

Nielsen Could Hit Home Run with New Service Measuring Sports Sponsorships



Buyers and sellers of sports advertising have long debated whether certain media positions hold more value than others — for example, should an electronic billboard behind first base cost more than one behind third? Now they will be able to quantify which media placements get the most air time with a new service from Nielsen Media Research that will measure sponsor-placed media seen on televised sporting events.

Nielsen's Sponsorship Scorecard will look at viewer demographics and length of exposure for in-stadium signage, superimposed elements of broadcasts, promotional elements, and any other sponsorship-placed media readable by viewers and seen on television for at least one second.

"Stadiums are basically real estate," explained Ron Schneier, senior vice president and general manager for Nielsen Ventures (a unit of VNU Media Measurement and Information, which is also parent company to Nielsen Media Research). "Just as a homeowner can increase the value of their home by building an addition or making improvements, stadium owners can look for more creative and effective ways to use their medium to increase its value and enhance the communication impact."

Given the high opportunity for ROI, Schneier believes both buyers and sellers of sports sponsorship media will benefit tremendously. "The sports sponsorship business today is a \$7 billion-plus industry," he said. "I would estimate roughly \$1 to \$2 billion of that is spent on the buying and selling of signs. Right now, there is no currency between buyers and sellers to determine that value. Many national advertisers have been hesitant to get involved in non-traditional media when they can't measure whether the placement is worth the price being asked. Once the currency is in place, we expect advertisers to take the medium more seriously and for their sellers' demand to increase."

Here's how the service works: Sports games are downloaded onto a server that is digitized and time-coded. Analysts then review the games, capturing various signage and coding how long the signage is seen, where the image is located in the stadium, what brand the image displays, and whether the view of the signage is full or partial. A back-up team then checks the work to make sure the information is correct.

The new service gives advertisers a tool that allows them to look at various locations within a stadium or across multiple stadiums and sports to determine "hot spots" — places that get the highest television visibility as defined by most minutes or the highest level of television impressions. Meanwhile, sellers will be able to determine which locations in their stadiums get the most television exposure, get more information on viewer demographics, and provide best practices by appeasing sponsors who aren't getting the TV time they hoped for by improving visibility during the season.

"We are dealing with a medium that has a lot of room for growth," said Schneier. "There are many creative ways to use sponsorship elements without overcluttering the screen or playing field."

He cited a successful example: "We've recently seen superimposed placement on Fox broadcasts on home plate for national games. It looks great, it's more visible, it doesn't interfere with the enjoyment of the game, and it has received a lot of positive recognition. I think we are going to see a lot more of that."

Sports teams may also look to enhance their marketability by donning shirts, hats, and pants with prominent sponsor logos — something we've recently started to see at golfing and horseracing events. Nielsen also predicts non-traditional sports will get in on the act. For example, measuring Nascar's signage-dense landscape could provide a wealth of information for advertisers.

In 2005, Nielsen plans to move to digital-image recognition technology that will build a library of all the various signage elements as it "watches" a game. While this new technology will speed up the information-compilation process, it is not fail-safe; for example, rain can interfere with the frequency of light and alter colors, which may cause the technology to miss some signage. A human eye will still be needed to observe and check the elements to determine what they are and whether they are, in fact, sponsor-placed media.

"We've gotten an extremely strong reception from both teams and sports advertisers," Schneier added. "People are very pleased that we are doing this."

Looking into the crystal ball, it's likely Nielsen's innovation has big implications not only for the sports world but for other entertainment-based media — televised concerts, award shows, even reality programming (which is already beginning to use sponsor advertising in new ways la "American Idol"'s Ford Focus "music videos"). The possibilities are virtually endless.



For more information, please visit <http://www.nielsenmedia.com>.