

From Messi to Pepsi – inside the World Cup marketing machine



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Few stages rival the men's football World Cup when it comes to global brand exposure. Investment manager Des Armstrong sat down with John Paul O'Meara – non-executive director at Walter Scott and former senior vice president for brand strategy at Adidas – to explore how the German sportswear giant approached the occasion.

For a company like Adidas, the World Cup is a huge opportunity - I heard it described recently as a "six-week Super Bowl". How far in advance does planning typically begin?

The day one World Cup ends, the next World Cup begins, at least in terms of high-level planning. There will be people working on the World Cup every moment of every year – not just in terms of what happens on the pitch, but fan-zones, logistics – there's a huge amount of behind-the-scenes work. It's a very valuable opportunity although it can be unforgiving if you make a mess of it. The stakes are high.

But because of how football has evolved, the marketing machine is nearly always running at full tilt. In Europe, you have the Champions League every year

and the European Championships every four. Effectively, a company like Adidas has a major football catalyst every year.

So, it's important not to view the World Cup in isolation. It's part of a broader narrative but it does provide a fantastic opportunity to amplify all the work that goes into normal day-to-day football.



A big part of building a campaign for a major event must be choosing which players to feature. What factors go into that decision? How do you weigh performance expectations against global appeal?

I think that's one of the biggest changes I've seen over the years – the emergence of players as integral to storytelling. Thinking back on past Adidas campaigns, Lionel Messi was central to Creators, and There Will be Haters was built around the likes of Gareth Bale and Luis Suarez.

What you're trying to do with these campaigns is anchor the brand culturally. So, when you're thinking of which players to feature, of course you want to have the best in terms of skill, athleticism and on-field credibility. But you need to balance that with cultural influence and storytelling potential.

Take a player like Paul Pogba. He was a great player although not one of the very best. In terms of cultural influence, however – how he dressed, his haircuts, his attitude – he was really significant.

I think the reason brands gravitate towards personalities for the World Cup is that the interest of the football fan isn't limited to their own team. Lots of fans will sit down and watch seven hours of World Cup football in a single day. So, getting the right personalities with the right stories is an opportunity to resonate globally.

Another important consideration when choosing who to feature is who's appearing in other brand campaigns. Some of the players in the portfolio will also be doing work with Pepsi, Coca-Cola, McDonald's etc, so you can leverage that work.



One of the most fascinating aspects about the World Cup is the cultural diversity. Football really does cut across borders and culture. If I think of Japan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mexico, they don't have too much in common culturally – but they do share a love of football. Is it a challenge balancing global brand consistency with diverse end markets?

There's a definite tension between global and local when it comes to marketing, but it's a healthy tension. I think if you can get to a "values-led"

level of abstraction, you can express yourself locally within that.

So, thinking of those big Adidas campaigns. Creators revolved around creativity, which is universal across cultures, but has very different local expressions. A global brand campaign around creators creating the future and, within that, a local angle on what that future looks like.

How does an Adidas or a Nike measure the success of an event like the World Cup?

The World Cup doesn't create your brand, and it doesn't create your position in the football category. What it does do, however, is reveal the strength of your brand. It lets you see if you have been doing the right work over the years in terms of your product portfolio, your player portfolio, and the teams you're working with.

Of course, sales matter – that's always a point of pride for the big sportswear brands. Market share matters, too. But from a “brand” perspective, I think the major consideration is what does the World Cup give you in terms of future opportunities? Things like brand heat and pricing power and advocacy. Also, has the event provided opportunities across other segments of the product portfolio?

The measure of success stretches far beyond the event itself. Back to school, for example, is very important for sales of cleats. When kids go back to school and need new sports gear, that's when you can see the halo effect from the World Cup.



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The sports apparel market is ferociously competitive. Is there a competitor campaign you've looked at and thought "I wish we'd done that"?

I think Nike has always been good at conveying a certain attitude. One Nike campaign I thought was very good was Good vs Evil from the mid-90s, which featured the likes of Eric Cantona and Ronaldo (the original one) facing off against a team of mythical monsters. It was a very creative way of telling the story and it had great attitude.

I think the likes of Pepsi and Coca-Cola also do a really nice job at the World Cup. To be honest, I sometimes think they do a better job with their cultural storytelling than the big sports brands.

And what about Adidas – any favourites from past campaigns?

I always liked Creators. Creativity is such a positive concept, and it worked very well at the global and local level.

Going back to 2006, I loved the Jose+10 ad. Two kids in Brazil picking their dream teams, with the players appearing one by one. Zidane, Beckham, Kaka, as well as old-school legends like Franz Beckenbauer and Michel Platini. It was

current but it also had a timelessness that made it really stand out.

Last question – who's your pick for the tournament?

I would like to see Germany win because my wife and kids are German, but I'm not sure about their chances. (Germany was subsequently eliminated by Paraguay in the Round of 32.)

Morocco is a dark horse, I think. It would be great to see somebody like Morocco win.

More importantly though, it's been a very good World Cup so far in terms of the quality of the games and the goals scored. It's been very entertaining – long may it continue.

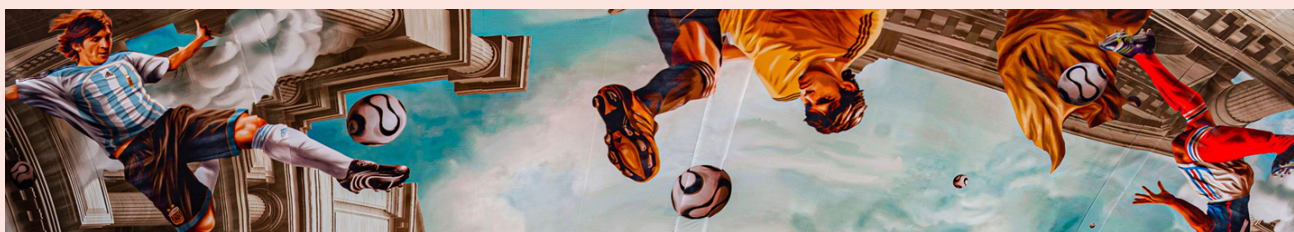
This interview took place on Friday 26 June during the World Cup.

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