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And now a word from our patrons....

When the age of mass media dawned, before advertising entered its fabled golden age in the late 50s and 60s, sponsorship was advertising. Radio created a mass audience, homogenizing cultural output, creating superstars, and advertisers wanted in. Direct commercial interruption – advertising – was felt to be too intrusive, so brands instead owned and controlled the content itself, indicated by the names: Champion Spark Plug Hour, The Voice of Firestone. Advertising agencies created them, as they later did for television.

Content was created to aggregate certain kinds of audiences to sell certain kinds of products. The relationship changed – networks wanted control of the content, and advertisers found it increasingly expensive to underwrite shows themselves. Thus, spot advertising, a model taken from magazines, was born.

Sponsorship as we think of it today has a much older heritage. Ancient Athenians would put up the funding for cultural and sporting events to make them accessible to the common man. In return they would get their name in stone. Royalty and aristocracy would provide patronage, for a combination of altruistic and image reasons, that allowed art to be created and events for the masses to happen. The nature of this commercial relationship was culturally defined – it was never a simple commercial transaction. It was, for want of a better word, subtler than simply sticking your name on something. A patron's sophistication and grace were reflected in how the patronage would manifest.

Today, brands provide patronage, but often forget it's not just their money that should be evident. When we think of sponsorships, we tend to think of events or properties. Inherent in the word is the idea that the event being sponsored exists exogenous to the brand – otherwise it is a brand event, not a sponsored one. The patronage should be fitting. Let's call this strategic coherence. The Vans Warped Tour makes sense – skate brand for skater music. However it can also be used to create relevance: Sprite sponsoring the X-Games establishes, rather than reinforces, Sprite's positioning. But beyond that, a patronage property should be treated with respect, and the brand's involvement should demonstrate its taste, its point of view. It should reflect the role of the brand in the world

**the brand's involvement should demonstrate its point of view... reflect the role of the brand in the world and its customers' lives**

and its customers' lives – adding to the experience if appropriate, remaining discrete if not. When Pabst Blue Ribbon

sponsored Bike messenger parties and events it did not slap banners over everything, it was simply supporting a culture that had championed its beer.

In almost every arena of culture, brand involvement is now present and necessary. Decrying the commercialization of culture is pointless – someone has to pay for it, especially if it is to reach larger audiences. Instead, as brand collaborators, we should all endeavor to ensure brand patronage demonstrates intelligence as well as assets.

**Faris is EVP, Chief Technology Strategist at McCann Erickson New York, striving to better integrate brands, people and technology. Previously he spent 5 years as the 'Digital Ninja' at communication strategy shop Naked Communications.**

**Faris' 'Talent Imitates, Genius Steals' blog was placed by Campaign in their top ten advertising blogs in the UK and is currently the number 2 advertising planning blog in the world. He was also named a Campaign 'Face to Watch' in January 2008.**