

Sponsoring – a worldwide disease

Dear Reader,

You all know it: sponsoring has become the “magic word”. Wikipedia.com offers the following definition:

“To **sponsor** something is to support an event, activity, person, or organization financially or through the provision of products or services. A **sponsor** is the individual or group that provides the support, similar to a benefactor. **Sponsorship** typically benefits both the recipient (by providing material benefits) as well as the sponsor (as a marketing tool that enhances the sponsor’s public image and provides access to a wider audience).”

This activity is based on a contract and is supposed to be a so-called win-win situation. Sports without sponsoring seem unthinkable these days. We cannot watch any televised sports without being exposed to sponsoring and advertisement. Manufacturers use the athletes or their equipment as moving billboards. Good examples are Formula One races or alpine ski competitions. There the win-win situation is clear: By having broad exposure (millions of TV spectators), the manufacturer expects to sell more products. Modern marketing evaluation tools are able to measure this effect. Taking it a step further, the image of the person or team is used to enhance the image of the sponsor. A good example is UBS, which sponsors Alinghi, the winner of the Americas Cup. All over Switzerland, this victory is used to link the triumphant Alinghi crew with the successful wealth management of the bank UBS. Here, too, marketing tools are able to quantify the impact.

Now let’s have a look at dentistry. Manufacturers of dental products get requests on a weekly, perhaps daily basis to sponsor congresses, symposia, congress bags, speakers, speaker dinners etc., you name it. Sometimes sponsoring is used just to allow manufacturers to acquire exhibition space at a congress. Furthermore, the pressure is increased by classifying the sponsors from platinum, maybe down to iron, aluminum or even scrap metal according to the amount of money they give! So who would want to be silver if the main competitor is classified as gold or platinum?

Congresses, symposia, or workshops are tools to disseminate knowledge and information, which of course is also done by scientific journals. Moreover, they serve as platforms for contacts and sometimes trigger creativity and inspiration. However, it is legitimate to ask whether congresses need much sponsoring. They could also be self-supporting, as every business should be in this world.

Coming back to sponsoring, I think in dentistry the situation is different than in sports: It is not a win-win situation. Where is the effect, if a company sponsors a speaker? He/she might be willing to mention specifically the sponsor company’s products (but on the other hand this is NOT what independent researchers should do). I doubt there is any measurable effect in increased sales if a manufacturer sponsors an event with 80 participants. If a manufacturer sponsors a dinner, I think the effect is nil, if you disregard the epicurean satisfaction of the participants!

So what should we as a profession do? In sports, the need has arisen for regulations to limit the impact of sponsoring, or in other words, to uphold the spirit of sport for its own sake vs sport for the sake of advertisement. In dentistry, we should not add more regulations to an already highly regulated world. But we should seriously consider returning to the idea that events should support themselves. Bring the congresses back to their true task and skip the expensive surrounding events, which would reduce the costs and in turn keep the subscription/registration/membership fees on a reasonable level. Organizers often forget that the sponsoring companies must earn every Euro or dollar they spend for sponsoring. So I clearly prefer the attitude which usually governs the cooperation between industrial companies and universities: “data for dollars”. This is a true win-win situation, since research can be conducted, the financiers receive the data which are needed, and the university gets the opportunity to publish, which covers their needs.

Coming back to the initial idea that financing of scientific institutions should yield a benefit for both parties, any procedure which generates hard data (facts) is to be preferred to sponsoring. We scientists know that data are stronger than opinion. This may be reflected in much stronger advertisements as compared to any sponsoring action!

Sincerely yours,



J.-F. Roulet
Editor-in-Chief