

The Sponsorship Playbook:

The New Rules for Winning with Sponsorships

A strategic guide for how leading brands design, evaluate, and scale sponsorships that drive real business outcomes.



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Overview

Sponsorship marketing has evolved into a strategic investment – one that shapes brand reputation, drives consumer connection and supports long-term business growth. But too often, organizations still treat sponsorships as simple awareness plays or renew legacy deals without fully re-evaluating the business case.

This report offers a more disciplined approach. We outline how to define the right spaces to play, show up in ways that create lasting impact, and make smarter investment decisions grounded in data. We also highlight a few key trends that are reshaping the sponsorship landscape and what they mean for forward-thinking brands.

Specifically, this report covers:

- **Where to Play:** How to use consumer passion points and data to select the right spaces for your brand
- **How to Win:** How to build emotional connection by showing up with relevance and value
- **How to Evaluate:** A framework to assess, measure, and scale smarter sponsorship investments

Together, these principles provide a roadmap for building a high-performance sponsorship strategy that has been tested and proven with leading sponsor brands. Let's dive in.

A Few of Our Client Partners


Advent Health



THE *Coca-Cola* COMPANY

POWERADE[®]


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Heineken[®]

Choosing the Right Space to Play

Using Passion Points to Your Advantage

Before evaluating a specific opportunity, brands must step back and decide where they should be playing. Sponsorship spaces – whether sports, entertainment, culture or influencer-led – offer vastly different strengths. Choosing the right space starts with having a deep understanding of your target consumers and your **objectives**. This can be built using a combination of internal data sources, external third-party sources or custom panel studies.

Once you have clearly defined business objectives and a clear target definition in place, you can begin to build a deep understanding of your target. There are different ways to approach this, but one of the most powerful is to identify the **'passion points'** that drive your target consumers. Ideally, these are interests that go beyond casual curiosity. This exercise is about understanding what hobbies or interests truly shape their behavior and choices on a day-to-day basis.



So, how do you choose the right areas to focus on for your brand? Consider these dimensions when deciding where to invest sponsorship resources:



Reach

How much of your target is interested? How many of them can you reach?

Ownability

Is there an ownable space for your brand, or is it saturated with other brands/partnerships?

Intensity

What is the level of engagement and interest? For example, we commonly find that sports fandom tends to have more fervor or “intensity” compared to other spaces like movies or music.

Brand Alignment

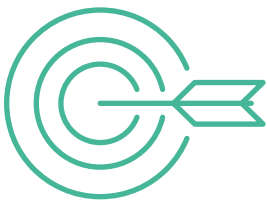
Does your brand fit authentically into that space? Are there clear/natural connections and entry points for your brand? More on this one later.

Answering these questions does not have to be guesswork. Over the years, we’ve established approaches to quantify each of these, allowing you to get conclusive answers on ‘where to play.’ For example, we might analyze media engagement data to determine intensity or use consumer segmentation models to identify alignment with your brand’s psychographic profile. Well-designed panel studies can also be a useful tool.

Assessing Incrementality and the 3Ts Framework

Most organizations don't have the luxury of building a sponsorship portfolio from scratch. Legacy deals and long-term contracts are usually in play, which adds complexity. Yet too often, new deals are still evaluated in isolation. The real challenge is determining whether a new opportunity delivers incremental value – enough to justify the cost – or simply overlaps with existing partnerships.

To understand how new opportunities fit into your existing plans, campaigns and activations, consider the “3Ts.”:



Target

Can it help you reach new key demographics or enhance engagement with existing groups?



Time

Does it enable you to communicate with audiences at different times of the year or fill a gap in your marketing calendar?



Territory

Does the deal allow your brand to reach into new target markets or regions?

The 3Ts are not about determining whether a sponsorship is “good” in isolation. They help you evaluate how well it complements your current strategy. For instance, if you already have strong coverage in a particular demographic or region, a new opportunity that doesn’t expand your footprint might not be worth the investment.

When brands clearly understand these dimensions, they’re in a stronger position to decide where to invest, and, just as importantly, where to hold back. An **incrementality mindset** pushes you beyond the obvious; it encourages you to spot gaps, avoid duplication, and uncover creative, non-obvious ways to grow your presence.



Building Deeper Connections With Your Target Audience

Where You Show Up Is Just the Start

Choosing the right spaces for your brand is only the first part of the battle. You also need to show up in ways that are relevant, credible and, ideally, provide a value-add for your target audience.

That starts by going one level deeper than just identifying passion points. Brands need to understand how people connect to those passion points through different levels of entry and types of engagements – what we call **passion connectors**. Two consumers may both love music, but one connects through collecting vinyl and playing in local jam sessions, while the other follows global EDM artists and travels to festivals. Same passion, completely different entry points when planning your sponsorship.

Identifying these connectors helps brands tailor their presence to the right moments.

Live events are high-emotion, low-frequency opportunities ideal for driving affinity and brand memory. Streaming services, on the other hand, offer high-frequency, low-emotion touchpoints where brands can integrate into daily rituals. Each requires a different playbook.



While sponsorships have historically been used to drive awareness, the most effective programs today go much further. Best-in-class brands are embedding sponsorships into broader business narratives - aligning them with brand values, strategic priorities and key audience segments. When done right, sponsorships spark conversations that outlast the moment, build internal pride and even unlock high-level relationships with partners, stakeholders, and policymakers. But at the core, most sponsorships still hinge on one thing: creating meaningful connections with potential consumers.

And those connections must be earned. With growing skepticism toward traditional advertising, consumers expect brands to show up with purpose, not just presence. Sponsorship is uniquely positioned to deliver on that expectation so long as the activation is aligned with what the audience cares about and how they engage.

“Working with Foresight has been a game-changer. We particularly appreciated their methodical and innovative strategies that have not only optimized our existing operations but also opened new avenues for growth. With Foresight’s help, we’ve managed to make smarter, more informed decisions that have had a profound impact on our success in the region.”

THE *Coca-Cola* COMPANY

At Foresight Strategy, we help brands design sponsorships that connect by focusing on two core levers:



Consumer Motivations

What emotional or psychological needs are driving engagement? (e.g., escapism through gaming, nostalgia through film, energy and identity through sports)

Barriers & Tensions

What's getting in the way? (e.g., cost, access, perceived exclusivity, social anxiety)



By mapping consumer motivations, brands can speak with real authenticity. It's not just about showing up; it's showing up with the right message. If your target engages with gaming for escapism, not adrenaline, your brand voice needs to reflect that. Get it wrong, and even a well-funded activation will feel tone-deaf or out of place.

Barriers and tensions, on the other hand, reveal where you can add tangible value. This could mean reducing cost or access friction, creating safer or more inclusive spaces, or offering tools that improve the experience. These aren't add-ons, they're your ticket to relevance. **If a consumer's first reaction is "Why are you here?" the answer should be self-evident in how you're making the experience better.**

When brands align their message to motivations and their actions to barriers, they stop being background noise. They become trusted participants in a consumer's world, and that's what builds long-term loyalty and brand equity.



Emotional Connection Drives Business Value

Building emotional connection isn't just a branding exercise—it's a proven driver of business performance. On a lifetime value basis, emotionally connected customers are more than twice as valuable as highly satisfied customers. That's why the work of building deeper resonance through sponsorship isn't just about feeling relevant - it's about being effective.

But in today's fragmented and competitive market, simply being present isn't enough. To earn attention and drive action, brands need to build trust. Consumers are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising and are far more likely to engage with brands that reflect their personal values. That's where sponsorships have a unique edge: they allow brands to earn attention by participating in the moments and communities people care about most.

This is especially important when targeting **high-value audiences**. These are the consumers most likely to convert, stay loyal and influence others. In our work, we define high-value audiences not just by demographics, but by behavior, mindset, and strategic fit. They tend to:



- **Convert more efficiently:** They're more primed to act, with shorter paths from exposure to purchase.
- **Stay longer:** Their loyalty leads to higher retention and repeat value.
- **Maximize marketing efficiency:** They allow for smarter spend versus broad, low-yield targeting.
- **Become advocates:** They don't just engage—they influence others through word-of-mouth and social proof.

To resonate with these audiences, the most effective sponsorship strategies are designed as integrated ecosystems. Depending on the context, that may include live experiences, community programs, digital storytelling, influencer partnerships or targeted content campaigns—each chosen to maximize impact, authenticity, and connection.

When those elements come together, sponsorship stops being a cost center and becomes a competitive edge.

“The team provided great insights that helped us both validate decisions and provide new, fresh ideas that enabled us to offer more relevant sponsorship/partnership solutions.”

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Signing Smarter Sponsorship Deals

A Framework for Evaluating Value, Efficiency and Strategic Fit

Yes, smart sponsorship is about playing in the right spaces and creating emotional connections. But from a business standpoint, it's also about making the right deals at the right price. **That means signing contracts that are aligned with your brand, your goals, and the actual value the opportunity can deliver.**

Too often, brands evaluate deals in isolation or rely on surface-level assumptions about audience size or "fit." Effective sponsorship investment, however, requires a structured, consistent framework; one that reflects how your business defines value, and one that can be applied with discipline across your entire portfolio.

We've built and implemented custom sponsorship evaluation frameworks for some of the biggest sponsor brands in the world. Below are five of the key dimensions we consider. These metrics are designed to validate your strategy and ground decisions in measurable impact:

1

Audience Fit - Does the asset reach the right people, efficiently and at scale?

2

Brand Touchpoints - How many meaningful interactions or exposures does it enable, and through what channels?

3

Sales Impact Potential - What is the expected uplift in terms of revenue & sales?

4

Contract Strength - What rights are included? Are they clearly defined, actionable, and aligned with your activation plan?

5

Cost vs. Value - Does the price reflect the rights, reach, relevance, and risk of the investment? What should the target price be considering the rights and expected impact?

This approach turns deal-making into a decision science. There will always be qualitative factors at play, but the goal is to anchor decisions in the best available data. We structure and provide clarity to the evaluation process by helping clients focus on specific business outcomes they want to achieve and to feel assured that their investments are positioned to achieve those outcomes.

“Foresight Strategy is my go-to business partner when difficult challenges need sharp thinking, team collaboration and the ability to deliver analytical results that drive concrete actions on time every time.”



Building a Smarter Sponsorship System

Most brands treat each sponsorship deal as a one-off. But when every opportunity is evaluated through a consistent framework, using metrics that reflect how your business defines value, you begin to build something much more powerful: a system that learns.

This is the foundation of a measurement ecosystem.

Each new evaluation adds to a growing internal dataset that, over time, becomes a living record of success that will tell you:

- Which rights deliver
- Which audiences engage
- Which assets are more impactful

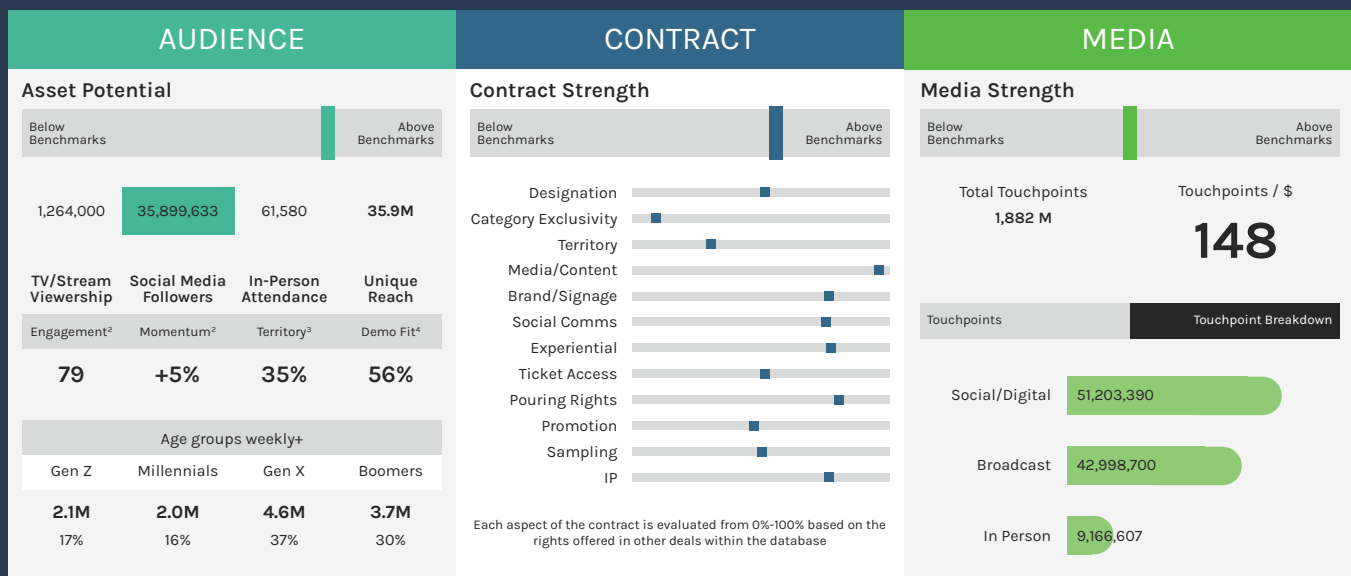
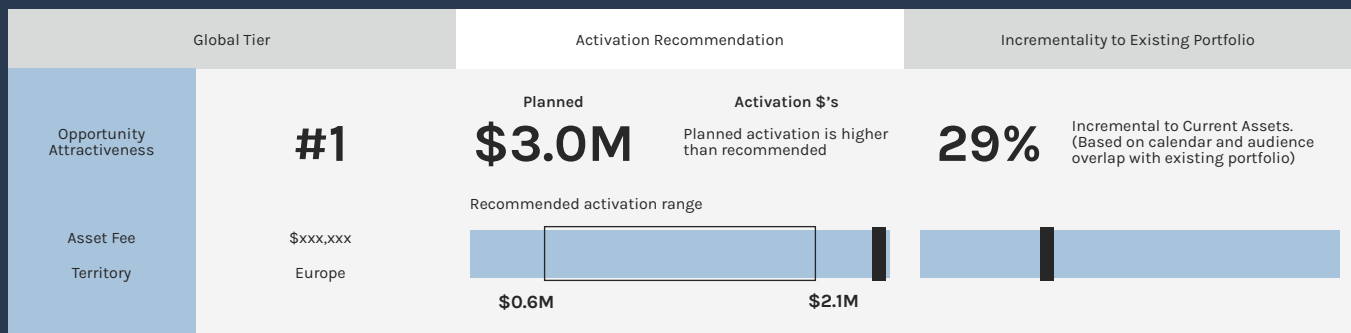
When your evaluation criteria align with how you measure impact, you create a closed loop—from projected value to actual performance.

The result? Smarter decisions, faster. Greater confidence in negotiations and renewals. Less reliance on third-party valuation models. The best organizations can instantly see where a deal ranks relative to others they've assessed based on hard business metrics, not instinct.

In time, this becomes a proprietary intelligence engine that is tailored to your brand, owned by your team and more valuable with every deal you make.

It all starts with a consistent, data-driven framework for evaluating assets.

We can deliver one-off valuation exercises (and in some cases, that may be what's needed), but what we prefer to build with our clients is a system - one that compounds in value over time, sharpens decision-making, improves efficiency, creates a competitive advantage, and reduces resource strain in the long run.





A Few Trends To Consider as You Build Your Strategy

While the fundamentals of effective sponsorship remain constant (find the right space, show up authentically, and evaluate with discipline), the landscape around those fundamentals is evolving fast. Here are three trends reshaping the opportunity set.

Evolving Audiences and Channel Dynamics

The way people consume content and connect with brands is changing. Live broadcast events still command strong engagement, but younger audiences are moving toward digital-first, on-demand platforms. Traditional broadcast viewership is declining, especially among Gen Z and younger millennials, who favor highlights, creator content and behind-the-scenes access over full-length live coverage.

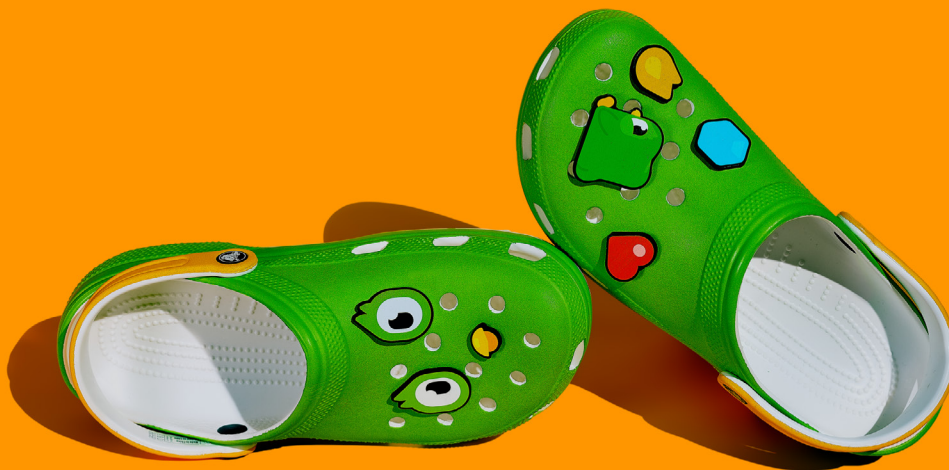
This shift might seem like a red flag for live event sponsorship. In reality, it's creating new possibilities. Platforms like Amazon Prime and Netflix are now broadcasting live sports, opening the door to hybrid sponsorship models that span both live and digital environments. The smartest brands aren't abandoning live; they're finding ways to integrate into the new ways people watch, share, and engage.

Rethinking What “Partnership” Looks Like

As the cost of traditional sponsorships rises and media attention fragments, brands are getting more creative with how they show up. One major shift: a rise in non-traditional collaborations between brands that share audiences, values, or cultural relevance.

Some lean into product innovation ([Heinz and Absolut](#), [Dunkin’ and Scrub Daddy](#), [Coke and Oreo](#)). Others focus on shared identity or lifestyle alignment ([GoPro and Red Bull](#), [Crocs and Duolingo](#)). These aren’t sponsorships in the classic sense in that they’re co-created brand moments designed to drive word-of-mouth, earned media and cultural currency.

For marketers, the takeaway is clear: partnerships don’t always have to be bought. They can be built through shared relevance, smart timing and strategic co-creation. When budgets are tight or traditional assets are saturated, these types of collaborations can offer high returns with lower spend. What you save in spend you’ll need to match in creativity. These partnerships demand more ingenuity, but when done right, they can punch well above their weight.



The Rise – and Reframing – of Women’s Sports

There’s no question that women’s sports are gaining momentum. Viewership is up, investment is accelerating and public interest is growing. [The 2023 Women’s World Cup drew over 2 billion viewers globally](#), and WNBA viewership increased by roughly 170% in 2024 from 2023 across all broadcasting networks and streaming platforms. Major sponsors are taking notice; with expanded media coverage, growing fan bases, and new opportunities emerging across leagues and events, [ad spending on women’s sports has more than doubled in 2024](#) compared to 2023.

While some brands are applying the same playbook they’ve used for years in traditional sports advertising, others, [often newer entrants](#), are seizing the opportunity to tell more differentiated, values-led stories through women’s sports platforms. It’s a space worth watching as marketers experiment with new forms of engagement and cultural positioning.

That said, like any asset, these deals need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. The right investment depends on alignment with your brand, your audience, your strategy, and the stories you’re trying to tell. The fundamentals still apply: run the numbers, assess efficiency and make sure the upside hasn’t already been priced in.



Strategic Recommendations

Sponsorship should be treated with the same strategic discipline as any other major marketing investment. To maximize impact, brands should follow a few guiding principles:

Choose the Right Spaces Based on Consumer Passion and Brand Fit

Use audience insights such as reach, relevance, and intensity to identify where your brand can show up with purpose, not just presence.

Build Emotional Connection by Adding Value

Go beyond visibility. Understand what motivates your audience and what gets in their way—then design activations that speak to both.

Use a Consistent Framework to Evaluate Every Deal

Apply a structured approach to assess audience reach, contract strength, brand impact, and cost versus value.

Invest in Systems That Learn and Scale

The most effective organizations build a proprietary sponsorship intelligence system that compounds over time, sharpens decision-making and drives lasting competitive advantage.

By applying these principles, sponsorship moves from gut feel to growth engine – helping brands connect with the right people, in the right way, at the right price.

To learn more about how to further optimize your sponsorship portfolio, visit our website to [sign up for a free, 1:1 sponsorship marketing assessment](#).

About Foresight Strategy

At Foresight Strategy, our mission is to unlock growth through data-driven solutions to the toughest strategy problems; we believe there are no unanswerable questions.

We build custom, data-driven models & frameworks to help marketing leaders bridge the gap from art to science, insights to strategy, and theory to practice.

To learn more about our capabilities and how we can support your sponsorship goals,

visit our website at foresightstrategy.com.



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