

B®AND IN ACTION

THE

ACTIVATION IMPERATIVE



PUTTING
ACTIVATION AT
THE HEART
OF FOOTBALL
SPONSORSHIP

CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION

Sponsorship works best when brands and rights holders collaborate to create inspiring activation programmes that add value to the basic contracted rights. These days, it's just not enough to rely on the traditional assets of branding, perimeter boards and corporate hospitality. Only by pushing boundaries with truly compelling fan engagement activity do both parties get more from the partnership.

Rights holders know this. Sponsors know this. It's sound marketing logic. And yet, through our exclusive research with Premier League clubs, we have discovered that activation is frequently missing from the agenda. As a result, sponsorship deals across the commercial football world are not being fully leveraged.

In this paper, Brand in Action publishes the results from a series of in-depth interviews conducted with some of the key figures in football club sponsorship, including partnership managers at eight Premier League clubs of different sizes and profiles.

WE REVEAL:

- The absence of activation from sponsorship sales negotiations
- Why a strategic approach is vital
- How activation can bring fans closer to brands
- Why content is still king
- How the wrong resource can hamper activation
- The importance of measuring activity
- What good looks like – brilliant activation campaigns

WE ALSO INTRODUCE THE BRAND IN ACTION 'ACTIVATION ROAD MAP' – OUR SIX-STEP PLAN TO MAKE ACTIVATION WORK FOR BRANDS AND RIGHTS HOLDERS.

THE STATE OF SPONSORSHIP TODAY

Sponsorship decisions have greatly evolved in recent years. With the huge visibility and value a brand can achieve from associating with the right sports property, deals done on the golf course are, by and large, a thing of the past.

With rights being salami sliced, and assets packaged to serve specific global markets, the biggest brand sponsors are becoming increasingly savvy in screening opportunities.

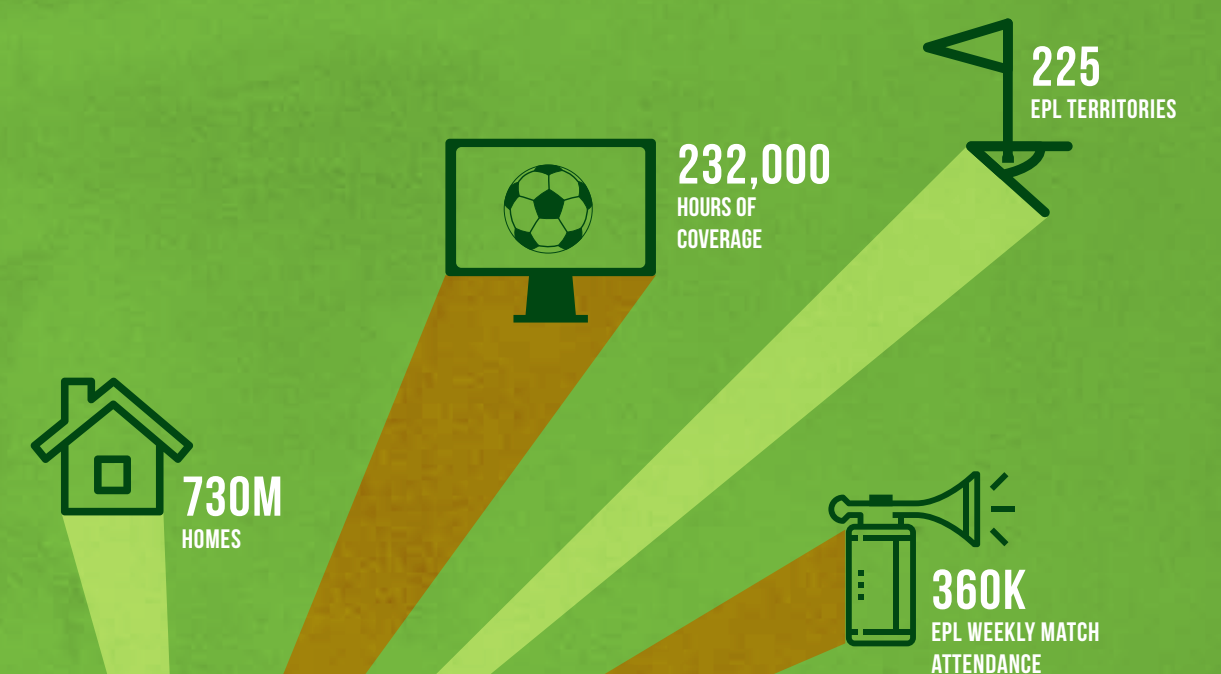
THE MAIN PULL, OF COURSE, IS THE VAST TV EXPOSURE THAT THE ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE OFFERS:

225 territories, 730 million homes, an in-home audience of three billion and over 230,000 hours of coverage*. This helps explain the exponential rise in the cost of sponsorship – the total value of EPL shirt deals for the 2016-17 season is £226.5m, or £11.35m per club – representing a 126% rise over the last six years^

* <http://fanresearch.premierleague.com/global-media-platform.aspx>

^ <http://www.sportingintelligence.com/2016/07/31/premier-league-shirt-deals-rise-to-record-226-5m-high-310701/>

WITH THESE NUMBERS TO CRUNCH WHEN CONSIDERING A DEAL WITH AN EPL CLUB, IT'S NO WONDER A MORE SOPHISTICATED ANALYTICAL APPROACH IS REQUIRED.



Why then, with such big investments and the massive opportunities these present to brands and right holders, is activation so often being overlooked?

OVER THE NEXT FEW PAGES, WE EXPLORE THE MAIN ISSUES AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ADDRESS THEM...

DON'T LET ACTIVATION BECOME AN AFTERTHOUGHT

THE ISSUE:

For many of the clubs we spoke to, activation discussions only begin once the rights deals are done, and budgets are largely committed. There is a rush to the line to get the deal signed, then the realisation dawns that the hard work has only just begun.

The principal cause seems to be the separation of the sponsorship sales teams and the marketing teams. Therefore, the people tasked with – and usually heavily incentivised to – bring in the deals are often not coordinating with the marketing teams, i.e. those tasked with actually implementing the deal once it's in the bag.

“I think this is one of the biggest issues in the industry at the moment – the people who do the deals with football clubs aren't the people who are thinking about the wider objectives for the brand, day-to-day.”

Another club official told us:

“As a responsible club, you should be talking about activation. It's not just about securing the deal.”

While another bemoaned the fact that activation:

“...only starts the day after the deal is done.”

That said, there were clear differences between clubs at the top and bottom of the food chain, with one of the lower ranked teams commenting:

“At the very top of the game, I suspect quite a lot of negotiations aren't just about the fee – but also about the budget to activate that will add value to both parties.”

There's also an understandable reluctance to draw attention to the budget required over and above the initial sponsorship outlay – the industry rule of thumb is that, whatever the value of the deal, the same again should be set aside for activation.

“I think you need to have your contractual spend – and then the same again, for activation.”

But in a bid to get it over the line, sales teams can be forgiven for not wanting to inflate the total potential cost.

“I think the budget planning can be problematic – brands may be used to shelling out for media rights, but to ask them for the same again for activation can cause an intake of breath. It's getting there with the bigger, more experienced brands, but there's still a sense that they don't immediately see the sense in committing that much money.”

THE SOLUTION:

1. Ensure activation is introduced early into the sales process.

“We now have our partnership sales and our partnership marketing team operating under the same leadership, which has transformed the way we work with our sponsorship partners.”

2. Help advise potential sponsors on the important role activation plays once they're on board. For example, it was encouraging to hear from one club that:

“For the pitch, we would brainstorm clever activation ideas and use them as part of a proposal to a particular brand or sector.”

3. Be up front about the investment needed once the partnership is underway.

“You want it to be 50-50, ideally. But some brands have no idea that you need to spend after the initial outlay on the sponsorship.”

4. Rights owners themselves need to have a clear proposition; not just brands. A club must be able to define its own brand story in order to differentiate itself from other properties. A compelling club narrative will attract like-minded prospect brands and inspire them to create memorable activations that will engage fans emotionally and behaviourally.

TAKE A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO ACTIVATION PLANNING

THE ISSUE:

Time and again, we heard from top Premier League clubs that sponsors aren't approaching activation with a strategic mindset. It's a curious situation, given that, for all other major components of a business's marketing plan, it would be inconceivable to spend large chunks of budget without a rigorous strategic planning process.

Would a multi-million pound TV campaign or NPD budget be signed off without a clearly defined plan for creation and execution?

And yet, that often seems to be the case when it comes to sponsorship and its activation – seemingly the poor cousin in the marketing mix family. A typical response from one club:

“Some businesses just want to be aligned with something, without thinking it through – but later on, that throws up more questions than answers.”

Furthermore, at least two of the clubs we spoke to questioned the ability of brands to articulate their objectives from the deal.

“Some brands haven't got a clear idea what they want out of the sponsorship. So, during negotiations, it's our job to help them visualise a partnership where activation is an essential ingredient.”

“Brands need to really understand what they want to get out of a partnership – and sometimes they're not very good at communicating it.”

THE SOLUTION:

The feedback from the clubs was clear – sponsors should make choices on who they partner with and how they activate, based on a clearly defined strategy aligned to the brand's objectives. Clubs told us:

“Have a clear grip of your objectives, understand who you're talking to and always take a partnership approach.”

Another way of thinking about this is to switch from the traditional model of a rights-led strategy and, instead, consider what you want to achieve from the partnership – and then decide how your rights can be activated to reach that aim.

“The days of just stamping your brand on a shirt are gone, generally. It's much more about the relevance of your story, the touchpoints and activation.”

IN FORMING A STRATEGIC PLAN, AREAS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:



HOW ACTIVATION CAN HELP BALANCE COMMERCIAL INTERESTS WITH FAN SENSITIVITIES

THE ISSUE:

In such a competitive sponsorship market place, clubs can face difficult choices when tempted with commercially beneficial deals that might be viewed dimly by the fan base – either due to the profile of the brand involved or the nature of their product or service.

Recently, there has been some discontent among fans about the glut of online casino and gambling brands now splashed across various Premier League shirts.

Further back, other examples spring to mind, not least Wonga's tie-up with Newcastle, which was not warmly received by sections of the Toon Army.

Certain clubs we spoke to claimed they would think twice before associating with brands likely to be judged negatively by fans. One partnership manager commented:

“ We have a manifesto of club values and vision – and that's what we base our sponsorship strategy around.”

Ideally, every club aims to maintain its integrity with a selective approach to who they partner with. Financial reality, however, means that sometimes that perfect fit isn't always possible.

THE SOLUTION:

Fans are generally pragmatic creatures and understand that sponsorship revenue is necessary for their club to progress and be competitive. But they also want to see brands give something back and contribute to the wider organisation – and this is where activation can play an important role in engaging fans.

“ It's not just about the brand exposure, it's about building a true relationship.”

Carefully judged activation programmes can help change perceptions of a brand. Communicating a more human, emotive brand message can help reposition the brand – and by association, the club – in a more positive light.

This explains why brands regularly undertake cause-related activations and align themselves with the club's own charities.

SAMSUNG 'DREAM THE BLUES'

Samsung's 'Dream the Blues' campaign with Chelsea set out to help children aged 9 to 13 achieve their football dreams, by running a range of youth training camps across eight different countries.

Since its inception in 2007, over 5,000 children have benefited from the scheme, spreading the message far and wide that the club and its sponsor are committed to fans and their futures.

MILLWALL & PROSTATE CANCER UK



In an effort to show fans they were a family club that cared about the community, Millwall waived all commercial fees for Prostate Cancer UK. They featured the charity's logos on their shirts, providing information in their publications and at their ground, and had healthcare professionals on hand to offer advice during games.

KUMHO TYRE 'PLAY SAFER'



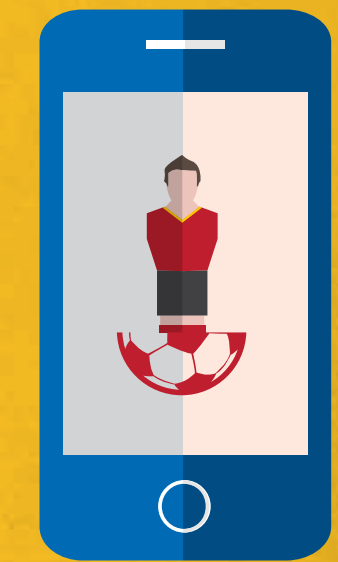
Kumho Tyre, Manchester United and Greater Manchester Police all collaborated for the launch of 'Play Safer', a road safety initiative that helped children develop essential road awareness while at the same time sharpening up their football skills.

The activity strengthened the club's links with fans and helped the Korean tyre manufacturer become known globally as the brand that 'makes a difference'.

TURKISH AIRLINES EURO 2016 APP

Sponsors can also use activation to improve the overall experience of the game for fans – for example, by providing new and innovative ways to interact with their beloved team.

During Euro 2016, Turkish Airlines sponsored the tournament app with live match notifications, as well as player and team info.





CONNECT WITH TECHNOLOGY, ENGAGE WITH GREAT CONTENT

THE ISSUE:

There's a common perception that big activation programmes rely on big data – to disperse and amplify the activity, rights holders must have vast fan databases. For instance, two of the smaller EPL clubs told us:

“Across our digital and social media platforms, the numbers aren't big enough – they just don't stack up.”

“When you look at it from the brand's perspective, they can spend their money at a club with a database of probably 60-odd million – and then there's us, with a database of a few hundred thousand.”

So when it comes to activation, clubs lower down the food chain can struggle to convince their partners of its value when much of their data is limited and fairly localised.

THE SOLUTION:

The proliferation of digital media channels means clubs should not feel hamstrung in their ability to put sponsors' activations in front of fans. Technology has fuelled the evolution of sports marketing and progressive brands have harnessed new channels to implant themselves in the lives of the modern fan.

But it's only with great content ideas that a sponsor can truly engage with consumers – and compelling creative campaigns needn't be the preserve of just the big clubs.

Fans these days are less concerned with expensive production values – what turns them on is the chance to go behind the scenes, see players in a different context and forge an ever-closer bond with their club.

Sponsors can use this to their advantage by making sure maximum value is extracted from the crown jewel of the sponsorship inventory – player rights. A day with a player can produce multiple content pieces that can be used tactically over a campaign.

“It's about humanising the players – fans want access to players, to what makes them tick, insights into their lives and their personality – that's gold dust. Video content is the key for the next couple of years.”

“Great content doesn't necessarily need to be vastly expensive. It just needs to be done right and then promoted through the right channels – ideally, amplified by the players' own accounts. They can help start the conversation.”

So, while sponsors should always be looking for the next big technology or media platform, the critical task is still to produce smart, creative communications that cut through and resonate with the target audience.

This combination of the right channels with the right content will help extend the reach of the rights holder, as well as the sponsor, enabling clubs to grow their databases beyond their traditional fan base and enhance the value of their properties.

“Any brand that's even close to sports sponsorship should realise it's about creativity, innovation and engagement.”



GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE AND PARTNERS TO MAKE IT WORK

THE ISSUE:

Another common theme from our conversations with EPL clubs relates to the people involved in delivering activation. It seems that the responsibility for implementing activation programmes rarely lies with a dedicated resource. As one of our EPL respondents put it:

“Sponsorship falls between the cracks of advertising and PR – often an add-on to someone’s job.”

In addition, some clubs felt that the staff they deal with often don’t have direct experience in sports and sports marketing. This can be an issue, given it’s a specialist area where an understanding of the unique behaviours and codes of sports fans is essential if a brand wants to appear authentic and credible to its audience. As one respondent succinctly said:

“You need to speak the same language as fans.”

THE SOLUTION:

For sponsors, getting the right resource assigned to delivering activation activity is vital. This applies to the in-house marketing team just as much as collaborating with the right external agencies. Activation needs input from a broad range of skill sets – strategists and planners, creatives, technologists, developers and project managers.

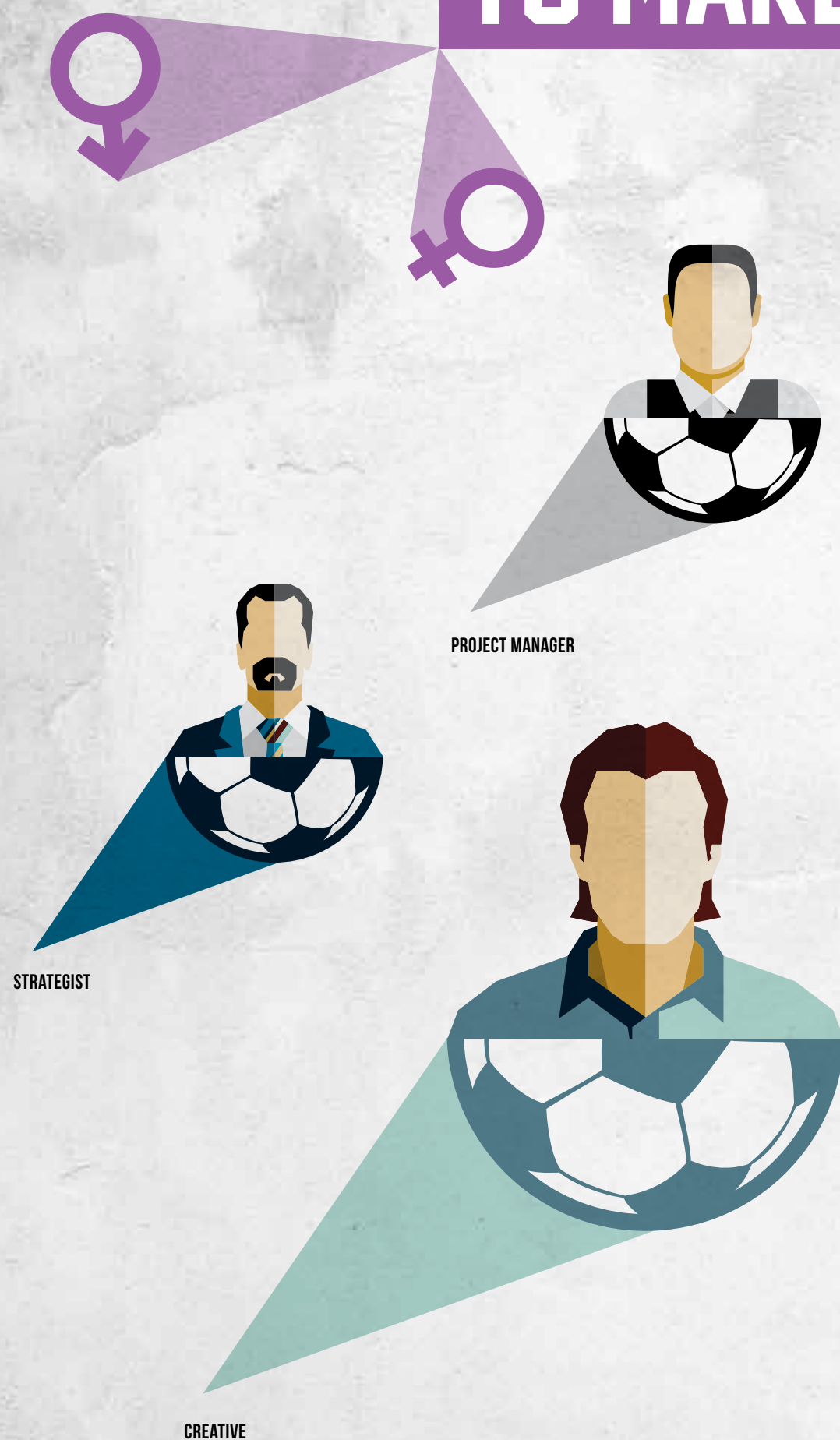
Resource permitting, brands should also consider implanting their people into the club to kick-start activity and make things happen. One club talked about their positive experience of this decision:

“We actively encourage our partners to come and work with us here. One of our partners actually has a full-time person on site, working out of our office. People treat this individual as a member of the club’s staff and, as a result, you can see that the engagement for that brand is substantially better than for the others.”

Beyond the marketing team, delivering great campaigns needs the support of the playing staff too. Player appearances usually form a core component of the rights inventory, so it’s up to clubs to grant access – obviously, without affecting performance! One partnership manager commented:

“We’ve had to work very hard with our playing staff to make them engage with our business community. It’s only now become apparent how important this is to the club as a whole.”

In summary, working collaboratively with both internal and external resources fosters bigger and better ideas – clubs, brands and agencies all pulling in the same direction can achieve great results for all concerned.



KEEP MONITORING TO MEASURE ROI

THE ISSUE:

Critical to the winning – and later, the renewal – of sponsorship deals is the ability of clubs and brands to measure the impact of the partnership over its lifetime.

This can be a difficult area. The majority of the clubs we interviewed use established consultancies such as Nielsen Sports and Kantar, as well as the Premier League themselves, to help them assign value to sponsorship media value.

However, beyond the topline value of the basic rights package, clubs and brands should always try to put in place the ongoing measurement of the impact of activation. Because, as one club told us:

“True ROI is the great unknown within sports negotiation.”

THE SOLUTION:

Here are a few suggestions based on the experiences of the Premier League sponsorship execs we spoke to:

1. Good measurement starts with setting out clearly defined objectives and KPIs at the very start of a relationship. Again, not always that straightforward...

“We’re in year three with one of our global partners and their objectives seem to change on a fortnightly basis.”

“It’s absolutely key to have an immersion session when you’re getting the partnership off the ground.”

2. Use a variety of different tools to supplement Nielsen Sports analysis:

– Several clubs ‘listen in’ to supporter forums for a barometer on fan opinion.

– Run online questionnaires to track engagement with an activity or particular sponsor brand.

“We use fan surveys not just to measure changes in awareness, but also to evaluate perception of the brand, which is a far more powerful metric.”

– Measure social and digital engagement (There are a host of tools for this, e.g. Meltwater.)

– Use fan testimonials to evidence the success of activation

3. Insist on regular reviews with your partners – these provide an opportunity to demonstrate what’s working, give visibility of activity and, working with your agency, flush out new ideas for the future.

“We try to do campaign analysis at the halfway point of a season – and then again at the end.”

“Every month, we prepare media reports and activation reports demonstrating what’s been done and how successful it’s been.”

Being able to demonstrate the impact that activation has on a sponsor’s brand will help rights holders to attribute an accurate value to its properties. This is helpful in both attracting new prospects, and also upselling existing partners at renewal time.

“If you can look after the guys you’ve already got and demonstrate the ROI they’re getting, they’ll keep coming back.”

“How good a job we do with activation is the key to upselling and renewal.”



FIND BETTER WAYS TO GET CLOSER TO FANS



Fan engagement is about more than getting the brand name out there – the audience needs to understand how it fits with the values of the club they invest so much time, loyalty and emotion into.

Here, we look at a few examples of brands that have delivered truly creative campaigns to bring them closer to fans.

PRODUCING CONTENT WITH AN APPEAL BEYOND A CLUB'S FAN BASE

Subway used fan engagement as the driver for a more widely appealing piece of content that harnesses the emotion of the interaction between fan and club.

Their 'Late for Training' stunt in 2016 saw four fans entering a competition to win a shirt in the Liverpool FC shop, then being whisked away to Anfield for a training session with Daniel Sturridge and John Barnes, collecting personalised shirts, boots (and Subs!) along the way.

The resulting video has been viewed over 450,000 times, and you don't need to be a Liverpool fan or even a football fan to enjoy it.

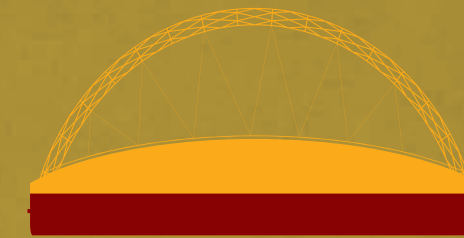
"BRANDS THAT ARE NEW TO SPONSORSHIP DON'T REALISE THE EXTENT OF HOW CREATIVE YOU CAN BE"



EMOTION IS FOOTBALL'S MOST VALUABLE COMMODITY

Heineken staged a stunt for the Champions League match between AS Roma and Real Madrid. In a simple set-up, a fan is offered a single free ticket to the match – his dilemma is whether to go to the game or to stick to the traditional beer, pizza and football game with his best friends.

His reaction when he is 'outed' live at the stadium only to be reunited with his buddies and their sofa – now transported to a private box – makes for a compelling prank and one which went viral, seen by over 1.1 million people to date, all over the world.



CAPITAL ONE GIVES FANS THE CHANCE TO 'OWN THE ARCH'

This innovative Twitter campaign gave fans the chance to choose the colour of the iconic Wembley arch ahead of the Capital One Cup Final. Fans could vote with their Tweet using the hashtags #ChelseaAtWembley or #SpursAtWembley, to see the arch lit up in their club's colours, white or blue.

Supporters could also submit motivational messages to players on the Capital One Facebook page, with one for each team being selected to appear above the tunnel, and have their #FinalSelfie broadcast live on the big screens.

The campaign attracted over half a million Tweets and represented a unique way of exploiting social media to bring fans closer to the brand. The match was shown in a record number of over 200 territories that year.



EMIRATES BRINGS A LIGHT TOUCH TO THEIR FLIGHT SAFETY DEMONSTRATION

Another lovely example of reaching beyond the fan base – not just of the club, but of the sport itself – was the Emirates spoof pre-flight safety demonstration delivered by cabin crew at Benfica's Estádio da Luz in October 2015.

Eight flight attendants took to the pitch moments before the match against Sporting Lisbon to welcome fans to the stadium and deliver 'scarf instructions' to fans with children to adopt the 'embrace position' in the event of a goal.

The whole thing was beautifully conceived and realised, with a warmth and universal appeal that helped the video go viral, having been seen to date by over 2.3 million people.

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THE BRAND IN ACTION 'SIX-STEP ACTIVATION ROAD MAP'

1. BUILD ACTIVATION INTO THE SALES PROCESS

- It's not an add-on – activation is the cornerstone of every successful partnership.
- Make sure it's part of the sales conversation from the get-go.
- Budget accordingly – beyond the fee, allow for investment to bring the partnership to life.

2. WHAT'S THE PLAN?

- Take a strategic approach to planning your activation campaigns.
- Start with an all-stakeholder immersion session.
- Set clear objectives and KPIs.
- Be sure that activity is aligned to the sponsor's and club's objectives.
- Make the rights inventory work for the strategy – not the other way round.

3. START WITH SEGMENTATION

- Identify the audiences your activation programme needs to reach.
- Define geographic and demographic profiles.
- Create pen portraits to understand what makes them tick, their lifestyles and behaviours to ensure your activation message will resonate.
- Pinpoint the rights that will get the sponsor's brand in front of them.

4. RESOURCE UP!

- Get the right people and partners on board to devise and execute the plan.
- A mix of internal and external specialist know-how will achieve the best results.
- With the team assembled, collaborate at all times – it's good to talk!

5. GET CREATIVE

- Reaching the right people in the right channels counts for nothing without the right message.
- True consumer engagement is only possible with razor-sharp creative ideas attuned to the unique codes and behaviours of sports fans.
- Don't limit your ambition – think big!

6. WINNING PERFORMANCE

- Track the success of all activation activity.
- Set clear KPIs and continuously measure performance.
- Don't stop at eyeballs – engagement is a more powerful barometer of success.
- Give all stakeholders visibility of results.
- Stay flexible – measuring performance allows you to focus on the things that work.



BRAND IN ACTION

**WE ARE A LEADING SPONSORSHIP
ACTIVATION AGENCY.**

**FOR BRANDS, OUR MISSION IS TO
OPTIMISE YOUR SPONSORSHIP THROUGH
STRATEGICALLY DRIVEN, INNOVATIVE
ACTIVATIONS DESIGNED TO GET RESULTS.**

**FOR SPORTS PROPERTIES AND RIGHTS HOLDERS,
WE ARTICULATE POWERFUL STORIES TO GIVE YOU
THE EDGE IN ATTRACTING POTENTIAL SPONSORS
IN A HIGHLY COMPETITIVE MARKET PLACE.**

We cut our teeth with one of the world's
biggest sports rights holders, helping many
of their partners over the last ten years,
including Kumho Tyre, Turkish Airlines,
Hublot, Swissquote and Casillero del Diablo.

For a flavour of what we do, please visit:
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Sources:
The quotations used in this report were taken from telephone
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confidentiality, the names and clubs of interviewees have
been withheld.



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