

An IMC Approach to Event Marketing: The Effects of Sponsorship and Experience on Customer Attitudes

JULIE Z. SNEATH

University of South
Alabama
jsneath@southal.edu

R. ZACHARY FINNEY

University of South
Alabama
zfinney@southal.edu

ANGELINE GRACE

CLOSE

The University of
Nevada Las Vegas
angelinegrace@gmail.com

The number of companies sponsoring events has increased over the past decade. Yet, for many firms it is unclear how the effectiveness of event marketing activities can be measured. The study examines outcomes associated with an automobile manufacturer's sponsorship of a six-day charitable sporting event. Data for the study were collected from a sample of 565 spectators in five cities during the six-day event. Results provide evidence for inclusion of event marketing in the company's promotional mix and indicate that experience with the sponsor's products during the event may enhance event outcomes. The role of event marketing as a form of communication is discussed, and recommendations and directions for future research are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

EVENT MARKETING is an increasingly important component in the promotions mix. In response to the many challenges facing traditional media, including cost, clutter, and fragmentation, the use of events in which companies can have face-to-face contact with their target audience has grown and become a valuable contributor to marketing communications programs. It is estimated that 22 percent of total marketing communications budgets are dedicated to event-related sponsorship activities (MPI Foundation, 2004). Not surprisingly, the fees paid to sponsor events, along with the campaigns and promotions designed to leverage the sponsorship, have also grown. Despite these increases, event sponsorship is still a "new activity" for many firms (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998, p. 7), and many companies are uncertain how the effects of sponsorship activities (Hulks, 1980; McDonald, 1991), and their relationship to other elements in the promotional mix, should be measured.

The purpose of this study is to examine outcomes associated with the sponsorship of a charitable sporting event by an automobile manufacturer.

Specifically, it investigates (a) perceptions of the title sponsor and its products, and (b) how experience with the sponsor's products during the event influences spectators' perceptions and likelihood of purchase. A description of the event and sponsor is provided, along with a review of trends in event marketing and integrated marketing communications (IMC). Following this review, the research questions and results of the study are presented. In addition, the importance of event marketing as a component of an IMC strategy is discussed, and managerial implications and directions for future research are presented.

THE EVENT

The event in this study involves a six-day charitable sporting event that consists of a series of festivals across 11 cities. In 2004, its second year, the event attracted more than 750,000 spectators. This number was identified using crowd estimates. In addition to the sporting event, attractions in the host cities include entertainment, a health exposition, and exhibits that are provided by the event beneficiary, title, and other spon-

sors. Celebrity athletes help to increase attendance, as well as demand for sponsorship and hospitality opportunities at the event.

In a sense, this is one level of cause-related marketing. The official beneficiary of the six-day affair is a public-private coalition of organizations whose primary function is to promote health awareness and education and to increase access to quality healthcare. During the event, a variety of activities and health-focused booths are provided by coalition members in each of the host cities. Due to the large numbers of spectators and international media coverage, the beneficiary estimates that the value of media exposure for the 2004 event was \$2.5 million.

The title sponsor for the event is an automobile manufacturer. More than a dozen other firms sponsor the event and activities in host cities. In addition to naming rights, the title sponsor's name and logo are prominently displayed throughout the event on banners, signage, volunteers' shirts, and on the large-screen TV that projects the race to the crowd during the sporting event. The sponsor's name is also mentioned over a public address system by an announcer who is explaining what is happening in the competition.

In each host city, the automobile manufacturer has exhibits (tents) in which its cars and trucks are displayed. Although spectators are not provided with opportunities to test drive any vehicles during the event, they are able to interact with the vehicle and speak with the manufacturer's representatives. Those who attend the exhibits also have their names entered into a drawing for a new vehicle. The names and customer information collected from this drawing also provide a marketing purpose. A form of permission-based marketing, the drawing entrants may elect to receive promotional materials and updates from the sponsor.

A major difference between marketing with an event and many other communication methods is that events offer opportunities for personal interaction with products.

EVENT MARKETING

The term "event marketing" is used to describe a variety of activities, including the "marketing of events and marketing with events" (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998, p. 5). The marketing of an event is not related to sponsorship, whereas marketing with events entails the promotion of sponsors through the sponsorship vehicle. The latter, marketing with events, helps to accomplish the firm's objectives through event-related communications and experiences. A major difference between marketing with an event and many other communication methods is that events offer opportunities for personal interaction with products.

Defined as "the underwriting of a special event to support corporate objectives" (Javalgi, Traylor, Gross, and Lampman, 1994, p. 48), including sales, brand awareness, and image enhancement (Gardner and Shuman, 1987; Gross, Traylor, and Shuman, 1987), event marketing is one of the fastest growing forms of marketing communication. In 2003, \$152 billion was spent on event marketing (*Wall Street Journal*, 2005). Compared with other industries, automobile manufacturers and healthcare firms spend more on external events, i.e., those targeting customers, prospects, and vendors, than they spend on internal events, i.e., those that are designed for employees, sales teams, and partners (MPI Foundation, 2004).

Increased spending on event marketing, relative to other forms of promotion, suggests there are benefits to sponsoring events. Research by Crimmins and Horn (1996) suggests that sponsorship of high profile

events has the potential to be "worth millions of dollars" to the sponsor (p. 11). Furthermore, a recent survey of marketing executives at major U.S. corporations indicates that event marketing offers the greatest ROI, followed by advertising, direct marketing, public relations, sales promotion, and internet advertising (MPI Foundation, 2004). While the investment to communicate via a sporting event can be high, the cost may be offset by the increased amount of time customers are able to spend interacting with a company's products. Hence, event marketing may be seen as a unique opportunity to integrate the firm's other marketing communication activities, such as advertising, public relations, and direct marketing, with a hands-on experience that may be provided by an event. In a sense, event marketing enables customers to interact with the brand.

In the automotive and healthcare industries, event marketing has become an important component in companies' promotional strategies. According to a recent study, 53 percent of automotive executives and 44 percent of healthcare executives view event marketing as an important communication tool, indicating that their ROI from event marketing continues to strengthen (MPI Foundation, 2004). Firms in other industries (e.g., airline, consumer goods) are also beginning to spend a greater proportion of their promotional dollars on event marketing (IEG Sponsorship Report, 2000). However, much like other forms of promotion, issues of measurement, cost, and the clutter of multiple sponsors have been raised by both corporations and researchers.

[P]aying a sponsorship fee to have [a] company's name . . . associated with an event does not guarantee that customers will recognize the sponsorship, let alone positively alter their attitudes or behavior.

EVENT MARKETING OBJECTIVES AND MEASUREMENT

Objectives

Most firms have specific objectives when they choose to engage in event marketing (Stevens, 1984), such as sales, awareness, and image enhancement. However, paying a sponsorship fee to have the company's name merely associated with an event does not guarantee that customers will recognize the sponsorship, let alone positively alter their attitudes or behavior. Although the figures released by some organizations suggest a relationship between sponsorship and increased sales, the same results are not seen by all firms. For instance, up to two-thirds of the sponsors of the 1996 Olympics did not achieve their sales goals (Helyar, 1997). While event marketing may be used to accomplish short-term goals (Bacigalupo, 1996), it is particularly effective when the objective is to enhance corporate identity, awareness, equity, and/or image (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Meenaghan, 1991). Event marketing is also valuable when the firm's objectives are to support the community and reinforce relationships with consumers and other business organizations (Mount and Niro, 1995).

Measurement

Measuring the effectiveness of components in an IMC is challenging (Schultz and Kitchen, 1997; Swain, 2004). For many organizations, it is unclear how event-related marketing activities, in particular, should be evaluated (Abratt and Grobler, 1989; Cornwell, 1995). A study conducted by Gardner and Shuman (1987) finds that nearly half of the companies surveyed did not measure event marketing outcomes. Moreover, 27 percent of the companies were shown to assess effectiveness solely through sales and market share even though, as a communications-oriented activity, event marketing should be evaluated in terms of its relative effectiveness as a promotional element (Javalgi, Traylor, Gross, and Lampman, 1994). Measurement based on level of media coverage may not be appropriate either, because it does not provide information about recall or attitude change (Pham, 1991).

In recent years, the concept of IMC has emerged as the primary method for evaluating a firm's promotional efforts (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998). Rather than evaluate the effects of individual communications, the IMC approach suggests that

the effects of one promotional method cannot be considered in isolation from others. Further, the IMC approach suggests that unlike sales- and profit-oriented approaches, it may be more appropriate to measure event marketing effectiveness using exposure-based methods (Hulks, 1980), tracking measures that measure recall, awareness, and attitudes (McDonald, 1991), and experiments that allow for control of the effects of advertising (Pham, 1991).

The primary challenge for marketers continues to be the difficulty of separating the effects of the sponsorship from the effects of other promotional activities (i.e., spillover effects). In the current study, the sponsor's promotional activities will be examined and effectiveness will be evaluated using (a) spectators' experience with sponsor exhibits, (b) attitudes toward the sponsor and its products, and (c) likelihood of considering the sponsor's products for a future vehicle purchase.

METHOD

Questionnaire

A survey instrument consisting of 18 questions designed to gauge awareness, attitudes, and behaviors was administered to spectators attending the event. The questionnaire consists of several parts. The first part asks participants to identify, from a list of media and interpersonal sources of communication, how they heard about the event. Respondents were also asked to indicate which event-related activities they had experienced while attending the event. Questions designed to determine spectators' attitudes toward the sponsor and its products were formulated, and information was gathered concerning product perceptions and vehicle preferences. Finally, respondents were asked to answer classification questions (age, income, and gender).

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Sample

A total of 565 usable surveys were completed by 189 female and 344 male adults (35.5 percent and 64.5 percent, respectively; 32 missing) in five of the host cities during the six-day event. Attendance reflected the popularity of the sport among men—there were more men than women at the event. Only tourists, i.e., individuals who had traveled more than 30 miles to attend the event, were asked to complete the survey. The average age of respondents was 42.2 years, with a minimum age of 19 and maximum age of 97. One-fourth of those who completed surveys had incomes of \$75,000–\$100,000 per year. Nearly one-third (32.9 percent) had annual incomes greater than \$75,000. Responses to the classification questions suggest that demographic characteristics of spectators at the event were consistent

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample (*n* = 565)

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Age		
19–33	131	24.7
34–40	127	23.9
41–50	139	26.2
51 and older	134	25.2
Gender		
Female	189	35.5
Male	344	64.5
Income		
<\$25,000	30	5.9
\$25,000–\$50,000	86	16.5
\$50,000–\$75,000	103	19.7
\$75,000–\$100,000	131	25.0
>\$100,000	125	23.9

TABLE 2
Frequencies: How Did You Hear about the Event? (Top 5 Sources)

Source of Information	Frequency	Percent of Respondents ("Yes")
Sports publication article	165	29.3%
Friends, relatives, word of mouth	156	27.6%
Newspaper article	148	26.2%
Website article	122	21.6%
TV program	110	19.5%

with the title sponsor’s primary target markets, i.e., buyers aged 35 to 64 with annual incomes of \$50,000–\$80,000 per year (www.eventmarketermag.com). Respondent characteristics are presented in Table 1.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Communication sources

Spectators were asked to identify how they heard about the event. Fourteen sources were provided, including print, broadcast, electronic, and interpersonal sources of information. The frequencies (Table 2) show that the top five sources of information about the event were sports publication articles (identified by 29.3 percent of respondents), friends/relatives/word of mouth (27.6 percent of respondents), newspaper articles (26.2 percent), website articles (21.6 percent), and TV programs (18.5 percent). The remaining sources of information identified as a source of information, and the percentage of respondents answering “yes” were as follows: TV advertisement (8.0 percent), radio program (7.6 percent), other magazine article and magazine advertisement (5.5 percent), radio advertisement (5.0 percent), sponsor promotion (4.8 percent), and other sources (14.9 percent).

Attitude toward sponsor and sponsor’s products

To determine spectators’ perceptions of the title sponsor, frequencies were run and mean responses calculated for each of the following questions: “I like that an automobile manufacturer cares to do more than just build and sell cars and trucks,” and “Having visited the event, my opinion of (automobile manufacturer) has changed for the better.” More than three-fourths (81.3 percent) of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that they like that an auto manufacturer cares about more than just making and selling vehicles. When asked whether their opinion of the automobile manufacturer had changed for the better after experiencing the event, more than half (57.7 percent) of all respondents responded favorably (Table 3).

Experience with sponsor’s exhibits

To better understand the effects of event marketing activities, the data were split based on respondents’ experience with the title sponsor’s exhibits. *T*-tests were performed to determine whether there were any differences in attitude between

TABLE 3
Attitude toward Sponsor

(1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree)	Mean (N = 565)	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>I like that an auto manufacturer cares to do more than just build and sell cars and trucks.</i>	4.33			
Strongly disagree		15	2.7%	2.7%
Disagree		14	2.6%	5.3%
Neutral		73	13.4%	18.7%
Agree		117	21.4%	40.1%
Strongly agree		327	59.9%	100%
<i>Having visited the event, my opinion of (title sponsor) has changed for the better.</i>	3.73			
Strongly disagree		36	6.5%	6.5%
Disagree		16	2.9%	9.5%
Neutral		181	32.9%	42.4%
Agree		145	26.4%	68.7%
Strongly agree		172	31.3%	100%

spectators who had experienced the title sponsor's exhibits and those who had not. As seen in Table 4, respondents who had experienced the exhibits were only marginally more likely ($p < .054$) than those who had not experienced the exhibits to agree that they "like that an auto manufacturer cares to do more than build and sell cars and trucks." The automobile manufacturer's sponsorship of this event was perceived favorably by spectators.

For the opinion question ("my opinion of the title sponsor has changed for the better") a t -test indicated that those who had experienced the sponsor's exhibits had a significantly better opinion of the sponsor than spectators who had not experienced the exhibits ($p < .000$). Hands-on experience with a sponsor's products during the event is an important determinant of how the company and its products are perceived.

The mean response to the question, "As a result of what I've seen/experienced today, I am more likely to consider (automobile manufacturer's product) for my next purchase," was also calculated. With an overall mean of 3.20 (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), more than 40 percent (41.6 percent) of respondents indicated that, as a result of their experience at the event, they were more likely to consider the manufacturer's product for their next purchase (Table 5). When the data were split by experience with the sponsor's exhibits, the mean response was significantly greater ($p < .000$) among those who had experienced the exhibits (mean = 3.60) compared with those who had not (mean = 3.05).

With the data split by experience with the sponsor's exhibits (have/have not experienced), responses to the question, "Which makes and models would you

seriously consider for your next new vehicle purchase," were also examined. One-fourth (25.0 percent) of those who had not experienced the automotive exhibits indicated that their first choice of vehicle would be one of the sponsor's vehicles, compared with more than half (55.7 percent) of those who had experienced the sponsor's exhibits (Table 5). Consistent with the findings concerning spectators' attitudes toward the sponsor and its products, those who had experienced the sponsor's exhibits were more likely to consider buying the sponsor's vehicles than those who had not experienced the exhibits.

Experience with other exhibits

The data were also split on the basis of experience ("have/have not experienced") with other event-related activities, including the sporting event, host

TABLE 4

T-Tests: Attitude toward Sponsor (Split by Experience with Sponsor's Exhibits)

Have You Experienced (title sponsor's) Exhibits?*	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sig.
<i>I like that an auto manufacturer cares to do more than just build and sell cars and trucks.</i>				
No	389	4.29	1.020	.054
Yes	152	4.47	.883	
<i>Having visited the event, my opinion of (title sponsor) has changed for the better.</i>				
No	390	3.62	1.149	.000
Yes	154	4.01	1.042	

* 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree

TABLE 5

T-Test: Likelihood of Purchase (Split by Experience with Sponsor's Exhibits)

Have You Experienced (title sponsor's) Exhibits?*	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sig.
<i>As a result of what I've seen/experienced today, I am more likely to consider (title sponsor's) vehicle for my next purchase.</i>				
No	387	3.05	1.383	.000
Yes	154	3.60	1.218	

* 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree

Spectator experience/lack of experience with the sporting event did not influence responses to either the opinion or likelihood of purchase questions ($p < .964$ and $p < .093$, respectively). Experience with festival activities and healthcare exhibits (festival activities: $p < .813$ and $p < .778$; healthcare exhibits: $p < .492$ and $p < .497$, respectively) also had no effect on spectators' opinions of the sponsor and likelihood of considering its vehicles for purchase (Table 6). Given these findings, it appears that experience with sponsor's products during an event may have an even greater influence on spectators' attitude and vehicle preference than association with a cause, naming rights, signage, and other event-related communications. This suggests that interactivity and opportunities for personal interaction with a sponsor's products offer benefits unavailable to an impersonal sponsorship relationship.

DISCUSSION

Investing in event marketing

Although the title sponsor for this event does not reveal how much it spends each year on event marketing, according to the firm's director of global marketing, since 1998 the firm's event marketing budget has increased more than "ten-fold" (*Event Marketer*, 2003, p. 1). During the same interview, he also indicated

city festival activities, and healthcare exhibits that were provided by the event's beneficiary. To separate the effects of experience with the sponsor's exhibits from other activities and exhibits at the event, only the responses from respondents who had not experienced the sponsor's exhibits were selected for analysis.

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TABLE 6

Attitude toward Sponsor (Split by Experience with Event Activities) (among Respondents Having No Experience with Sponsor's Exhibits)

Activity Experienced*	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sig.
<i>Sporting event</i>				
• Having visited the event, my opinion of (title sponsor) has changed for the better.				
No	220	3.62	1.147	.964
Yes	170	2.62	1.156	
• As a result of what I've seen/experienced today, I am more likely to consider (title sponsor's) vehicle for my next purchase.				
No	217	2.94	1.393	.093
Yes	170	3.18	1.362	
<i>Festival activities</i>				
• Having visited the event, my opinion of (title sponsor) has changed for the better.				
No	209	3.61	1.139	.813
Yes	181	3.64	1.164	
• As a result of what I've seen/experienced today, I am more likely to consider (title sponsor's) vehicle for my next purchase.				
No	207	3.07	1.374	.778
Yes	180	3.03	1.396	
<i>Healthcare exhibits</i>				
• Having visited the event, my opinion of (title sponsor) has changed for the better.				
No	313	3.60	1.151	.492
Yes	77	3.70	1.148	
• As a result of what I've seen/experienced today, I am more likely to consider (title sponsor's) vehicle for my next purchase.				
No	312	3.03	1.386	.497
Yes	75	3.15	1.372	

* 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree

that the company's top priority is to increase opportunities for consumers to "touch and feel" the brand (p. 2). Results

of the current study provide support for this company's approach to event marketing.

The findings indicate that event sponsorship leads to favorable perceptions of a sponsoring firm and its brands, the importance of which is already well established (Johnson and Zinkhan, 1990). Event marketing should be viewed as an important component of an IMC strategy, rather than a stand-alone communication tool. Synergy is crucial as a strategic component. The wide variety of events and promotional activities available heightens the need for a synergistic approach to the organization's communication strategy. In addition, event marketing should also be viewed from a tactical standpoint, because personal interaction with the sponsor's products during the event appears to have enhanced the brand's personality, a desirable trait in equity building (Aaker, 1996; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Gwinner, 1997; Keller, 1993).

While the study did not directly measure purchase behavior, favorable responses to the consideration ("would seriously consider") and preferred choice ("preferred choice for next vehicle purchase") questions indicate there may be short-term gains that result from this company's event marketing activities. While it is fairly common to see little or no change in a company's sales immediately following its sponsorship of an event (Gillam, 1996), purchase intentions have previously been linked to event sponsorship (Kennett, Sneath, and Erdmann, 1998). A company that sees an immediate change in sales during and after sponsoring an event might expect to realize an even greater change in the months and years that follow. Given that survey respondents indicated they were more likely to consider and prefer the sponsor's automobiles after experiencing the event and exhibits, the sponsor should be able to leverage the sponsorship over time.

The current study provides support for event marketing's ability to positively

change, or at least alter, perceptions and behavior. While the relationship between all of the sponsor's communication activities was not measured, the findings suggest that event-related communications can be beneficial to accomplishing a firm's objectives. Furthermore, it appears that personal interaction with the sponsor's products during the event may lead to more favorable outcomes than sponsorship alone. Finally, first-time event attendees may be better candidates for persuasion than seasoned (i.e., returning) attendees. As such, the "newness" of an event has the potential to influence first-time attendees' desires to become involved with a sponsor's brand (i.e., engage in relationship-seeking behavior), which could result in more favorable brand attitudes and increased purchase intentions. If the "newness effect" among first-time event attendees continues to be documented, there are important implications for sponsors and marketers of annual or recurring events. Clearly, encouraging first-time attendance and the use of targeted promotions to provide incentives for attendance would become a priority.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important for firms to understand the relationship between and the outcomes of their various communication activities. While event marketing may be beneficial for firms in the automotive industry, it is unclear from this study whether results would be the same across industries and/or product categories. For example, products that are highly complex may not benefit through the informal interaction that is likely to occur during an event, particularly one that is entertainment oriented. In addition, event marketing by manufacturers of products with which consumers have frequent contact may not be equally beneficial, in terms of outcomes, because customers may have previously

been exposed to product-related communications and/or interactive opportunities.

It is difficult to separate the effects of event-related marketing activities from the effects of other promotions to which a consumer may have been exposed prior to the event (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998; Pham, 1991). McDonald (1991) asserts that customers who are already favorably disposed toward an event and its sponsors are most likely to attend. Therefore, the extent to which an event—independent of the sponsor's other promotional activities—impacts attitudes and purchase intentions is unclear. In addition, Pham (1991) suggests that those who wish to study events should use an experimental design to overcome the limitations of survey research, and future research that incorporates test-retest measures (before and after the event) is likely to provide even greater assurance that association with an event can influence opinions.

Another limitation of the study involves the potential for self-selection bias among exhibit attendees. Did the exhibits make potential customers more interested in the sponsor's automobiles, or did they merely attract those who were already interested? Individuals who already liked the brand may have gone out of their way to attend the sponsor's exhibits. Alternatively, those who attended the event may have developed more favorable attitudes and intentions toward the sponsoring brand. Because the study did not attempt to demonstrate causality, future research should endeavor to do so. Understanding the nature of this relationship could prove invaluable to event marketing theory and practice.

Future research should also attempt to establish a comprehensive model of communication to help organizations understand when it is most appropriate to incorporate event marketing into the promotional mix. Not all sponsors are likely

to benefit from their association with an event, nor do all event-related activities lead to desired outcomes. In addition, the relationship between event-related communications and outcomes should be examined longitudinally, because there may be a delay between the event and short-term goals such as sales and market share, as well as long-term effects of enhanced image. It would also be interesting to explore the lag time that a company should expect to see prior to realizing any rewards from its event marketing activities. A final consideration would be to examine each of the variables that are controllable by the sponsoring organization to determine the relationship between and relative importance of each element in the firm's marketing communications mix. **JAR**

JULIE Z. SNEATH is an associate professor of marketing at the University of South Alabama. She holds a Ph.D. in marketing from Georgia State University. Her publications, research interests, and consulting activities are primarily in the areas of sponsorship and event marketing. Dr. Sneath has published articles in *Health Marketing Quarterly*, the *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, the *International Sports Journal*, and the *Journal of Customer Service in Marketing and Management*.

R. ZACHARY FINNEY is an assistant professor of marketing at the University of South Alabama. He earned his Ph.D. in marketing from the University of Alabama in 2001. His research has been accepted for publication in numerous journals including the *Journal of Business Research*, the *Journal of Management Education*, and *Marketing Management Journal*. In 2003, Dr. Finney and two colleagues won the Steven J. Shaw Award for the Outstanding Conference Paper at the Society for Marketing Advances Annual Conference in New Orleans. His primary area of scholarly research is marketing strategy.

ANGELINE GRACE CLOSE (MMC, ABJ Advertising) is a Ph.D. candidate in marketing at the University of Geor-

gia's Terry College of Business. Her dissertation is on the role of information technologies with marketplace activities, chaired by George Zinkhan. She was also trained in UGA's Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communications. She is currently an assistant professor at North Georgia College & State University and is joining the marketing faculty of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in August 2006.

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