The Impact of Sponsor Fit on Brand Equity: The Case of Nonprofit Service Providers

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As the nonprofit sector becomes increasingly competitive, it is critical for nonprofit service organizations to become more brand centered and to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. The two studies show that high-fit sponsorship programs between nonprofit service firms and businesses positively influence brand identity via broad associations and brand meaning, brand response, and brand relationships through specific associations. Conversely, low-fit sponsorship programs are likely to hinder nonprofit brand management strategies by negatively affecting brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand relationships. Finally, the results reveal that nonprofit service organizations can use supportive communications to counter the risks of strategic alliances with low-fit businesses.

Keywords: *sponsorship; nonprofit; brand equity; brand image*

Research shows that strong brands provide their parent companies with many strategic advantages, including the ability to charge price premiums because of customer loyalty (Hoeffler and Keller 2003; Keller 2000). These advantages are described as brand equity, which captures the incremental value to consumers afforded by a brand (Yoon and Donthu 2001). Most of the extant literature that examines this concept focuses on for-profit product brands, with minimal attention to services (Berry 2000; Moorthi 2002) and even less attention to nonprofit services (Haig and Gilbert 2005). However, given the stagnation in government funding for nonprofit service organizations and the proliferation of me-too firms competing for the same funds (Frumkin and Kim 2001; Hibbert and Horne 1996), it is increasingly important for nonprofit leadership to create and maintain distinct brand identities that clearly differentiate themselves in the marketplace and lead to higher levels of brand equity.

Our research investigates the ability of corporate sponsorships to influence the value of nonprofit service brands. Corporate sponsorship was selected as the context for this research because for-profit companies have successfully differentiated and leveraged their brands through sponsorships (Crimmins and Horn 1996; Speed and Thompson 2000; Stipp and Schiavone 1996), and many nonprofit service organizations receive a significant portion of their income from corporate partners (see Hill 2002). Within this context, our study objectives were to demonstrate the strategic importance of well-defined corporate sponsorships as well as to understand how nonprofit service

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brands leverage these programs. Specifically, our investigation examined the impact of partnerships with well-regarded and highly familiar organizations on the strength of brand equity components of nonprofit service providers. Consider Lowes' sponsorship of the National Geographic Association and Whirlpool's financial contributions to Habit for Humanity. Management of these corporations believes that such alliances provide additional positive exposures to their brands, reinforce brand-specific associations, help develop a stronger sense of loyalty among consumers, and ultimately develop brand equity. In contrast, nonprofit service firm leaders may not fully comprehend the potential opportunities and consequences of these sponsorships on their brand's equity, particularly the detrimental effects of programs without intrinsic fit. The next section explores these issues through an in-depth look at the branding literature followed by specific hypotheses.

BRANDING STRATEGIES

According to Aaker (1991), the brand represents a set of associations that differentiate offerings within the marketplace. Such associations include the name, logo, values, causes, and/or other organization-specific attributes that help customers make selection decisions among alternatives. Given the unique nature of the service industry, particularly with regard to inseparability, heterogeneity, and intangibility, our brand focus is more holistic and reflective of organizations in their entirety. In addition, strong brands are associated with demand advantages as well as cost advantages (Campbell 2002; Hoeffler and Keller 2003; Keller 2000), which in the nonprofit arena typically manifest as more volunteer hours, greater dissemination of the organization's message or cause, and higher likelihood of selective attention toward messages by the organization, or in lower operating and communication costs as well as higher donation revenue (Hankinson 2001; Sargeant 1999; Trapp 1996).

The true value of a strong identity is inherently tied to consumer perceptions of, and engagement with, a brand (Keller 2000). Thus, the advantages afforded higher equity brands are not simply for the firm but also for the consumer (Haig and Gilbert 2005). Research shows that strong for-profit brands are likely to reduce consumer search time (Campbell 2002), limiting exposure to competitors; to moderate risk perceptions (Shapiro 1985), making it easier for consumers to commit to brands; and to be viewed as more credible (Erdem and Swait 1998), reinforcing positive beliefs about brands. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these benefits also may accrue to nonprofit service brands (Aoki 2003; Cone, Feldman, and DaSilva 2003; Ind and Bell 2000; Lerner 2003). Thus, it is important for nonprofit service leadership to understand the power of branding.

This project uses the Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework proposed by Keller (2001) to examine how nonprofit service firms build strong customer-driven brands. Specifically, our studies evaluate the ability of corporate sponsorships to advance brand equity via four components: brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand relationship. According to the CBBE model, building a strong brand involves engaging consumers in a step-by-step process in which they initially identify with and ultimately become connected to the brand. This salience goes well beyond mere recognition to include a deeper understanding of and commitment to the organization and its larger purpose. UNICEF provides a case in point, whereby the goal is to have patrons develop deeper knowledge of the brand and recognize their fuller range of activities, from feeding children, to providing vocational training, to advocating for immunization, to supporting education of female persons. By increasing the depth and breadth of awareness among the target market, they may be able to better meet the diverse needs and interests of different consumers and develop stronger relationships.

Although consistent brand identity develops broad associations, brand meaning helps define and differentiate those associations via specific images and beliefs. Positive brand images typically manifest as favorable associations that are unique to service offerings across two key dimensions: functional/performance attributes and abstract imagery (Keller 1993). The first component includes items such as service reliability, service quality, and pricing, whereas the second component includes items such as user profiles, brand personality, and brand values. Recently, scholars have argued that abstract imagery is particularly relevant to nonprofit service organizations because of the intangibility and social context of their offerings (Venable, Rose, Bush, and Gilbert 2005). In addition, nonprofit service firms create competitive positions that ultimately translate into brand relationships through focused communications. Such positioning is critical because potential donors often are aware of various causes without recognizing the unique character of charities that benefit these causes (Hibbert and Horne 1996).

Brand response is the next step in the cognitive chain of events leading ultimately to brand relationships. Brand response also is shaped by two components: judgments and feelings. Judgments are cognitive responses consumers have to brand stimuli, including thoughts regarding credibility and quality. In the nonprofit sector, judgments of credibility and trust have been shown to be important antecedents of brand engagement. A survey by the Consumer Information Company confirms that donors are more likely to contribute money when they feel good about the organization, trust the organization, and have confidence in the organization (Day 2000). Credibility involves the perceived capacity to deliver on communicated promises and to be viewed as trustworthy, likeable, and expert (Keller and Aaker 1992). High-credibility brands benefit from lower perceived risk, information costs, uncertainty, and higher perceived utility (Erdem and Swait 1998).

In contrast, brand feelings are affective responses and include feelings of warmth, fun, excitement, self-esteem, and social approval. Brand feelings help companies develop positive affective connections with customers that improve their overall attitudes toward brands (Kahle, Poulos, and Sukhdial 1988). Such affect causes consumers to experience affirming emotions that are tied to brands (e.g., fun, sincerity, happiness, or sorrow), and in the case of nonprofit service firms, good feelings about themselves for their involvement and for "doing the right thing" (e.g., self-respect or self-esteem) (Amos 1982; Dawson 1988; Wunderink 2002).

Finally, consumer engagement with brands results in higher levels of involvement with the brand, engenders brand loyalty, and develops strong brand relationships. In the nonprofit service sector, such engagement may take the form of financial contributions, volunteer commitment, recommendations to others, or personal use of the services provided. The goal of the nonprofit service organization should be to increase both engagement intensity and activity, thus creating deeper and more frequent opportunities for interaction with the brand.

Sponsorship Programs and Brand Management

Sponsorship programs include activities and events in support of specific causes that provide for brand-building opportunities among nonprofit service providers and their for-profit sponsors (Meenaghan 1998). The potential impact of these relationships on corporate partners recently received considerable attention (Gwinner and Swanson 2003; Johar and Pham 1999; Kuzma, Shanklin, and McCally 2003; Madrigal 2000; Speed and Thompson 2000), but relatively little research exists on the opportunities and costs for service organizations (Basil and Herr 2003; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004; Wymer and Samu 2003). This intellectual void may be due to the perspective of corporate sponsorship as gift giving rather than strategic alliance. However, for-profit companies now recognize the tactical value of linking with specific causes and credible nonprofit service providers. For instance, there are hundreds of antismoking organizations that seek sponsors for a wide range of activities, and each differs in markets, events, media profile, and reputation. The necessary brand management synergies for sponsors and sponsored alike require in-depth understanding of these factors.

Research shows that these linkages provide brand-building benefits for corporate sponsors, including enhanced brand associations, improved competitive positions, positive consumer feelings, and increased brand engagement (Gwinner 1997; Madrigal 2000; Porter and Kramer 2002; Speed and Thompson 2000). However, certain conditions must exist to maximize the impact of sponsorship programs on these variables. Scholars have identified the following moderating influences on consumers' evaluations: personal interest (Gwinner and Swanson 2003; Sen and Bhattacharya 2000), firm reputation (Johar and Pham 1999; Speed and Thompson 2000), sponsor motivation (Speed and Thompson 2000; Webb and Mohr 1999), and perceptions of fit (Madrigal 2000; Simmons and Becker-Olsen forthcoming; Speed and Thompson 2000).

The Strategic Importance of Fit

Fit is broadly defined as a strategic match between sponsoring firms and sponsored nonprofit service providers in mission, target audience, and/or values. The branding and sponsorship literatures reveal that fit (e.g., between brands and extensions, or brands and endorsers) influences consumer evaluations of target products/brands. When fit is high, consumers experience cognitive consistency and generally respond favorably (Boush and Loken 1991; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Keller and Aaker 1992; Speed and Thompson 2000). When fit is low, consumers experience cognitive inconsistency, which negatively influences their responses, and an attenuation effect occurs (Meenaghan 2002; Porter and Kramer 2002; Speed and Thompson 2000). These outcomes emerge because consumers value consistency in their thoughts (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989) and report negative reactions to their violation. Furthermore, information that is inconsistent with prior knowledge causes consumers to question underlying motives for the pairing (Yoon and Gurhan-Canli 2003). Thus, low-fit sponsorships spark negative attributions and negative affect toward both partners. Finally, inconsistent information or lack of thematic relatedness between the partners weakens brand images.

The ability of high-fit sponsorship programs to influence specific beliefs related to brand image, brand meaning, brand response, and brand relationship are informed by McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model. This perspective posits that meaning transfer from one object to another (e.g., from sponsoring firms to sponsored nonprofits or vice versa) and the creation of a shared set of associations require a well-developed relationship between the two objects. High-fit pairings meet this standard as clear connections are identified and meanings are shared, reinforcing the partners' brand associations and competitive positions. However, low-fit pairings provide no readily identifiable linkages, and consequently no shared meanings arise. Reebok's sponsorship of the New York Philharmonic provides an apt case-in-point. The inconsistency with prior actions by both organizations and incongruence between missions, target audiences, and values led to negative attributions, higher perceived risk, and ultimately negative attitudes and behavioral intentions (Weiner 1985). In contrast, consumers might easily perceive connections between the New York Philharmonic and a corporate sponsor like Sony Entertainment, reinforcing specific brand associations/brand images, increasing brand credibility, lowering perceived risk, and generating feelings of sincerity, which result in more positive attitudes and behavioral intentions toward nonprofits.

With the previous discussion as a basis, the following research predictions are advanced:

Hypothesis 1: High-fit sponsorships
a. Strengthen nonprofit brand identity,
b. Fortify brand meaning,
c. Increase brand response,
d. Strengthen brand relationship.

Hypothesis 2: Low-fit sponsorships
a. Weaken nonprofit brand identity,
b. Diminish brand meaning,
c. Decrease brand response,
d. Weaken brand relationship.

STUDY 1

We test these hypotheses by asking respondents to read news clippings that contain brief items about recent actions by nonprofit service organizations and for-profit companies. (See Appendix A for examples of these stimuli.) In the control condition, there is no sponsorship relationship between the two organizations. In the experimental conditions, the news items for the companies also announce their recent sponsorship of nonprofit service providers. The nonprofit service organizations and the companies are either high or low fit, as determined by pretests. After reading the materials, respondents were asked to complete measures of their perceptions of the nonprofit service providers. Our goal was to observe whether exposure to high-fit or low-fit sponsorships influences perceptions relative to the no-sponsorship control condition. Effects are replicated across two pairings of companies and nonprofit organizations.

Method

Pretests identified two equally well-liked (*M*s = 6.25 and 6.36, $F_{1, 21} = 1.63$, $p > .10$) and highly familiar (*M*s = 6.13 and 6.15, $F_{1, 21} < 1$) nonprofit service providers (Humane Society and the Special Olympics) and two equally well-liked (*M*s = 6.10 and 6.17, $F_{1, 27} < 1$) and highly familiar (*M*s = 6.50 and 6.57, $F_{1, 27} < 1$) companies (Alpo and the Sports Authority) to create high-fit and low-fit pairings. Liking and familiarity were measured via semantic differential items using 7-point scales: *negative/positive*, *unfavorable/favorable*, and *bad/good* (Cronbach's α = .97) for liking; and *unfamiliar/familiar*, *did not recognize/recognized*, and *had not heard of/had heard of* (Cronbach's α = .96) for familiarity. The selection of highly familiar well-liked brands is appropriate because they represent firms with defined brand identities and associations.

Additional pretests established that the pairings Humane Society/Alpo and Special Olympics/Sport Authority are perceived as equally high in fit (*M*s = 6.65 and 6.25, $F_{1, 25}$ = 1.57, $p > .10$), that the pairings Special Olympics/Alpo and Humane Society/Sports Authority are perceived as equally low in fit (*M*s = 1.84 and 1.75, $F_{1, 25} < 1$), and that these high-fit pairings are perceived as significantly higher in fit than these low-fit pairings (*M*s = 6.45 and 1.80; $F_{1, 25}$ = 500.09, $p < .0001$). Fit was measured on a seven-item, 7-point scale: *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).

Two hundred thirty-six adults (average age was 35; 52% male) in nonmarketing professional training seminars participated in this study without compensation. Each individual was randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (fit: high vs. low) × 2 (sponsorship: present vs. absent) × replicate (one of two company/nonprofit pairings for the relevant fit condition) between-subjects design. Respondents were asked to read a press clipping containing four news items, with the first two describing recent actions by Procter & Gamble and the American Heart Association. The third item varied across conditions and described the recent promotion of an employee of either the Humane Society or the Special Olympics. The last item also varied across conditions and presented information about a new Web site for either Alpo or the Sports Authority, and—in the sponsorship-present conditions—an announcement of the firm's sponsorship of the nonprofit service organization.

After reading the clippings, respondents completed the dependent measures described below (some are reverse-coded). These measures are reflective of the Consumer Based Brand Equity Scale developed by Washburn and Plank (2002). Because our research interest is the effects of fit (and specific measures of consumer-based brand equity), measures for image clarity and image consistency as well as more detailed measures of brand response were added. These measures allow for the determination of specific rather than generalized associations as is the case with the Washburn and Plank scale. All items are measured with 7-point differential scales, anchored at one end by *strongly agree* and the other by *strongly disagree*.

1. Brand identity. This construct measures respondents' ability to recall and recognize brands and link them with broad associations. Given evaluations were to be of highly familiar nonprofit brands, a brand awareness manipulation check also was employed (*I am aware of the brand* and *I am familiar with the brand*). To measure familiarity and ability to make broad associations with brands, the following items were included: *is all about helping animals/disabled kids* and *aids in adoption for homeless pets* or *uses sports to help disabled kids* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).
2. Brand meaning. This construct contains brand image and more specific associations, including functional/performance associations (*lacks the ability and knowledge to provide the best services* and *services/events deliver the desired benefits;* Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$*).* In addition, more abstract brand personality associations were used such as perceived integrity (*cares little about animals/disabled kids* and *acts for the good of the community;* Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$*)* and perceived nurturance *(is a vital part of the community* and *is a positive force in the community;* Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$*).* Finally, this construct examines meaning consistency *(conveys the same image in all its activities* and *has conveyed an inconsistent image over time;* Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$*)* and clarity (*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 $\alpha = .88$).
3. Brand response. This construct measures both cognitive judgments of and affective feelings toward brands. As suggested by Keller (2000), our variables included judgments related to expertise (*plays a significant role in the world of nonprofit organizations* and *is a leader in services for animals/disabled kids;* Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$) and to trust (*is an organization you can trust, can be donated to with confidence,* and *needs to be carefully evaluated*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$). Furthermore, generalized brand feelings were evaluated *(I like this organization, this organization is a good organization,* and *this is a helpful organization;* Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$), as well as more specific feelings related to organizational sincerity (*acts in the best interest of animals/disabled kids, accepts corporate donations only to maximize fundraising,* and *accepts corporate support because it wants to make the world better*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).
4. Brand relationship. This construct measures consumer intentions to engage and develop relationships with brands. Unlike products, or even for-profit services, our interest is in several levels of brand engagement. Thus, three items were employed that represent financial (*I am likely to contribute financially to this organization*), time *(I am likely to volunteer for this organization)*, and word-of-mouth or psychological engagement (*I am likely to recommend this organization*).

Results

Perceived fit varies across (Ms = 1.59 and 6.45, $F_{1, 152} = 3{,}574.97$, $p < .0001$) but not within high-fit (Ms = 6.48 and 6.42, $F_{1, 76} < 1$) or low-fit conditions (Ms = 1.51 and 1.67, $F_{1, 76} = 1.61$, $p > .1$), providing an appropriate manipulation check. Results do not differ by nonprofit ($F_{1, 238} = 1.46$, $p > .87$) or firm ($F_{1, 238} = 1.27$, $p > .14$), so analyses are collapsed across variables of interest (means are provided in Table 1). More important, as predicted, high-fit sponsorships strengthen broad associations related to brand identity ($F_{1, 158} = 100.98$, $p < .001$), although they have no effect on brand awareness ($F_{1, 158} = .56$, $p > .05$). With respect to brand meaning, significant effects are revealed for both brand integrity ($F_{1, 158} = 48.14$, $p < .001$) and brand nurturance ($F_{1, 158} = 65.84$, $p < .001$) but not for brand functionality ($F_{1, 158} = 4.49$, $p > .05$). Furthermore, as expected, high-fit sponsorships increase brand consistency ($F_{1, 158} = 38.59$, $p < .001$) and brand clarity ($F_{1, 158} = 120.89$, $p < .001$). For brand response, significant positive effects are shown for general brand feelings ($F_{1, 158} = 49.82$, $p < .001$), expertise ($F_{1, 158} = 16.92$, $p < .001$), trust ($F_{1, 158} = 95.12$, $p < .001$), and sincerity ($F_{1, 158} = 63.41$, $p < .001$). Interestingly, no differences occur between high and low fit with regard to perceived expertise ($F_{1, 158} = 3.04$, $p > .05$). Last, brand relationship measures demonstrate that high-fit sponsorships increase willingness to volunteer ($F_{1, 158} = 45.24$, $p < .001$) and positive recommendations ($F_{1, 158} = 78.59$, $p < .001$), with more modest but still significant effects on individual financial contributions ($F_{1, 158} = 5.43$, $p < .05$).

On the contrary, but as hypothesized, low-fit sponsorships dilute broad associations related to brand identity ($F_{1, 156} = 17.35$, $p < .001$), but they have little impact on brand awareness ($F_{1, 156} = .79$, $p > .05$). With respect to brand meaning, significant attenuation effects occur for both brand integrity ($F_{1, 156} = 30.13$, $p < .001$) and brand nurturance ($F_{1, 156} = 10.37$, $p < .002$) but not for brand functionality ($F_{1, 156} = 1.48$, $p > .05$). As expected, low-fit sponsorships dilute brand consistency ($F_{1, 156} = 360.06$, $p < .001$) and brand clarity ($F_{1, 156} = 245.15$, $p < .001$). Regarding brand response, our results show moderate yet negative effects on expertise ($F_{1, 158} = 4.52$, $p < .05$) and

TABLE 1
Means for 7-Point Scale Dependent Measures in Study 1

	High Fit	*Low Fit*	*Control*
Brand identity			
Awareness	6.32	6.35	6.29
Broad associations	6.68*	5.79*	6.28
Brand meaning			
Functional performance	5.43	5.48	5.46
Integrity	6.67*	5.65*	6.13
Nurturance	6.38*	5.45*	5.70
Consistency	5.87	3.58*	5.67
Clarity	6.25*	3.60*	5.25
Brand response			
Brand feelings	5.61*	4.79*	5.23
Expertise	5.45*	5.27*	4.79
Trust	6.19*	5.03*	5.44
Sincerity	6.13*	4.68*	5.50
Brand relationship			
Time	6.03*	5.12	5.14
Financial contribution	5.47*	4.24*	5.26
Recommendation	6.45*	4.89*	5.15

* Indicates mean is significantly different from the control condition at the .001 level.

highly significant negative effects on brand feelings ($F_{1, 158}$ = 52.94, $p < .001$) and trust ($F_{1, 158}$ = 31.37, $p < .001$) and sincerity ($F_{1, 158}$ = 51.49, $p < .001$). Finally, low-fit sponsorships have an uneven impact on brand relationships, with no real effect on willingness to volunteer ($F_{1, 158}$ = .394, $p >$ .05), but significant negative influences on willingness to recommend nonprofit service providers ($F_{1, 158}$ = 56.15, $p <$ .001) and make individual financial contributions ($F_{1, 158}$ = 68.19, $p < .05$).

Discussion

These results show that sponsorships are a powerful brand-building tool for nonprofit service organizations, but that not all sponsorships provide equal benefits. High-fit sponsorships help nonprofits build their brand identity via reinforcement of strong broad brand associations, strengthen specific brand associations related to integrity and nurturance that enhance brand meaning, and develop positive responses related to trust and sincerity of brands. In contrast, low-fit sponsorships tend to dilute brand identity; brand meanings related to integrity and nurturance; and brand responses related to brand feelings, trust, and sincerity. Furthermore, high-fit sponsorships build brand relationships that ultimately lead to brand engagement; positively influencing volunteerism, individual financial contributions, and willingness to recommend. However, low-fit sponsorships decrease willingness to make individual financial contributions and recommend brands. Interestingly, low fit has no impact on functional performance or brand expertise.

STUDY 2

The previous investigation shows that the brand-building impact of sponsorships for nonprofit service providers varies according to their strategic fit with for-profit firms. However, the tremendous demands on nonprofit leadership to raise money (see Hill 2002) suggest that refusal to accept resources from, or limit their sponsor base to, partners that have a strong intuitive linkage is unlikely. The purpose of Study 2 is to examine ways to improve donor perceptions of, and intentions toward, nonprofits in low-fit sponsorship pairings. For instance, consider the World Wildlife Foundation, which accepts sizable contributions from Home Depot. Although consumers may not discern an obvious connection, the World Wildlife Foundation is able to communicate that "everyone deserves a home" including the Giant Panda, leaving consumers with a positive and consistent impression of this sponsorship program. Home Depot may build on this concept by communicating to the public how its support helps sustain the natural habitats of endangered species around the world. Previous research reveals that the positive affect generated from such pairings may allow consumers to resolve any inconsistencies that occur (Meyers-Levy, Louie, and Curran 1994).

Method

Study 2 examined the *creation* of fit in the otherwise low-fit pairing of a single sponsor (Alpo) and nonprofit service provider (Special Olympics). Eighty adults (mean age of 36; 49% male) from nonmarketing professional training seminars participated in the study. They were randomly assigned to conditions in a between-subjects three-group design (low fit vs. created fit vs. no-sponsorship control). Manipulations were again achieved by asking respondents to read news clippings (see Appendix B). Under low fit, the Alpo item had an announcement of its sponsorship of the Special Olympics. In the created-fit condition, the Alpo item contained the sponsorship announcement, plus information that caring for animals may increase self-esteem of the mentally disabled, and that the program included a lifetime supply of Alpo and free pets for Special Olympics participants. This information was intended to help readers resolve the incongruity of the Alpo/Special Olympics relationship. No sponsorship was mentioned in the control condition. For consistency, Study 2 uses the same dependent measures as Study 1.

TABLE 2
Means for 7-Point Scale Dependent Measures in Study 2

	Created Fit	*Low Fit*	*Control*
Brand identity			
Awareness	6.14	6.19	6.08
Broad associations	6.34*	5.78*	6.16
Brand meaning			
Functional performance	5.33	5.29	5.31
Integrity	6.51*	5.64*	6.05
Nurturance	6.09*	5.42*	5.66
Consistency	5.97*	3.02*	5.84
Clarity	6.01*	3.15*	5.67
Brand response			
Brand feelings	5.97*	4.81*	5.34
Expertise	5.25	5.23	5.19
Trust	6.16*	5.13*	5.47
Sincerity	6.08*	4.79*	5.46
Brand relationship			
Time	5.55*	5.03	5.06
Financial contribution	5.97*	4.89*	5.15
Recommendation	6.72*	4.94*	5.76

* Indicates mean is significantly different from the control condition at the .001 level.

Results

Our results show that created-fit sponsorships do not produce the negative effects of other low-fit associations. In fact, the findings for created fit tend to parallel our results for high fit in the first study (see Table 2). Specifically, created fit strengthens broad associations related to brand identity ($F_{1, 78} = 87.46$, $p < .001$), while having no effect on brand awareness ($F_{1, 78} = 1.05$, $p > .05$). For brand meaning, significant effects occur for brand integrity ($F_{1, 78} = 40.49$, $p < .001$) and brand nurturance ($F_{1, 78} = 49.18$, $p < .001$), but not for brand functionality ($F_{1, 78} = 1.02$, $p > .05$). Furthermore, our created-fit sponsorships increase brand clarity ($F_{1, 78} = 148.26$, $p < .001$) yet do not positively influence perceptions of brand meaning consistency ($F_{1, 78} = 2.49$, $p > .05$). With regard to brand response, significant positive effects are revealed for brand feelings ($F_{1, 158} = 35.86$, $p < .001$), trust ($F_{1, 78} = 95.12$, $p < .001$) and sincerity ($F_{1, 78} = 63.41$, $p < .001$), but not for expertise ($F_{1, 78} = .948$, $p > .05$). Finally, brand relationship improves with created-fit sponsorships through willingness to volunteer ($F_{1, 78} = 52.46$, $p < .001$), individual financial contributions ($F_{1, 78} = 49.73$, $p < .001$), and willingness to recommend the organization ($F_{1, 78} = 77.25$, $p < .001$).

Once again, low-fit sponsorships dilute broad associations related to brand identity ($F_{1, 78} = 22.43$, $p < .001$), but they have no effect on brand awareness ($F_{1, 78} = 1.01$, $p > .05$). For brand meaning, significant attenuation effects occur for both brand integrity ($F_{1, 78} = 36.45$, $p < .001$) and brand nurturance ($F_{1, 78} = 24.61$, $p < .001$), but not for perceived brand functionality ($F_{1, 78} = .849$, $p > .05$). As expected, these low-fit sponsorships dilute brand consistency ($F_{1, 78} = 421.56$, $p < .001$) and brand clarity ($F_{1, 78} = 376.45$, $p < .001$). With regard to brand response, no dilution effects are manifested for expertise ($F_{1, 78} = 2.47$, $p > .05$), yet significant effects are revealed for brand feelings ($F_{1, 158} = 46.75$, $p < .001$), trust ($F_{1, 78} = 37.64$, $p < .001$) and sincerity ($F_{1, 78} = 58.52$, $p < .001$). Similar to Study 1, brand relationships under low-fit sponsorships of willingness to volunteer are not affected ($F_{1, 78} = .761$, $p > .05$), but they are negatively affected in terms of willingness to recommend the organization ($F_{1, 78} = 26.76$, $p < .001$) and make individual financial contributions ($F_{1, 78} = 89.16$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the *creation* of fit between for-profit companies and nonprofit service providers through marketing communications may enhance the reactions of potential donors to intrinsically low-fit sponsorship programs. The results mirror high-fit sponsorships in that broad associations of brand identity are strengthened significantly, and brand meaning is enhanced through positive changes to brand integrity and brand nurturance. Created fit also reveals the potential to improve brand clarity as well as brand response with regard to brand feelings, trust, and sincerity. All three aspects of brand relationship, willingness to volunteer, to recommend the organization, and to make financial contributions, vary significantly and positively as well. On a different note, the low-fit findings parallel the results from Study 1.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research contributes to an understanding of how nonprofit service firms build the value of their own brands through strategic use of sponsorship programs. Most previous scholarship concentrates on the potential positive impact of these associations to corporate sponsors. Implicit to these studies is the belief that nonprofits gain a certain amount of goodwill from their societal activities that may transfer onto various sponsorship partners. This conviction has helped fuel the expansion of corporate donations of time, talent, and treasure, with little interest in the longer term consequences to nonprofit service providers. Thus, another unstated precept is that the only rationale for nonprofits to enter into such relationships is to receive resources because these partnerships have no real impact on their own reputations. However, as our results show, this is not the case, and nonprofit service leaders need to think strategically about their partners.

Managerial intuition alone might predict the above conclusions, but our findings regarding high-fit and low-fit pairings among nonprofit service providers and for-profit companies may not be so easily discerned. For example, high-fit sponsorships appear to enhance several important brand characteristics of nonprofit partners, revealing the significant and positive influence of sponsorships that make sense to the public at large. Such cognitive consistency may result in fewer questions as to the rationale for these associations, causing both parties to be perceived as “doing the right thing.” On the other hand, low-fit sponsorships seem to have the opposite effect for the same underlying reasons. Negative consequences on various brand factors for nonprofit service providers may occur because of perceived inconsistency between partners that results in questions about motives and capability. Interestingly, these outcomes may be ameliorated through the judicious use of marketing communications that provide a basis for understanding intrinsically low-fit sponsorship relationships.

These theoretical issues have several practical implications for nonprofit service leadership. First, although high-fit sponsorships may seem inherently obvious, managers charged with establishing these connections would benefit from research into their true appeal to important target audiences. Second, many of the supporting promotional campaigns are controlled by for-profit companies with large marketing budgets and used to enhance the for-profit brand. Marketing or public relations directors in service organizations need to find ways to leverage these assets to ensure that their reputations are enhanced as well. Hence, these campaigns may need to be jointly prepared so both partners benefit. Finally, low-fit pairings should occur only when nonprofit leaders have the ability to control the flow of information about their relationships. When circumstances allow for the dissemination of information that provides acceptable explanations for sponsorships, strategic alignment between for-profit companies and nonprofit service providers may be publicized as long as such justifications play a central role in communications. However, when validations cannot be communicated properly, nonprofit managers must consider carefully the potential negative consequences to their reputations relative to the resources acquired.

The time and financial commitment by for-profit companies to establish and maintain positive brand identities may appear excessive, especially to nonprofit service leadership facing constant resource limitations in their search for and application of solutions to important social problems. Under these conditions, their priorities are unlikely to divert resources to fund significant marketing activities in support of brand management objectives. Nonetheless, our research suggests that coherent branding strategies may be an important avenue for reaching their primary goals, improving donor loyalty as well as donor willingness to make contributions and volunteer. Given that most nonprofits are created to solve complex and vexing dilemmas (e.g., finding cures for cancer, solving housing needs for the poor, and educating young people against the use of violence), real progress typically is measured over years or decades. Such a long-term horizon is consistent with the view of brand building as an investment in the future rather than a drain on precious assets. With governments asking for increased involvement from the private sector to support the public good (Hill 2002), can nonprofit service providers survive without sustainable brand identities?

Future Research

The diversity that exists within the nonprofit sector suggests further study of sponsorship relationships. For example, one clear need is to address the generality of these effects across a wider variety of corporate entities and service providers. Our research concentrated on highly familiar and well-liked businesses and nonprofits. Additional scholarship may include sponsorships where one party is attempting to repair, change, or develop new brand identities. In these cases, potential donors would be unable to rely on current positive associations and would need to develop or modify existing beliefs and attitudes as a result of new information provided through marketing communications. Created fit could also be varied from low (e.g., general statements about good intentions) to high (specific statements related to credibility or sincerity). Such scenarios require looking beyond short-term effects based on a single message to capture the sought-after impact, instead employing multiple exposures with different modalities over a longer time period. This same procedure may be used to determine if the negative effects of low-fit sponsorships persist or represent a short-term phenomenon and whether the positive influence of created fit on brand identity perseveres over time.

APPENDIX A
Study 1 Materials

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 United States.

The American Heart Association achieved its goal of increasing access to life-saving automated external defibrillators (AEDs) for air travelers with the new Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requirement that commercial airlines carry AEDs as part of on-board medical emergency equipment. AEDs are small, easy-to-use devices 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 treatment of animals for more than 20 years. In her 5 years as program director of the Humane Society, she has spearheaded educational campaigns to increase awareness of animal protection issues.

Alpo Petfoods today announced the opening of its expanded online store, www.Alpo.com. The store enables consumers to securely purchase an assortment of pet food and related products online. The site includes the ability for returning customers to purchase without reentering personal information and to interact in real time with customer service representatives. Coincidentally, Alpo also announced its new sponsorship of the Humane Society, 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 events.

Alpo: high fit, sponsorship present

BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE NEWS

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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 more than 20 years. In her 5 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.

Alpo Petfoods today announced the opening of its expanded online store, www.Alpo.com. The store enables consumers to securely purchase an assortment of pet food and related products online. The site includes the ability for returning customers to purchase without reentering personal information and to interact in real time with customer service representatives. 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.

Alpo: low fit, sponsorship present

BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE NEWS

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Alpo: high fit, sponsorship absent

BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE NEWS

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Alpo: low fit, sponsorship absent

APPENDIX B
Study 2 Materials

Note: The low-fit condition and the no-sponsorship control conditions are identical to the low-fit condition and the low-fit no-sponsorship 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 United States.

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Alpo: created fit, sponsorship present

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