**How to win with sports marketing!**

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In our 24/7 world, where we’re always plugged in, constantly moving from platform to platform and accessing content on demand, sport retains the power to cohere marketing messages on a global level, uniting audiences through their universal passions.

Despite a fragmenting media landscape, around half of the world’s population, for example, tuned into the 2016 Rio Olympics via "traditional" TV.

But with so much change in consumer behaviour, largely driven by rapid technological advances, the way marketers must play this crucial sports marketing game has also changed significantly.

**Trend 1: Sports marketing is shifting to new, different platforms**

A major driver of change is how consumers, particularly younger viewers, watch sport today. The stereotype of sport spectators has long been groups of friends gathering around the TV set, making an event of watching a fixture at home. But traditional TV viewership is declining, as people increasingly consume TV in new ways, such as streaming on their mobile and other digital devices.

However, the game-changer is the meteoric rise of social broadcasting. Both [Twitter](http://twitter.com/) and [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/) are pushing their "live" functionality, which is increasingly becoming the first place many fans, especially younger ones, go to witness the action.

Twitter has announced that sport is one of the main sectors it plans to develop on this front, already signing a deal to live stream the NFL. Meanwhile, [YouTube Live](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4R8DWoMoI7CAwX8_LjQHig) has struck a deal to live stream the [Uefa Champions League finals](http://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-secures-deal-to-live-stream-uefa-champions-league-finals-2016-5?IR=T) in partnership with [BT Sport](http://sport.bt.com/).

This illustrates a trend for the future as broadcasters will look to modernise their offering, both to remain commercial and adapt to the growing number of typically younger sports fans who watch their sports online.

So what is so compelling about the social media environment for sports fans? Put very simply it is the unpolished authenticity.

Snapchat, for example, brings with it an authenticity previously unseen. It is raw and real and absolutely of the moment, so the perfect contrast to overly stage managed or manicured content as previously existed. It brings the fan directly to the heart of the experience.

For Generation Z, authenticity is the number one demand. Overly elaborate platforms or experiences are unable to match the immediacy of their favourite environments. Sports fans do not necessarily care what channel or source but the breadth of content and information available to them to better express and align themselves with.

To make their environments even more sticky for sports enthusiasts, experts predict that the next obvious areas for social broadcasters to move into are micropayments to buy tickets and travel discounts to get to games.

As well as social broadcasting, another area that is likely to experience growth in the near future is sports creating their own platforms. This is a particularly attractive option for smaller, more niche sports that don’t get prioritised by the traditional broadcasters.

That said, some experts stress that traditional TV will remain vital and is "still King" in terms of exposure and reach.

Google’s decision to advertise on TV during the [Uefa Euro 2016](http://www.uefa.com/uefaeuro/) as testament to this. It proves even digital native companies rely on the reach and power of TV to spread the word about their services to an incremental audience.

Indeed, agencies report those brands that diverted all their sports marketing budget to digital are, in many cases, reversing that decision and realising traditional media plays a crucial accompanying awareness role. The big broadcast moments are still very important.

**VR and AR as platforms**

The jury is still out on emerging platforms such as VR and AR, which are yet to perfect their functionality or attract a mainstream audience. Some believe VR will prove a hit because of its ability to offer a real, raw insight

VR’s killer benefit, compared to standard video content, is that even when a situation has been staged, VR’s immersion helps mimic real life and offers a complete 360-degree view to create the illusion of an unfiltered experience.

However there is also the view that questions VR’s validity, especially in a live sports context.

There are those, too, who are more cynical of the hype and believe these technologies will always play second fiddle to the experience of actually physically being at a sporting venue.

The argument remains that there are some digital experiences which can better and more personally deliver value to the fan through watching at home

**Trend 2: Sports fans are demanding a much more engaging, immersive experience than ever before**

The fact that sport has gone from a lean-back, passive spectator activity to a lean-in, participative one has triggered a seismic shift in the kind of marketing that now resonates most strongly. Fans want to be closer to the action, to the athletes, to the stats and to the most revealing camera angles. They want the insider’s view. As a result, generating constant, captivating, exclusive content has become a modern marketer’s priority.

Sponsoring a sports property gives a brand a credible reason for entering and hosting the conversation, enabling it to create interesting content due to its access to players, managers and behind-the-scenes action.

Planning and delivering content has become a military operation, across the whole of marketing not just in relation to sports, due to the complexity and explosion of platforms. Consequently, brands like Nissan and Ford have "content factories" internally. Both have found their sports alliances are a hugely valuable boost to the "factory" production line due to the desire of sports content.

Content that makes fans feel closer to their sporting idols has particular power. Especially for the younger generations, the staid, old-fashioned formats of traditional press conferences and formal Q&A sessions don’t cut it anymore. Having grown up on social media, they want real, unadulterated interaction with athletes without the spindoctors on the sidelines. Hence, the emergent and growing cut-the-middle-man media such as The Players’ Tribune and NBA star Lebron James’ multimedia site [Uninterrupted](http://www.uninterrupted.com/).

As a result, brands must take a more creative approach to content creation facilitating this direct interaction. Nike has responded smartly to this trend with [Nike On Demand,](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImyKOZ5_N1k&feature=youtu.be) a one-to-one messenger service via [WhatsApp](http://www.whatsapp.com/), which links fans directly with its vast network of athletes and coaches to inspire them to achieve their own personal sporting goals. Content includes playlist suggestions, motivational tips, challenges, reminders and informal conversation.

This trend offers huge opportunities for marketing to be genuinely engaging and creative, deepening customer relationships far more than a logo badging exercise ever did in the past. The digital explosion allows marketers to launch increasingly targeted campaigns and engage in meaningful conversations with fans. Furthermore digital is also transforming measurement, meaning that marketers can track the direct impact of marketing on a specific call-to-action.

**Trend 3: Sports marketing is shifting to be more lifestyle and entertainment orientated**

Driven by this fan desire to know more about their sporting heroes, athletes are becoming more like celebrities, with an increasing number becoming rights holders themselves. With this comes the expectation that they behave more like celebrities and that sporting occasions mimic entertainment events.

Indeed, it appears that athletes are prepared to play this new sponsorship game, with many happy to tweet about their training regime or pre-game preparation, using social media to share their feelings, photos and other private details of their lives.

Similarly, we saw the expectation that sporting events should take on a more entertainment feel fulfilled at the revamped [Uefa Champions League opening ceremony in 2016](http://www.uefa.com/uefachampionsleague/video/stars-of-ucl/videoid=2369306.html). Tournament sponsor [PepsiCo](http://www.pepsico.co.uk/) fused the worlds of sport and entertainment by negotiating the performance of its brand ambassador and pop star Alicia Keys.

Savvy sports brands have cottoned on to this merging of the sporting, lifestyle, fashion and music worlds already. It’s this trend that led [Manchester United](http://www.manutd.com/) kit sponsor [Adidas](http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/brand/adidas) to team football star Paul Pogba up with grime singer Stormzy in a music video, which quickly went viral. Reflecting on the campaign, the brand explained that sports marketing activations which combine influential social media personalities like Stomzy with its signed players will be its focus going forward.

It doesn’t necessarily need to be this combination of lifestyle and sporting stars, either, to make a winning formula. What’s more important is the entertainment "X-factor". However, while these "big name" celebrities undoubtedly work in some campaigns, the use of celebrities has to be weighed up carefully as, in some instances the individual or using a famous person at all, could be inappropriate. Like Sport England’s hugely successful ["This girl can" campaign](http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/1376632/sport-england-credits-150000-women-doing-sport-this-girl-can) encouraging females to take up sport. It was about making sport relevant to women who didn’t previously think it was for them.

Widening out the market in this way to appeal to the more casual fan via entertainment makes sport a more effective marketing channel. So does the fact that in times of economic crisis, as we’ve experienced in the last few years, people seek escapism and solace in their passions.

**Trend 4: Sports marketing culture is becoming more inclusive**

The idea that sport is a man’s world today is as outdated as the stereotype that a woman’s place is in the kitchen. Sport is at the vanguard when it comes to challenging gender roles.

This questioning is being fuelled by sports organisations realising the economic opportunity that female fans – a previously largely overlooked fan base – represent.

Women’s sport is a huge opportunity for brands to play a positive, active role in redressing the imbalance of female representation both on the sports field and supporting pitch side. When it comes to women’s sport, experts advise putting community at the heart of campaigns.

As mentioned in, the shift to an entertainment style approach is attracting more casual sports fans too, which is being actively encouraged by rights holders. During the [Rugby World Cup](http://www.rugbyworldcup.com/?lang=en), for example, novices could purchase a headset for £10 which provided basic commentary, including an outline of the rules.

Similarly, song sheets are now commonly given out to welcome those who don’t know the words off pat at football matches. Children are also being welcomed into venues more and more, with specific activity directed at them and an increasing number of designated family areas at events.

To conclude sports for me remains the most powerful of marketing platforms for brands to engage with their audiences through a core passion. The key is to understand, align and interact to deliver your brand promise and ultimately add value to their precious experiences at scale through paid, owned and earned channels!