

Digital data options add new dimension to sponsorship

When the world plunges into recession no area of business can expect to escape and sponsorship has been impacted along with every other element of the marketing communications sector.

It is an entirely natural process. When cash and credit are tight, every facet of a business comes under intense scrutiny and only those activities and investments which can be proved to deliver results and value will survive the attention of the financial directors.

And while there is no one-size-fits-all approach, we have seen the results right across the sponsorship spectrum. While some corporations are dropping out of deals or cutting back their spend, others are signing to new sponsorship adventures because they believe they will take them exactly where they want to go.

What was widely predicted appears to have come true. In sponsorship, the focus has shifted further towards creativity and value for money and that means finding new and more effective ways to deliver brand messages to target audiences.

In this respect, the online environment offers massive potential which is only just beginning to be harnessed.

According to Johan Apel, CEO of Swedish digital data company Tracab, the lack of boundaries – in terms of inventory, legislation and creativity – means that online is no longer an add-on but the core of successful sponsorship programmes.

His company – a partnership with the Swedish defence and aerospace giant SAAB – is at the forefront of delivering real time data from football matches which is already used in a number of different ways.

In the simplest terms, Tracab uses 16 cameras, located in the grandstand, to cover every inch of a football field in 3D. The cameras track every movement of players, officials and of course, the ball, 25 times per second, producing a stream of digital data which is processed to produce a real-time representation of every run, pass, corner, free kick, save and goal.

Viewers of the UEFA Champions League will already be familiar with one use of the data produced by Tracab. The data is used by broadcasters and delivered as on-screen graphics, while the media receive a far more comprehensive statistical breakdown of the match to help in the compilation of match reports.

But, says Johan Apel, this is really only the tip of the iceberg.

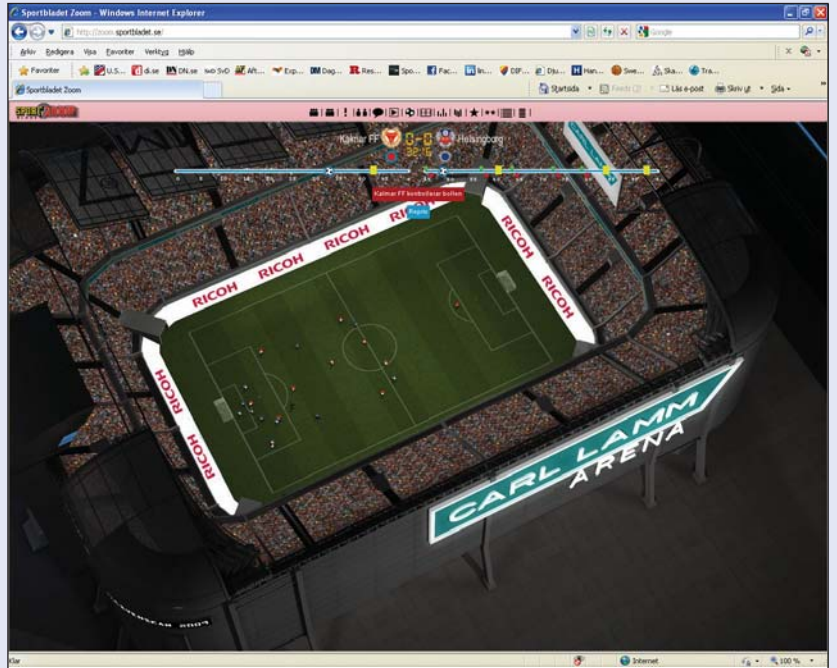
'The use of digital data is exploding in many areas and sponsorship is key among them,' he said.

'The digital environment provides opportunities to create new types of exposure for brands and new ways of engaging with audiences while really reinforcing their brand messaging.'

Among the major brands to use digital data in this way is Castrol, the lubricant brand whose brand values are focused on the concept of 'performance.'

Castrol made a major strategic shift when it moved into football ahead of the last UEFA European Championships and launched its Castrol Performance Index concept. Since then the company has signed as a sponsor of the 2010 and 2014 FIFA World Cups and is again using its index to rate the performance of every player in every match from the qualifiers up to the final.

The Castrol Performance Index uses a sophisticated evaluation process to rate the performance of players out of 10 in each match. Passes, tackles, blocks and shots are not simply recorded as a statistical fact but assessed against the level of difficulty and the contribution they make.



But the key to its success is the quality, stability and reliability of the data recorded from the field.

'This is a great example of a company thinking about the ways it can make its brand values come alive by focusing on performance,' said Johan Apel.

'Football is such a hugely popular sport that football fans are inevitably major consumers of many other products, so football is a great connector. In this case the Castrol Performance Index is used to build a link with consumers and enhance their experience of football by adding a new dimension to their understanding and appreciation of the games. This in turn reflects Castrol's commitment to enhancing performance.'

'Yet it simply wouldn't be possible without the technology which allows us to digitally capture and analyse the necessary data.'

Castrol's use of data is just one among many in a growing market.

In Sweden football fans who are unable to get along to a match or watch television need no longer miss a moment of the action. They can log onto Tracab's 'Virtual Arena' hosted on the website of the country's leading tabloid newspaper.

The Virtual Arena does what it says on the tin.

Data captured using Tracab's technology is processed to deliver a real-time graphic representation of the game being played. As a shot is struck or a tackle made at the stadium, its virtual replica is being watched by a whole new audience.

Virtual arena is proving hugely popular not only with fans but with brands.

'What we have done is to create sponsorship and advertising inventory which simply didn't exist before,' explained Johan Apel.

'The Virtual Arena has perimeter boards which are for sale while in Sweden, the Arena itself is titled sponsored as the Ricoh Arena, providing incredibly strong and cost-effective links to top level football,' he said.

'The fact is that digital rights will become more and more important to sponsors as new technology platforms emerge and younger audiences gravitate towards new ways of engaging with sports content. And where the audiences are is exactly where the sponsor brands need to be.'

'The virtual world is growing almost by the day and sponsors with the imagination and creativity to create a compelling and meaningful presence will find fresh, cost-effective opportunities for engaging with their audiences. And in a time of recession, that is more important than ever before,' he said.