



SPONSORSHIP, ENGAGEMENT AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

- ROS CASEY

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of sponsorship by a university and through case studies shows how it can be an important tool to improve the student experience. It provides insights into the importance of matching the sponsorship to the core business of the university and the imperative of the alignment of values. While universities, as places of education and research, are most often the beneficiaries of philanthropy, grants and sponsorship, they are also large businesses operating in a competitive environment and they have a need to promote themselves in the market, using the full array of business tools including sponsorship. To gain the most from an investment in sponsorship it is worth looking beyond what is immediately on offer to see what the possibilities might be. As a university's highest priority must be its students, it makes sense that, even when utilising a business marketing tool such as sponsorship, it should seek to leverage benefits for its students.

Keywords

maximising sponsorship investment, student experience, university engagement

Universities, as places of education and research, are most often the beneficiaries of philanthropy, grants and sponsorship which support students, facilities and programmes. They are, however, also large businesses, operating in a competitive environment, and they have a need to promote themselves in the market using the full array of business tools including sponsorship. As large businesses they also have an impact on the local community. This is particularly the case where a university is one of the largest employers in a region. Community engagement is

therefore a priority. For both these reasons universities often become the target for sponsorship requests. Developing the right portfolio of sponsorships that best suit an organisation can therefore be a challenge but the investment of time, effort and resources can be rewarding in unexpected ways.

In Australia community engagement is of such importance that there is a national organisation, Engagement Australia (EA), which exists to lead and facilitate the development of best practice university–community engagement. To quote from EA, ‘the ways in which higher education

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institutions engage with communities is increasingly considered to be at the core of national innovation and productivity agendas'.¹ The clear message from EA is that effective community engagement is built on sustainable partnerships, not a scattering of sponsorships. Of course, this approach refers to the larger community: the state, the nation and even the international community. Universities still have to look after their own backyards, however, and modest, strategically determined sponsorships can build and sustain goodwill.

Just as partnerships are the key to successful community engagement, they are also the key to successful sponsorships. The nature of sponsorship has changed and will continue to do so. While remaining commercial, it is well past the transactional stage — the exchange of cash for static assets. It is no longer about paying a fee to have one's logo on the side of a racing car or on the screen at an event, although not all those seeking sponsorship realise this. Sponsorship today is about networking and about using the sponsorship to build new relationships. It is about maximising resources to take advantage of technology and leveraging databases for mutual benefit and, importantly it is about embedding the sponsorship in the core business of the organisation.

This cannot happen quickly and requires longer term investments in order to build trust and a better understanding of one another's business. Despite these changes, it is still very much anchored in the domain of marketing. Primarily, sponsorship is still seen as a tool to increase brand, product and corporate awareness. It can be so much more.

Victoria University² (VU) is a young university, even by Australian standards. It is just 25 years old although it can trace its history back 100 years to the founding of

its predecessor institution, the Footscray Technical School, in 1916. It is based in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

The west of Melbourne was initially a base of manufacturing and heavy industry and over the 20th century it became home to successive waves of immigrants following the Second World War, the Vietnam War and, more recently, a growing number of refugees. It therefore has a diverse cultural mix and a high proportion of residents for whom English is a second language. It is fiercely tribal and new arrivals quickly take on the mantle of 'being from the West', proud that they are part of a community that looks after its own and welcomes everyone. Historically it has been seen as an area of socio-economic disadvantage but this is changing and the inner west is rapidly becoming gentrified.

The student population of VU reflects the diversity of its region and many students are the first in their families to attend university. As the only university based in the west of Melbourne, VU has proudly inherited the mantle of its predecessors in seeking to offer outstanding educational opportunities to those who would not normally have access to tertiary education. It has a strong focus on social justice and seeks to provide a nurturing environment for its students in order for them to achieve success in their studies and in their careers. Partly by necessity through lack of resources, and partly because it heavily tailors its programmes to suit its student demographic, VU tends to do things a little differently from most universities.

This is increasingly true in the area of sponsorship. VU is both a university *of* the west and *for* the west and community engagement has always been a high priority. Indeed, both the university and its predecessor institutions came about through community agitation and there

is a strong sense of ownership by the community, although not always approval. With this comes the expectation that the university will unfailingly provide support to the community, often through sponsorship.

This is neither economically nor strategically sustainable. VU has therefore progressively assessed and evaluated the manner in which it supports the immediate community and has significantly reduced the direct support it provides both in kind and financially through sponsorships. It now supports a modest number of small initiatives that directly relate to university activities. This does not mean that it has abrogated its responsibility to the community, but rather that it has transferred its focus toward encouraging broader collaboration, linking partners and fostering knowledge exchange rather than direct financial support.

While mutually beneficial, this is neither new nor groundbreaking. The real innovation has come about in VU's approach to its larger sponsorships which are part of its marketing mix. The evolution of its approach to sponsorship in this context can best be shown through four key examples.

Although offering a broad range of courses with identified strengths in a number of areas, VU has positioned itself as Australia's leading sports university. This is built on a long tradition of teaching and research in a wide cross-section of sports-related areas, ranging from elite performance to healthy and active communities, sports business, sports history and sports law. It also has strong creative and cultural studies programmes including the visual arts, music and creative writing. These align neatly with traditional sponsorship opportunities; sports and the arts tend to be the main vehicles for sponsorship internationally.

One of VU's longest standing sponsorships is with the Malthouse Theatre³ (The Malthouse). The Malthouse is a contemporary theatre company based in Melbourne which is renowned for pushing artistic barriers with innovative and often confronting productions. It has a strong emphasis on diversity and seeks to engage a broad audience with theatre, with a special emphasis on young people. Its values align well with those of VU. This relationship has existed for more than 15 years.

Despite this alignment and the longevity of the sponsorship, the relationship has not always been productive. For many years it was managed within VU at the senior executive level with the senior executive substantially 'owning' the relationship. There was a minimum amount of interaction with the broader university community and the benefits were largely confined to logo placement, corporate hospitality opportunities and a place on the board. As is often the case with relationships based around an individual, the relationship faltered when the executive left the university.

Consideration was initially given to discontinuing the sponsorship, but the long association, the fact that VU was building its creative writing programmes and the Malthouse's growing reputation and outreach to schools led to the decision to continue the sponsorship, although at a lower level. Management of the relationship became the joint responsibility of Marketing and the relevant faculty.

This was not a happy arrangement. Marketing had an understandable interest in branding and advertising and tended to monitor logo placement, advertising and the visibility of VU's support, whereas the faculty was more interested in professional engagement but lacked the awareness and resources to deal effectively

with an external organisation. There was a tendency to consider activities around the university timetable rather than taking account of the schedules of a commercial theatre company which needed to plan its productions 18 months in advance. The two areas within the university were often at loggerheads and the Malthouse was frustrated by a continuing lack of timely communication.

The relationship was again in serious jeopardy when changes to VU's organisational structure meant that responsibility for sponsorships across the university was centralised, not within Marketing but within the Advancement Office. This was not the result of a careful evaluation but an expedient decision based on staffing and personnel. It did lead, however, to an assessment of the sponsorship from a whole-of-university perspective and fresh discussions with the Malthouse which explored the broad range of possibilities for the sponsorship.

Over the past four years the relationship has blossomed in both traditional and non-traditional ways. After an initial period of stabilisation to maximise the branding and marketing benefits, the range of activities under the partnership was expanded with a strong emphasis on student involvement.

Enriching the student experience is a high priority for VU and it also prides itself on educating students for the real world of work. It does this through a wide spectrum of initiatives including more than 30 different types of industry and community work placements and interactions. Sponsored organisations had not been a big part of this programme, however.

The reinvigorated sponsorship with the Malthouse now includes a variety of student engagements. Students at VU have reserved places in the Malthouse's

Provocateur programme through which 18–26 year olds have the opportunity to engage in a year of theatrical activity — to see productions, meet the artists who created them, join formal conversation events and meet other artists, theatre-goers and thinkers. The Provocateurs programme offers VU students a premium opportunity to engage with a major performing arts company and other young people who have been selected as the most creative thinkers to generate ideas and promote dialogue. The creative leaders and administrative staff of the Malthouse deliver talks and workshops at VU campuses and now regularly attend key VU student engagement events. Media production students undertake special projects which include videoing productions and behind-the-scenes interviews with artists and directors, which are in turn used by the Malthouse on its website and for their engagement with schools. In addition, the more traditional work placements continue, with marketing students working with the Malthouse marketing team every year. Later this year, engineering and science students will work on an art installation at the Malthouse linked to a production and both partners are exploring research placements at the Malthouse for education-based students.

This new approach has not been confined to the Malthouse. Another long-standing sponsorship VU has is with the Western Bulldogs⁴ (the Bulldogs). The Bulldogs are a team in the national football competition. They too are based in the west. Despite joining the national competition in 1925 they have not enjoyed great success, winning only one premiership, in 1954. Nonetheless they have a loyal following and have shown great promise in recent years with expectations of appearing in finals on a regular basis.

The Bulldogs have always been a community-based club and they have also embraced the diversity of the west, so it is not surprising that they have had a long involvement with VU. Additionally, the club has always long had a commitment to encouraging it players to prepare for a life after football and so many of the Bulldogs' past players have studied at VU or its predecessor institutions and current players continue to do so.

A loose affiliation existed between VU and the Bulldogs for more than 30 years, but it was not until 2003 that the arrangement became more formal. It did not start with a sponsorship but rather involved a series of collaborations based around community programmes, sports science, use of the university's state-of-the-art facilities and student placement opportunities. There was a modest sponsorship component which increased significantly in 2013 to become a major sponsorship.

Marketing was a key imperative for the enhanced sponsorship, as the university was making a conscious effort to establish itself as Australia's leading sports university and increased visibility was desirable. The sponsorship benefits therefore focused heavily on branding, including naming rights to the club's home ground and primary sponsorship of the Bulldogs' new team in the second-tier competition. Importantly, however, the new sponsorship was also tied to a formal collaborative research programme.

Under this research programme, a number of sports science academics have been embedded within the Bulldogs' football operations team, as joint appointments of VU and the Bulldogs. In addition, doctoral and masters students, supervised by VU academics, also work with the Bulldogs while undertaking their research on such topics as data

analytics, talent development and identification, coaching practice and athlete training and performance. The opportunity to work within a professional football club is highly prized; not surprisingly, the students' career prospects are significantly enhanced. As a result of the collaborative programme, the Bulldogs now have a sports science capability that exceeds any other club in the competition. The arrangement is seen as having a positive impact on their on-field success.

The increased investment in sponsorship also sharpened the focus of the broader partnership and expanded the range of engagement. In addition to the long-standing arrangement where students undertake work placements as pre-service teachers delivering lessons in health and nutrition to schools in collaboration with the Bulldogs' players as role models, now students help to deliver community programmes such as the Sons of the West men's health programme, work in events management and marketing and also work under supervision providing remedial massage programmes. History students from VU also played a major role in researching the history of the club and providing the content for the club's first ever museum. This year community development students will work with the Bulldogs' Community Foundation to help deliver new community initiatives. So significant is the relationship between the Bulldogs and VU that in the most recent Bulldogs' Strategic Plan, the partnership with VU is listed as one of five significant strengths of the club.

Enhancing the student experience, at both an undergraduate and postgraduate level, and increased engagement of students are now key elements of all new and existing sponsorships. VU's sponsorship of the Sport Australia Hall of Fame⁵ (SAHOF) now incorporates both student

engagement and research. The sponsorship was initially based on a traditional model. SAHOF, uniquely around the world, encompasses all sports. Australia's sporting elite from the full gamut of sporting endeavour are recognised and celebrated. Each year new sporting legends are inducted into the SAHOF. In a country like Australia, where sport is an important part of the national identity, the annual induction dinner attracts great attention.

VU made the decision to sponsor SAHOF based on its strong connections with high-profile Australian sportsmen and women and the opportunity to enhance its brand which were the key selling points offered by SAHOF when they initially approached VU. Over the past three years, however, the sponsorship has delivered a range of significantly improved benefits to both parties with no direct increase in investment.

Following the work undertaken by history students with the Bulldogs, a student project was initiated within SAHOF where students are involved in researching Australian sportsmen and women with a view to identifying those outstanding achievers who may have been overlooked for inclusion because they were involved in less well known sports. Students have also assisted in assembling profiles for candidates considered for inclusion in SAHOF. This provided the students with a practical application of their research skills and gives the small SAHOF team access to a valuable resource. Students have also undertaken work placements in events management and in marketing as part of the sponsorship.

SAHOF was also keen to extend its sphere of influence and activity beyond an annual dinner and wanted to use its sporting heroes as role models for young Australians, not just in the sporting field

but in all walks of life. Working under the auspices of the sponsorship, in 2014 VU and SAHOF staged the first Integrity in Sport Forum to explore key issues impacting on sport in Australia and internationally. The forum featured a panel of high-profile Australian and international sporting personalities who were assembled through SAHOF's outstanding networks. VU provided the organisational capability and the intellectual framework for the discussion. In the lead-up to and after the event, VU academics published articles and opinion pieces linked to the forum. The event was attended by around 300 leading national sports administrators and officials and proved an excellent platform from which to publicise a new course offering, a Masters of Sport Business and Integrity. A second forum will be held in 2016.

By the time an approach was made to VU in late 2013 to sponsor a leading women's sporting team there was plenty of evidence to show how broadly sponsorships could be leveraged. The approach was from Netball Victoria,⁶ to sponsor the Melbourne Vixens (Vixens), an elite team playing in the ANZ Championship, a Trans-Tasman competition featuring teams from the world's two leading netball nations, Australia and New Zealand.

The Melbourne Vixens are a highly successful team with the largest membership base of any women's team in Australia. They also have a large following in social media and a good media profile. From a marketing perspective they therefore had a great deal to offer, especially as they would provide a gender balance with VU's sponsorship of the Bulldogs. In addition, Netball Victoria had a reputation as a highly professional organisation, with its own large membership base, a commitment to community and a clear

values framework. Importantly, Netball Victoria wanted more than sponsorship dollars — it wanted to build a long-term partnership but was realistic enough to understand that not everything could happen immediately.

The sponsorship agreement outlined a suite of benefits and outcomes but paved the way for broader collaboration around student engagement and research. Over the past two seasons the sponsorship has delivered the marketing benefits envisaged, undoubtedly helped along by a premiership in the first year of sponsorship, but it has also started to expand with Netball Victoria commissioning research from VU and an increasing number of students undertaking work placements. Several students have subsequently been employed by Netball Victoria.

While sponsorship will remain an important marketing tool for VU, future sponsorships will also be expected to provide, over time, opportunities to enhance the student experience through work placements or engagement. Every effort will also be made to provide research opportunities and to encourage collaboration between the staff of both organisations.

That is not to say that initial sponsorship proposals will be expected to contain such initiatives. An organisation seeking sponsorship can only offer such assets and benefits it has that it sees as relevant. Most professional organisations seeking sponsorship know that it has to be more than logos and signage but few are in a position to clearly understand the potential sponsor's business. This is especially the case when it comes to universities. Most people are unsure how universities are funded, how they operate and what is important to them. Those that are aware of student placements often assume that

students might be an endless source of free labour. This is not the case and the Australian FairWork Commission has set strict rules to ensure that work placements and internships do not result in student exploitation.

What VU will look for is a genuine benefit as a marketing tool and the potential for further collaboration. Without the marketing component, VU would simply be paying for work placements, which is an entirely different proposition. In assessing the potential, VU looks at the values of the organisations and their alignment with its own values — not just what is written on the page but how the staff, and players, if it is a sporting team, emulate those values. It also seeks to determine how flexible and committed the organisation is and how open it is to developing new ideas. The next step is to develop trust by better understanding each other's business. All being well, after a successful start, other opportunities for collaboration can be explored.

It is also critical that VU maintain the integrity of its teaching and learning programmes and that research is undertaken under appropriate academic supervision. It is imperative that the sponsored organisation is aware of, and willing to comply with, the university's requirements. Work placements are clearly defined, including the hours to be worked, and are seen as part of a student's practical coursework in a specified subject or subjects. Research at undergraduate level might be treated as an assignment and is supervised by the lecturer or tutor who works closely with the host organisation. Research at postgraduate level undertaken with sponsored organisations is subject to the same rigorous academic requirements as any other research and progress is monitored through the Graduate Research Centre.

The benefits of a centralised model of sponsorship coordination in this scenario are enormous. A central sponsorship unit has the advantage of being able to see across the whole organisation and to think laterally about what might be achieved. A sponsorship managed by one faculty or college tends to look inward and only explore what is relevant to its own disciplines. Such sponsorships also often fail to engage the senior leadership of the university which in turn limits both the networking opportunities and the strengthening of the relationship. When a Vice-Chancellor or a Chancellor chooses to regularly attend events associated with the sponsorship it escalates the prestige of the sponsorship for both parties.

The depth of the relationship with sponsors is also attractive to philanthropists. VU uses its relationships with its sponsored organisations as an engagement tool with current and potential donors. The Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor can offer hospitality at theatre productions and at key netball and football games and related events; the annual SAHOF Gala Dinner is very popular. Over and above these opportunities, however, the engagement with students, joint research and joint community programmes demonstrate to donors that the university is innovative and connected to industry. VU has already received some philanthropic support for sponsor-related programmes and work is underway to more fully leverage these relationships. Ultimately, however, it is the students that benefit from this approach. VU is keen to provide opportunities for its students that add materially to their student experience while they are studying and which assist them in preparing for a successful career. The

opportunity to gain practical work experience, often with elite organisations, is of immeasurable benefit both in terms of enriching their learning and as an addition to their resumes. Such placements and engagement also provide exposure for VU students both within the sponsored organisation and among their other partners, sponsors and supporters. As a result students are offered employment on graduation or even poached by rival organisations. VU students are held in high regard for their work ethic and their practical application of their knowledge to the workplace.

To gain the most from an investment in sponsorship it is worth looking beyond what is immediately on offer to see what the possibilities might be. Ideally these should focus on the core business of the organisation but also on what sets it apart from others. As a university VU's highest priority must be its students and so it makes sense, even in utilising a business marketing tool such as sponsorship, that it also seeks to leverage benefits for its students.

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