CultureCase

The potential dangers of corporate sponsorship

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Summary

There has been a great deal of discussion in the cultural sector about the types of relationships that exist (and should exist) between cultural institutions and corporate donors. Such relationships have consequences both for the corporations and the cultural partners. Using the example of theatres in Russia, this research shows that there are reputational costs for arts organisations that choose to uncritically embed themselves with corporate donors.

The Golden Mask prize in Russian theatre

The paper uses the prize to indicate a certain level of elite theatre peer recognition. The festival is part of the theatre calendar, and the judging panel are entirely composed of theatre people. It is not anything imposed from the state or the corporate world. The paper used data from 449 theatres from the period between 2004 and 2011, and examined how they fared in the Golden Mask competition. 2004 follows a key turning point in Russian cultural policy: with corporations responding to calls by the President that they should do more to support culture.

Corporate sponsorship buys access and influence among local politicians

The corporate donors were able to lever personal relationships and local legitimacy by association with local theatres. The paper shows how theatres need to be especially careful in their management of relationships with corporations from 'tainted' industries such as oil, gas and mining.

The research found empirical evidence that organisations suffered negative consequences for sustained relationships with corporations from tainted industries. The theatres were punished for stepping far outside established norms of values and procedures: corporate money was distracting at best, corrupting at worst. Theatres were able to better mitigate the ill effects of those donor relationships when they were episodic and project-based, rather than sustained at an institution level.

Keywords

interview **theatre** **reputation** **philanthropy** **Russia**

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