

Tango Squads: How Adidas used influencer marketing and dark social to boost authenticity and engagement

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This event report describes how Adidas, the sportswear manufacturer, utilised influencer marketing and dark social to boost engagement internationally through its Tango Squads.

- The programme was designed to influence and drive football culture in order to increase positive brand sentiment.
- Seventy percent of Adidas' online referrals came via dark social and the company wanted to harness this.
- Tango Squad was a small online membership, which gave out exclusive football content.
- Adidas realised that it was more efficient to rely on multiple lower level influencers than single celebrity level influencers to increase reach; it was important to the company that content was delivered quickly to the intended audience.

Adidas Tango Squads bring together hyper-connected people who are all passionate about football, giving them exclusive access to events, experiences and player meets – "things that football lovers are all interested in, but struggle to achieve" was the way Florian Alt, senior director of global brand communication at Adidas, put it.

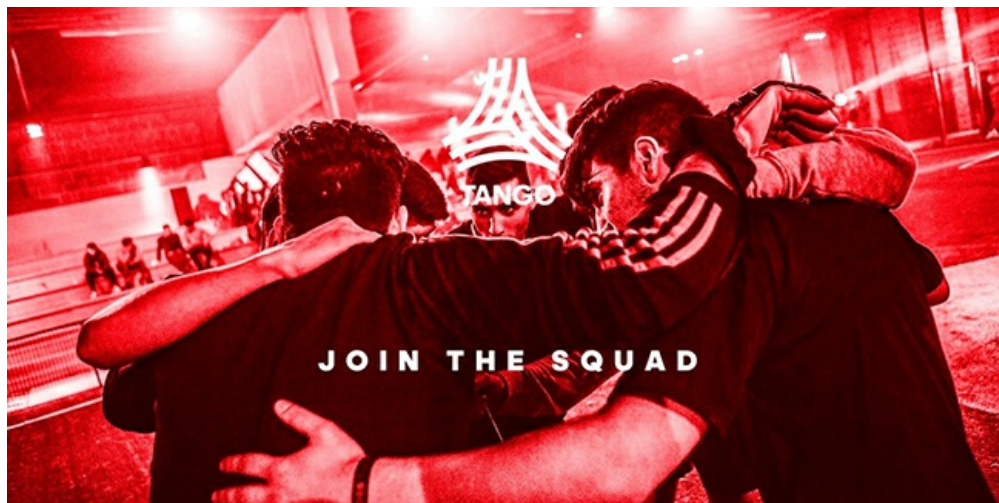
He was explaining to an audience at the Festival of Marketing, an event held in London in October 2016, the ground-breaking approach to influencer marketing sports brand Adidas is taking, and it may hold the key to one of modern-day marketing's Holy Grails: **dark social**.

"We in the Tango Squad project have a great opportunity to do things differently", Alt explained. This means a new way of creating content, and a new way of speaking to people. It also means re-assessing what 'influence' means nowadays, and recognising the potential value for brands in the private sphere. In short, starting again on content and influencer marketing – "being much better and more tailored to what they expect and want from a brand," Alt said.

The aim of Tango Squads is simple: to influence and drive football culture. "We hope that we can influence them in a way that we will see a positive brand sentiment whenever they talk about football," Alt explained.

The target audience is people who are creators who want to play lots of football and do their best: "It's the people who are making a difference in any sport they are practising in," Alt expanded. Specifically, that means 16-19 year old football-obsessed kids. Football is 'always on' for this group, not just when they are playing. "Anything that is going on in their minds is related to football," Alt continued; "they are constantly looking for what's out there, and what is the latest and greatest in football."

They are also super-connected among themselves. "They are constantly socially active and sharing the stuff with their friends and peers", and usually this means 'dark social' – spaces like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Line – where brands are not invited.



Dark social is an important focus for brands like Adidas as its research shows that globally around 70% of online referrals come via dark social – and the rate is even higher in the UK at 75%. But those figures are averages; in the hyper-connected target group Adidas believes the proportion of online referrals coming from dark social is even greater.

"That's the point where we come in, to facilitate those conversations", Alt explained. "With this connection [Tango Squads] they get access to content, stories and news that they wouldn't get anywhere else.

"They want to be seen as the guys who are in the know. They want to be the guys who everybody goes to if they want to know something in relation to football."

This means that membership of a Tango Squad is a win-win situation: Adidas gets access to the social networks of participants through channels it usually does not have a voice in, and members get exclusive news and information that help to boost their social status and reputation as experts about football within their social networks.

Each Tango Squad aims to have no more than 500 members, and each Squad is based in a big city: London and Paris were home to the first Tango Squads. "Everything we do, we focus on first and foremost on key cities," said Alt, which is where the hyper-connected football people the brands wants to reach mostly live.

"This is a bit of a different way to approach influencers," he said. "They will give it longevity, and more importantly they give it authenticity.

"You can of course take a piece of content and seed it to one global influencer," he continued, "but instead of giving it to one person you give it to 500 kids, and every one of them has 2,000 followers." And this different approach to influencer marketing adds buckets of authenticity: "The reach will be the same, but the influence will

be greater."

Some of the exclusive content and experiences to which Tango Squads get access include meeting players, training with players, receiving products before general release, and helping to create Adidas content.

"[They're] invited to events that only VIPs usually get access to," Alt said. "That's why it's so worthwhile for these kids to be part of the Tango Squads."

Tango Squads have allowed Adidas to introduce elements of co-creation to its new products. It started by sharing new products with the Squads before general release and asking them what they liked or did not like.

"In many instances they think differently to how we do in the head office," Alt explained, and this has led to Adidas making changes to new products and adapting marketing tactics. "You are giving up a little bit of opportunity or keys to your brands," Alt admitted, "but our experiences have been more than only positive." So much so that Adidas now shares ideas and new products with Tango Squads much earlier in the development process, using these highly engaged consumers as part of product research.

And again, it's not just the company that benefits from this relationship: "The kids really appreciate having the opportunity to engage with a brand and tell the brand what they like and think is cool or not cool," Alt said.

"They are really having a feeling that they are speaking on eye level with you", Alt continued. "They see the impact of what they play back to us." And that helps to foster a closer brand relationship with the Tango Squad, removes the 'top down' feeling and means that when they respond, Squad members aren't just one of millions tweeting at the brand: "We really listen to what the kids say."

The Tango Squad also feeds Adidas' social media objectives, first to be a personal brand, and second to have the 'hottest' social currency. In terms of the latter, that means Adidas focuses on engagement and shares rather than achieving mass reach. Tango Squads help the company understand what its audiences are interested in and how that is changing, and then refine its approach to other forms of marketing.

The process to join a Tango Squad is simple: fill in an online form providing some personal details, and then Adidas does a background check including age, location and the extent of the applicant's social profile to check they are hyper-connected.

If they pass these checks, applicants are then added to their local Tango Squad messenger list. Each list is managed by local Adidas teams, and members are able to join in group discussions and one-to-one chats. As soon as they are added to the group, Squad members begin receiving information about experiences and opportunities.

The aim is to "fuel their social media arsenal", Alt said. Often, members save the content shared through their Tango Squad and use it later when it becomes relevant to their friends, helping them reconfirm their status as an information source about football.

Speed is especially important to Adidas, as Alt explained: "We want to be a responsive brand. We want to talk to consumers in the moment when it's relevant to them and they are having a conversation about football" – and Tango Squads help them achieve that.

"The whole Tango Squad experience is mobile optimised, and mobile first," Alt added. This means that most video is shot in portrait mode, with a more intimate feel.

Exclusive content and events Tango Squads have enjoyed so far include:

- A short video from Paul Pogba, already an Adidas partner, when he joined Manchester United. This was initially shared only with Tango Squad members.
- An opportunity for the Paris Squad to win a new Real Madrid football shirt before it was in stores. The competition was announced with a video produced by a rapper, blending culture and football.
- Meeting players – including two lucky Squad members who met Lionel Messi and "are now probably brand fans and brand advocates for the rest of their lives", Alt observed.

Adidas shares its exclusive content and opportunities through dark social, but the Tango Squad then shares in both dark and public social media – and often create their own football and Adidas related social content.

At present, there are 15 Tango Squads in 11 markets, with 100-250 people in each Squad – and a target of 500 people per Squad.

Alt wasn't sure where Tango Squads would go next. "It's so fresh, we don't want to put too many limitations around it from the very beginning," he explained. For now, Adidas intends to focus on co-creation and allowing participants to influence what happens next. "It could be that this is redefining influencer marketing," Alt finished, "It could be more of an insider campaign for NPD. Or it could be rolled out to become much bigger."

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