

## »» When brands run out onto the field: Generating engagement in the year of the World Cup

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*“Some people believe [soccer] is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that”*

Bill Shankly, former soccer player and manager

Given it is such an important event, every four years the World Cup attracts big companies that associate their brands and products with one of the most popular sports events on the planet. Its major sponsorship deals make soccer and the World Cup great vehicles for bringing products and consumers closer together.

Apart from these sponsorships, however, the World Cup inspires euphoria and optimism, especially in participating countries. The likelihood of winning matters very little. At the end of the day, the World Cup is a party everyone wants to attend—particularly brands, regardless of their connection to soccer.

Undoubtedly, the World Cup is a way to generate engagement, but for many brands it is also uncharted

territory. If executed well, a brand’s participation in the World Cup can result in long-lasting relationships, but if executed poorly, the relationships will be short-lived. Will the brand simply be purchased... or will it be experienced?

Like in soccer, some brands commit to winning one or two matches, but others aim to make a mark, grow and be champions. Of course, the latter is valuable and focuses on the long term.

If you are committed to developing engagement actions around the World Cup with a view that goes beyond the “group stage,” then the following five soccer guidelines, applied to brand communications, may be useful:

### 1. FIRST, THE COACH TALKS

*“Soccer is the most important of the unimportant things”*

Carlo Angelotti, Italian former footballer and current football manager

Soccer teams work all week long to prepare for an upcoming match. Teams evaluate their rivals, but at the same time position themselves, taking into account their strengths and weaknesses, their offense and defense. In the days preceding the match, the coach talks to the players to assess the next challenge and define “the story” the team will put into play on the field to win the match.

Brands must look at their World Cup engagement initiatives in a similar way.

### Assess the environment, rivals and brand attributes

There is no doubt the World Cup creates opportunities in the market and audiences to position your brand and align it with the attributes and feelings evoked



when seeing your country's team go out onto the field.

For many brands, this may well be familiar territory, but for others it may be completely new. First, ask yourself a few questions. What is your brand's relationship with sports? What about soccer? What is your relationship with the feelings associated with a World Cup?

In addition to the promotions and offers that appear in this "opportunity marketing" context (make a purchase to take part in a raffle, win a T-shirt for buying my product), brands can also build, based on this engagement, long-lasting relationships with their audiences and generate added value in the medium and long term.

With this in mind, it is important to correctly assess the environment and your brand to build a sound, efficient story. The assessment, much like a coach's, answers the following:

- Where and how do my brand's attributes fit in with soccer and the World Cup? What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- How does my brand "rank?" Who ranks highest? Who ranks lowest?
- What are my role models and rivals doing? How do they play?
- Are fans my reference point or should/can I add other audiences? If so, whom?
- How can I legitimately expand my horizons using soccer?

## 2. WHERE AND HOW TO FACE THE MATCH—AND THE CHAMPIONSHIP—

*"If you can't support us when we lose, don't support us when we win"*

*Bill Shankly, Scottish football manager*

Teams and brands must build a coherent story based on their situation assessment. This is the main task soccer coaches and those responsible for managing a brand face. Without a story, you can win a match, but

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you will never win a championship.

Brands can build effective stories aligned to their surroundings—so long as they perform a correct analysis and specifically map their communities.

An empty message or one built upon what is "desirable" instead of "achievable" may cause a positive initial impact, but it would be based on expectations that cannot be met. Subsequent disappointment is the worst impact a brand can have on its target communities.

At the same time, building a World Cup story believing it will hook audiences equally is like believing all fans appreciate the way a certain coach organizes his or her team. In soccer, it is said there is a coach in every one of us; something similar applies to brands. It is important to know who we wish to address.

### The field

Before playing, the teams go out onto the field. They set foot on it, explore it, measure it and discuss where the ball will be fastest, where there will be more bumps and which spaces to avoid. How thick is the grass? Is it wet or dry? Nothing is left to chance.

The "field" for brands is an area of conversation and interaction with their audiences. Being familiar with it is as important as it will be for teams stepping onto the soccer field in Russia.

Brands perceive soccer as an area strictly pertaining to the World Cup, but this is not necessarily the case. It is an area in which brands must legitimately participate, as long as they have already built something over time.

In this regard, the aim is to add a differentiation factor into the story because there are already many other "teams" with more credibility, either because they are official sponsors or because they have had a long-lasting presence in soccer.

Understanding the playing field and finetuning the brand discourse accordingly will allow brands to develop a creative focus which will reflect on the field and in the experience of consumers around the World Cup, as well as promote relevance and engagement.

### 3. TACTICS: FROM 4-4-2 TO ENGAGEMENT

*"Everything I know about morality and the obligations of men, I owe it to football (soccer)."*

Albert Camus, Author

A team's tactics are determined by the way it plays, which is based on its available talent and objective (in other words, the story and initial assessment). For brands, these tactics originate through good content and key actions that put them in touch with their audience.

Brand content must be used to engage fans and audiences. This content-tactic must not overlook the World Cup's information oversaturation. While part of the contents and actions are aimed at a loyal public (the true fans), another major part of the actions attempt to increase market share, as well as reach new audiences and fans. How does one play the match accordingly?

Brands must learn how to combine techniques that make a big impact (to break through the "noise") and techniques focused on brand credibility and ensure a long-term relationship.

So, contents and tactics may result in different, complementary engagements:

- **Brand journalism**

A good story aimed at a specific soccer community may strengthen a brand's **legitimacy** and build a long-lasting relationship with its audiences and consumers. Brand journalism actions are used to build these types of relationships and brand presence in an already known or new areas, such as soccer.

For soccer terms, brand journalism is like a great player who was brought up at the club at grassroots' level and gradually grew until becoming the top player in the team. It is an engagement constructed jointly over time with the fans.

- **Branded entertainment**

Branded entertainment actions can **highly impact** audiences, generating strong awareness through the noise. It is like when team signs a soccer player and introduces him or her to its audience. This great player will immediately increase jersey sales and win over new fans. It is the "WOW!" factor that breaks through the attention barrier.

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These kinds of actions require storytelling be prioritized so the event connects with people's experiences... and creates overall memorable experiences, too.

The market is rife with well-funded branded entertainment with little impact, like when a team signs a million-dollar deal for a player who does not benefit the team. Why does this happen? For one, a lack of focus in storytelling that builds a unique story in the medium and long term.

At the same time, part of the return on investment will have to be driven by the reach and awareness allowed by the use of a brand PR initiative, built on a unique story, to generate added value but which does not block enjoyment.

However, the brands' reach will be pointless if they do not achieve true influence. With this in mind, the traditional influencers' model will have to change to an advocacy model where not only opportunity is in play, but the legitimacy of the brand, in which it must have better constructed relationships, at least in theory.

A team only made up of million-dollar signings is as risky as a team consisting only of home-grown players. In the same way, a good engagement strategy pertaining to the World Cup must keep in mind both brand journalism and branded entertainment in a perfect, coordinated balance.

### 4. "WE DESERVED TO WIN, BUT THAT'S SOCCER FOR YOU!"

*"That's soccer for you. We deserved to win, but it's the goals that count"*

Typical soccer player's post-match comment

Soccer is a passionate sport that results in intense debate between matches. From the clichés players use after the match, to the more scientific analyses drawn up by sports' strategists, the debate about impact and results measurement is, essentially, what brings soccer to life. We all have our own way of interpreting the results.

Communication and marketing results often have a similar effect. They are explained by figures of speech or perspectives linked to a wide range of aspects. Setting specific aims and clear measurement indicators for results is crucial to lending continuity to this type of project.

Measuring results and indicators must go beyond awareness or the direct impact on sales. It must also look at brand consolidation in the area and added value in the medium and long term.

However, the measurement of these engagement actions is transversal to the project. Having a control panel which permits configuring pre-event indicators and following their development during the action is like having reliable information about statistics and data during the match. Everything is measurable and every measurement offers valuable insight into maintaining or altering an engagement initiative.

In summary, a good measurement of results involves:

- Correctly defined indicators in accordance to the brand's objectives
- A control panel which allows monitoring said indicators
- A subsequent evaluation which looks at the short, medium and long term aspects, with a return on investment that encompasses the brand's added value and manages to measure specific interactions (engagement).

## 5. THE TRUE FAN

*"Playing without fans is like dancing without music"*

Eduardo Galeano, Author

Last, but not least, are the fans. Although brands' audiences, much like fans, are a key transversal component when preparing the story, implementing actions and measuring results, do not view them as an objective or a final recipient.

Soccer teams do not go out onto the field just so the fans watch them. They expect the audience to play the part too: cheer them on, wave flags, make noise—in other words, celebrate. They want the fans to be "the 12th man," the extra player that leads the team to victory.

A brand that seeks to create a long-term relationship with its audiences and consumers has to view them as

"the 12th man." They are not just mere spectators or message recipients. They are protagonists active in the action development and the story's internalization. A brand can only be legitimate and impactful in the area of soccer if its audiences are active in the game, in the conversation.

Engagement actions within the area of soccer can, in several ways, get audiences to take part in the context of brand journalism and/or of branded entertainment. For example:

- **Ambassadors:** They are the leaders among the fans. When mapping specific communities, pinpoint these influencers and micro-influencers who help to position your story. Do so carefully, as engaging influencers is also challenging. Consumers – just like a team's fans – want to establish transparent and emotional links to brands so they last a long time.

Commercial activations through influencers may help win a match, but not the championships. Creating a network of organic, sustainable affinities with them is key. Remember, these influencers may be closer than you think (for instance, employees).

- **Inbound Marketing:** Our action's must generate leads, continuity and long-lasting relationships. It is one thing to get a fan to go to a stadium once; it is something else entirely if you convince them to wear the team's shirt, take a flag and buy season tickets. The actions linked to inbound marketing make true fans, while actions not linked to it only gain fleeting supporters.

For many people, soccer is a passion. Some may like it more, others less. However, during the World Cup, national teams awaken deep values in the countries they represent, positive values around the nature of the sport and unconditional support to a team, win or lose. It is an unbreakable relationship filled with joy and heartbreak. It is loyal and long-lasting and spans many generations.

What brand wouldn't want to be perceived and experienced in this way?



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