



Does sporting passion equal marketing relevance? - Getty Images Sport

## PASSION KILLER

Redmandarin CEO **Shaun Whatling** believes that sport overplays the passion card when it comes to selling sponsorship and tells **Kevin Roberts** that relevance is a far more important factor.

**OVER THE YEARS** Shaun Whatling, CEO of UK-based sponsorship consultancy Redmandarin, has earned a reputation, and no little respect, for his willingness to challenge the accepted wisdom of sponsorship.

He is a free thinker whose approach has been shaped by a career which has taken him from the voluntary sector to the CEO's chair at Redmandarin via the world's largest action sports agency - which he co-founded - and a media pic.

That challenging nature is now manifest in a book, 'Defining Sponsorship' in which he has drawn together and analysed the cumulated wisdom and insight of a galaxy of sponsorship sector stars in order to cast fresh light on a industry which has, from time to time, appeared to be on the verge of eating itself.

Even the cover of the book appears to deliver a message. It features the skeleton of a dinosaur - an image which might seem to be a case of Whatling getting his conclusions in first.

"Other people have said that but it's really not the case. It was more a symbol of what might happen unless sponsorship addresses some of the fairly fundamental issues it faces," he says.

The book's publication marks the 10th anniversary of Redmandarin, the specialist

consultancy which he bought some two years ago. It is a unique collection of contributions from many of the individuals whose attitudes and decisions have shaped sponsorship as we know it today. But what, if anything, did he learn from the exercise?

"I guess what was refreshing and pleasing was the fact that many of the people we spoke to shared some of our beliefs about sponsorship. Our learning was that there is an under-swell within the industry of people who think along the same lines as us...that there is a greater level of solidarity within the industry than has previously been the case."

That's an interesting conclusion given the noise which continues to surround sponsorship and which must have inspired the book project in the first place.

"The reason for putting the book together was to give a conceptual framework for sponsorship. It is sad the industry is lacking in self awareness. It doesn't seem to know enough about itself and what it needs to do to articulate its strengths," he says.

"My understanding of a mature industry is one which is able to accept criticism. It is puerile to rebuff criticism unthinkingly.

"You have to be able to put it into a wider

context and for me, and many of the book's contributors, the bigger context is that sponsorship is completely under-valued.

"The book is an attempt to say that sponsorship isn't simply a discipline or a channel but an approach to marketing. It is, of course, integrated because all of the marketing channels have to work with sponsorship.

"I agree with contributor Lesa Uckman (co-founder of IEG) that talking about sponsorship from a narrow perspective effectively narrows what it can do for a business."

Defining Sponsorship is probably as broad a representation of views of leading sponsorship pros as has ever been compiled and Whatling certainly doesn't agree with every thought captured in its pages. But, he says, while some comments betrayed 'a lack of perspective' there was a point of contact with every contributor.

"What was touching is the fact that so many people are passionate about sponsorship and so many of them recognise that it has a bad reputation and are prepared to challenge that reputation," he says.

"Yet this is also a business where we still see people learning on the hoof. Some come into it to believing it is just about hospitality or about

media and some are parachuted in without prior experience and still consider themselves experts. That works against sponsorship's evolution. Look at how many London 2012 partners have gone out and recruited people with robust experience - probably only Lloyds. What does that say about the seriousness of the other partners?

"You wouldn't appoint somebody as brand director and say 'pick it up as you go.'"

Parts of Whatling's own summary and conclusions may surprise some sports sponsorship purists. Above all, he takes issue with the value of passion as a driver.

"Passion has lost currency and the use of the word is an example of sales rhetoric beginning to confuse issues," he says.

"There are always people who are passionate but passion represents a cliché which doesn't recognise the market reality. The result is that any brand which wants to reach mass audiences can be badly misled by an awful lot of sports.

"We talk about relevance and not passion... the fact that people care... That is how we frame what is happening between sports and CSR.

"CSR enables individual sports to reach a broader footprint and I believe rights holders should have been using enlightened self-interest to take advantage of this years ago."

Whatling has spent much of the last two years re-structuring Redmandarin to reflect his approach to sponsorship, admitting that "in the past our view of sponsorship was too narrow."

The changes mean that the current Redmandarin team is drawn from management and brand consultancy, consumer insight, planning and creative specialists.

"That reflects the way I see sponsorship needing to be delivered to brands. Our understanding of what is happening between a brand and consumers is at a different place now and I want to be able to make an explicit link between the strategic and creative elements of a programme."

Defining Sponsorship captures a range of thinking from the heart of a sector which appears to have moved in fits and starts over the decades. But where does Whatling see sponsorship developing in the next 10 years or so?

"One thing won't change," he says. "The greatest limits on sponsorship are those imposed by the brands themselves. Corporate culture fundamentally dictates how well you do a sponsorship and communicative brands that believe in dialogue will continue to do good sponsorship. Those who don't won't.

"Sponsorship will be bigger but different and the role of sponsorship, or whatever it may come to be called, will be much more broadly accepted within the marketing industry.

"And as brands become more conscious of the content argument and the need to engage with customers in more creative ways, they will create new opportunities for smaller rights holders."

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