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## Sponsorship report card: Experts grade the retail gasoline category

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After a major wave of consolidation, the four market leaders in this category — BP, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil and Shell — are typically within a point or two of each other in terms of market share. The companies are huge and moving the needle on market share for any one of them is truly like turning a battleship. And their sports marketing, accordingly, tends to reflect more inertia than effectiveness.



These big companies require big sports marketing platforms to be at their best. I miss Shell's longstanding brand association with professional golf (now down to one event) and Texaco/Havoline's eight-year Olympic partnership (Texaco and Havoline got divvied up before the end of that sponsorship by Shell and Chevron).

Instead we are left with regional platforms like BP's naming-rights sponsorship (Arco Arena) and ConocoPhillips' Big 12 and Kansas State sponsorships. I thought ExxonMobil was stepping up to a big platform when I saw their Olympic-themed ad on NBC during the Torino Games. Unfortunately, ExxonMobil is not an official sponsor and the ad, instead, simply made them an official ambusher. Surely, they have a marketing budget big enough to play by the rules! Therefore, the big four rate no better than a B- in my book.

The next tier of companies, though, (and no doubt they are trying harder) fare much better.

Chevron, for example, latched onto the mighty NFL and drove in-store through a Seattle Seahawks promotion and got a double hit on both its gasoline and oil (Havoline) brands. (Grade B+).

Citgo has hooked itself to the highly popular Bassmaster series and has developed a nicely integrated program with title sponsorship of the series and two sub-tours, endorsements of star anglers, co-sponsor promotions, and entertainment of gasoline resellers at tour sites. Their "Citgo Racing to the Kentucky Derby" series of 12 races leading up to the Kentucky Derby could really stand out this year with no Triple Crown sponsor. And with two CITGO "blue" monster wall signs (Boston and Houston), its Baseball Hall of Fame deal and rumors of a major MLB sponsorship, the company is at the top of my grade scale in terms of integrated sports sponsorships. Give them an A.

Normally I would discount motorsports sponsorship for a company in this category since it comes across as too obvious. However, Sunoco's 10-year NASCAR partnership, where fan loyalty is at the top of the charts and where every driver has to wear the Sunoco patch, with supporting sponsorship at more tracks than any other company in the category, special Rookie of the Year and regional racing series entitlements and awards, cause-related programs (with Petty Enterprises), and motorsports diversity program leadership merit Philadelphia-based Sunoco a strong A.

**Overall grade: B+**