

OPENING THE DEBATE

Karen Earl, Chairman, the European Sponsorship Association, on the discussion around defining sponsorship.

SHAUN WHATLING, CEO of Redmandarin, has effectively opened a debate about creating a better definition of sponsorship. In fact, he's written a book about it and in it he asks an eclectic group of opinion formers to put forward their own ideas on sponsorship.

It's an interesting exercise for a number of reasons. Firstly, the contributors agree that sponsorship is a powerful marketing medium through which brands can connect meaningfully with consumers. Secondly, they identify a number of the different issues sponsorship can address - green, environmental, social, educational, employee relations and so on.

These are quite apart from the more usual business objectives targeted by sponsors. Thirdly, that sponsorship has come a long, long way since the early examples of the 'yos and is a serious marketing discipline.

The diversity of opinions expressed merely demonstrates just why it is so difficult to come up with one definition which 'fits all'. The European Sponsorship Association (ESA) has taken its definition from the ICC Code of Sponsorship.

"Any commercial agreement by which a sponsor, for the mutual benefit of the sponsor and sponsored party, contractually provides financing or other support in order to establish an association between the sponsor's image, brands or products and a sponsorship property in return for rights to promote this association and/or for the granting of certain agreed direct or indirect benefits."

It's a definition which has been *in* circulation for a number of years and few would deny that sponsorship's success over the past four decades has necessitated a fresh debate on whether it should be updated to capture the true essence of modern-day sponsorship.

On behalf of ESA and its members, I welcome that debate and am looking forward to playing a leading role in it over the coming months. If it leads us to the creation of a better definition which ensures sponsorship's place at the highest marketing table, I'm all for it. I can immediately think of a number of issues which should be on the agenda:

- What constitutes sponsorship, and what does not?
- When sponsorship is asked to deliver results against so many diverse brand and business objectives, how can one definition aptly suffice?
- Is the word 'sponsorship' the correct word to use?

Taking the last issue, I have been quoted as saying that 'partnership' might be debated as being a better descriptive word in future and this has resulted in a flurry of opinion suggesting that it would not.

Most seem to conclude that 'sponsorship' is the best option available, though not necessarily the ideal. This suggests that there is room for creative discussion which could well produce a more satisfactory description.

There is common agreement on the fact that the rules of marketing are changing. Power is shifting to the consumer and sponsorship, done well, can successfully create meaningful relationships with consumers. Ergo, sponsorship has the ability to be in pole marketing position in the next decade and beyond.

But to claim this position, sponsorship has to clearly express and justify its position using clear examples of success and an evaluation system which is clearly understood and bought into by brands. And here lies the heart of the debate.

As Shaun Whatling acknowledges, the industry is repeatedly subject to the charge of being profligate, unaccountable and whimsical. Some of these criticisms come from other forms of marketing which might just be a little uncomfortable about sponsorship's growing success and the potential effect on their budgets.

Whatever, the sponsorship industry must arm itself with a robust definition, backed up with a plethora of case studies based on a transparent and effective evaluation system. Bring on the debate. The outcome will surely be an even stronger sponsorship industry.

The debate will feature at the SportMarketing 360 conference on September 23 and continue at ESA's flagship conference, Future Sponsorship, on November 25 and 26.