-world potential for sponsorship effects, both positive and negative, seems great. However, our results can most confidently be generalized to situations such as those we examined: familiar and well-liked firms and causes, causes that do not evoke too many fearful thoughts (e.g., no images of horrible disease), minimal exposures to basic sponsorship information, overall communication levels similar to those for the firms and causes we examined, very-low-fit and very-high-fit sponsorships, and so forth. In particular, we would not expect our predictions and findings with regard to the effect of clarity of positioning to be replicated for firms whose positioning is disliked rather than liked by consumers. Furthermore, although we focused on what we believe are the most common mediators of fit effects—clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship—it seems likely that other mediators operate in some contexts. Next, we discuss a few of the variables that seem most promising for further research.

Repeated exposures to less simple communications. When a brand extension is launched, it is common for consumers to be repeatedly exposed to well-developed advertisements. In contrast, the typical extension study offers a single exposure to a simple product description. Studies that create a more realistic information environment find that the negative effect of low fit (i.e., low category similarity) decreases as information about the extension, exposures, and consumer innovativeness increase (Klink and Smith 2001; Lane 2000). Although social sponsorships rarely receive communication support equal to that of brand extensions—indeed, minimal exposures are common—repeated and well-produced messages may mitigate the effect of low fit. It is possible to point to apparently successful sponsorships in which fit is questionable, for example, the support of the arts and cultural events by financial institutions. People may have learned through repeated exposure that financial institutions and cultural events go together. If repeated exposure to low-fit relationships can create fit, high levels of promotion may offer another route for overcoming the risks of low fit. However, this strategy may require a level of commitment best reserved for special situations, for example, when a firm seeks to overcome an image problem.

High fit/negative associative links. Some sponsorships are intended to overcome specific negative associations (Hoeffler and Keller 2002; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004). For example, oil and chemical companies, which are often associated with environmental pollution, frequently sponsor environmental causes. Notably, our pretests indicate that people perceive these kinds of relationships as high fit. For example, manufacturers of alcoholic beverages were rated as having a high fit with Mothers Against Drunk Driving. An important question for future research is whether high fit in these situations has the same beneficial effects we observed in the current studies or whether such sponsorships backfire by reminding consumers of the negative associations. In related findings, Szykman, Bloom, and Blazing (2004) report that respondents infer more society-serving motives when a message about the dangers of drinking and driving is delivered by Mothers Against Drunk Driving than when it is delivered by Budweiser.

The role of persuasion knowledge. In the domains of brand extensions and corporate social responsibility, it has been argued that low fit engenders the attribution that the company’s action (e.g., creation of a brand extension, support of a social cause) is a self-interested attempt to gain market value rather than a genuine attempt to deliver value (Aaker 1990; Keller and Aaker 1992; Rifon et al. 2004; cf. Brown and Dacin 1997). This prediction is based on two
ideas: (1) that people have “persuasion knowledge” (Fries- 
tad and Wright 1994, 1995), or intuitive beliefs about mar-
keters’ motives and tactics that they use to interpret mar-
keters’ actions, and (2) that low fit somehow activates or 
shapes the use of this knowledge. For example, Rifen and 
colleagues (2004) argue that the greater elaboration associ-
ated with low fit increases the likelihood that people will 
retrieve persuasion knowledge and use it to infer that the 
company is motivated by self-interest (cf. Campbell and 
Kirman 2000). Relying on scales of perceived motivation, 
Rifen and colleagues find the predicted effect. 
In contrast, our thought listings from both Study 1 and 
Study 2 show no evidence that this effect occurs sponta-
neously. Instead, we observe the effect only when we 
employ scaled measures. Furthermore, these scaled mea-
sures do not exhibit discriminant validity. Thus, our results 
suggest that the predicted attributions were not made spon-
taneously but rather were constructed on the spot, through 
attitude priming, to respond to our measures (Feldman and 
Lynch 1988; Simmons, Bickart, and Lynch 1993). We spec-
ulate that sponsorship fit may have the predicted effect on 
inferred motivations only when motivation is made salient. 
For example, consumers may be vigilant about marketing 
efforts of a firm that has recently experienced negative 
publicity, and therefore they may be quick to think about the 
firm’s motives. If inferred motives vary with fit, a low-fit 
sponsorship may be a particularly poor way to attempt to 
rebuild the firm’s reputation, whereas a high-fit sponsorship 
may be a particularly effective way.

We also find some evidence that consumers’ use of per-
suasion knowledge may both increase and decrease the 
marketer’s effectiveness. Our respondents’ comments 
reflected the marketing-savvy attitude reflected in today’s 
popular culture. When fit was low, they chided the mar-
keter: “Alpo will not sell more food.” When fit was high, 
they implicitly applauded the marketer’s efforts: “By doing 
this, they may open more of a market for themselves.” This 
result implies that marketers may impede their effectiveness 
by any activity that consumers regard as unskilled use of 
marketing tactics and that they may boost their effective-
ness by winning consumers’ approval of their skill as mar-
keters. Thus, high-fit sponsorships may help firms achieve 
making objectives because of consumers’ use of persua-
sion knowledge.

Appendix A
Study 1 Materials

Alpo

The clipping for the high-fit, sponsorship-absent condition is as follows:

Businesses and Organizations in the News

P&G has introduced a home-use version of its fruit and 
vegetable wash for restaurant and food service operations. 
The wash is formulated to easily remove dirt and 
unwanted residues, including up to 93% of wax, 95% of 
handling residues, and is 98% more effective than water at 
removing pesticides. The product will be available at gro-
cerries and mass merchandisers throughout the U.S.

The American Heart Association achieved its goal of 
increasing access to life-saving automated external defib-
illators (AEDs) for air travelers with the new FAA 
requirement that commercial airlines carry AEDs as part of 
on-board medical emergency equipment. AEDs are 
small, easy-to-use devises that can analyze heart rhythms 
of cardiac arrest victims to determine if shock is necessary 
and, if warranted, deliver a life-saving jolt of electricity to 
the heart.

The Humane Society today announced the promotion of 
Elizabeth Hansen to the post of Executive Vice President. 
Ms. Hansen has been an advocate for the humane treat-
ment of animals for over 20 years. In her five years as Pro-
gram Director of the Humane Society, she has spear-
headed educational campaigns to increase awareness of 
animal protection issues.

Alpo Petfoods today announced the opening of its 
consumers to securely purchase an assortment of pet food 
and related products online. The site includes the ability 
for returning customers to purchase without re-entering 
personal information and to interact in real time with cus-
tomer service representatives.

In low-fit conditions, we replaced the Humane Society 
item with the following:

The Special Olympics today announced the promotion of 
Elizabeth Hansen to the post of Executive Vice President. 
Ms. Hansen has been an advocate for athletic programs 
for the mentally retarded for over 20 years. In her five 
years as Program Director of the Special Olympics, she 
has spearheaded educational campaigns to increase aware-
ness of the benefits of athletics for the mentally retarded.

In sponsorship-present conditions, we added the follow-
ing to the Alpo item:

Coincidentally, Alpo also announced its new sponsorship of 
the [Humane Society or Special Olympics for high-fit 
versus low-fit conditions], which it initiated with a 
$25,000 cash donation. The company will also institute a 
program whereby its employees can receive paid leave to 
participate as volunteers in [Humane Society, Special 
Olympics] events.

The Sports Authority

The clipping for the high-fit, sponsorship-absent condition is as follows:

Businesses and Organizations in the News

P&G has introduced a home-use version of its fruit and 
vegetable wash for restaurant and food service operations. 
The wash is formulated to easily remove dirt and 
unwanted residues, including up to 93% of wax, 95% of 
handling residues, and is 98% more effective than water at 
removing pesticides. The product will be available at gro-
cerries and mass merchandisers throughout the U.S.

The American Heart Association achieved its goal of 
increasing access to life-saving automated external defib-
illators (AEDs) for air travelers with the new FAA 
requirement that commercial airlines carry AEDs as part of 
on-board medical emergency equipment. AEDs are 
small, easy-to-use devises that can analyze heart rhythms 
of cardiac arrest victims to determine if shock is necessary
and, if warranted, deliver a life-saving jolt of electricity to the heart.

The Special Olympics today announced the promotion of Elizabeth Hansen to the post of Executive Vice President. Ms. Hansen has been an advocate for athletic programs for the mentally retarded for over 20 years. In her five years as Program Director of the Special Olympics, she has spearheaded educational campaigns to increase awareness of the benefits of athletics for the mentally retarded.

The Sports Authority today announced the opening of its expanded online store, www.TheSportsAuthority.com. The store enables consumers to securely purchase an assortment of sporting goods online. The site includes the ability for returning customers to purchase without re-entering personal information and to interact in real time with customer service.

In low-fit conditions, we replaced the Special Olympics item with the following:

The Humane Society today announced the promotion of Elizabeth Hansen to the post of Executive Vice President. Ms. Hansen has been an advocate for the humane treatment of animals for over 20 years. In her five years as Program Director of the Humane Society, she has spearheaded educational campaigns to increase awareness of animal protection issues.

In sponsorship-present conditions, we added the following to the Sports Authority item:

Coincidentally, The Sports Authority also announced its new sponsorship of the Special Olympics or Humane Society for high-fit versus low-fit conditions, which it initiated with a $25,000 cash donation. The company will also institute a program whereby its employees can receive paid leave to participate as volunteers in [Special Olympics, Humane Society] events.

In the created-fit, nonprofit-source condition, the Special Olympics item is unchanged from the control, and we added the following to the Alpo item:

Coincidentally, Alpo also announced its new sponsorship of the Special Olympics, which it initiated with a $25,000 cash donation. The company will also institute a program whereby its employees can receive paid leave to participate as volunteers in Special Olympics events.

In the low-fit, company-source condition, the Special Olympics item is unchanged from the control, and we added the following to the Alpo item:

Coincidentally, Alpo also announced its new sponsorship of the Special Olympics, which it initiated with a $25,000 cash donation. The company will also institute a program whereby its employees can receive paid leave to participate as volunteers in Special Olympics events.

In the created-fit, company-source condition, the Special Olympics item is again unchanged from the control, and we added the following to the Alpo item:

Coincidentally, Alpo also announced its new sponsorship of the Special Olympics, which it initiated with a $25,000 cash donation. The company will also institute a program whereby its employees can receive paid leave to participate as volunteers in Special Olympics events.

In the created-fit, nonprofit-source condition, the Special Olympics item contains the following addition (and the Alpo item is slightly edited):

The Special Olympics also announced Alpo’s new sponsorship of the organization, which it initiated with a $25,000 cash donation. The company will also institute a program whereby its employees can receive paid leave to participate as volunteers in Special Olympics events.

In the created-fit, nonprofit-source condition, the Special Olympics item contains the following addition (and the Alpo item is slightly edited):

The Special Olympics also announced Alpo’s new sponsorship of the organization, which it initiated with a $25,000 cash donation. The company will also institute a program whereby its employees can receive paid leave to participate as volunteers in Special Olympics events.

Appendix B

Study 2 Materials

The clipping for the no-sponsorship control condition is identical to the low-fit, sponsorship-absent control for Alpo from Study 1:

Businesses and Organizations in the News

P&G has introduced a home-use version of its fruit and vegetable wash for restaurant and food service operations. The wash is formulated to easily remove dirt and unwanted residues, including up to 93% of wax, 95% of handling residues, and is 98% more effective than water at removing pesticides. The product will be available at groceries and mass merchandisers throughout the U.S.

The American Heart Association achieved its goal of increasing access to life-saving automated external defibrillators (AEDs) for air travelers with the new FAA requirement that commercial airlines carry AEDs as part of on-board medical emergency equipment. AEDs are small, easy-to-use devises that can analyze heart rhythms of cardiac arrest victims to determine if shock is necessary and, if warranted, deliver a life-saving jolt of electricity to the heart.

The Special Olympics today announced the promotion of Elizabeth Hansen to the post of Executive Vice President.
Coordinately, Alpo Petfoods today announced the opening of its expanded online store, www.Alpo.com. The store enables customers to securely purchase an assortment of pet food and related products online. The site includes the ability for returning customers to purchase without re-entering personal information and to interact in real time with customer service representatives.

REFERENCES


