

Sports branding: specialist skills ensure commercial alignment

By [S'bu Mankole](#)

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Sport is no longer just about health, entertainment or developing team spirit, but rather a serious business with the potential to yield heavyweight returns on one's investment. With the business of sport as much about fans as it is about players, we're seeing more and more commercial brands starting to feature in this space - and turning to professionals when it comes to branding and marketing in this specialist arena.



The Switch Group maintains that this is because taking joint ownership of a venue or team requires one to draw holistically on heritage and synergies. Only in this way can one successfully link the commercial brand to both the sport and the target market.

Whole new ball game

When it comes to strategically building and developing commercial brands in the sporting space, there can be no doubt that one requires a specialist. Experience counts. Strategy is paramount. Simply put: this is a whole new ball game of brand building with its own very particular set of rules.

The first of these rules has to do with alignment. In most situations, one is typically facing the challenge of “rebranding” an event or venue with a commercial brand - something we have seen recently in the context of Ellis Park becoming Coca-Cola Park. As such, one is effectively replacing one brand with another on the basis of an underlying synergy existing between the two. It requires at least an alignment in the brand essence of participating brands.

This makes it about far more than just taking down one set of signage and putting up another. Strategic understanding of each brand is critical: one has to know the value of the individual brand, and how this will interact with the other. One also has to appreciate the benefit that the new brand will try to draw out of the exercise.

Heritage

That being said, the starting point for any rebranding exercise has to be heritage and understanding the key drivers that control the brand/consumer relationship. This goes hand in hand with the consumers of the brand or entity and therefore forms the basis of the brand equity of the venue or event. As such, it needs to be enhanced, as opposed to disregarded, in the process of rebranding. This means that an incredible amount of research and strategic work is required throughout the process so as not to alienate fans in any way, but rather draw in additional audiences based on new associations with the event or venue. Consumers or, in this case, fans must see the value of the “new” brand.

Switch's work in rebranding the "Top 8" to "MTN8" involved going through the above described process.

Here we saw a powerful commercial brand step in to take ownership of what has always been a strong brand in its own right. The link between the MTN brand and its target audience was crucial. So too was ensuring that all related activities - MTN's sponsorship of the 2010 FIFA World Cup for example - looked like "related" activities; that the MTN look and feel was maintained throughout.

When it comes to aligning your commercial brand with a sport, sport's venue or event, Switch's advice would have to be to approach this like you would any competitive sport. Research the playing field. Know the rules, and get in an expert coach to lead your team to victory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S'bu Mankole www.switchdesign.com is the business director of the Switch Group. S'bu joined the group in October 2004. He can be contacted on +27 (0)11 706 9370 or on sbu@switchdesign.com

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