

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE CHANGEABLE SPORTS SPONSORSHIP ECOSYSTEM

by Gayle Jenkins



Sustainability is not necessarily a word that we would have associated with sports sponsorship in the previous decade, but with the unprecedented year of 2020 now behind us, this theme seems more significant than ever. Research by [GlobalWebIndex](#) has shown that conscious consumerism is now mainstream with almost 60% of consumers stating they would now pay more for sustainable and eco-friendly products. With this in mind, brands and rightsholders within the world of sport are having to re-think their sponsorship approach and recognise the growing significance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) when striking up brand deals.

The traditional ecosystem of sports sponsorship would see brands gain exposure and value, mainly through broadcast, by having their logos splurged across boards surrounding the field of play and the rightsholders would be happy with a substantial paycheck in return. But the landscape has been changing, and the words 'partnership' and 'values' are now at the forefront of decision-making when it comes to entering a new commercial deal.

Rightsholders need to adapt their strategy to maximise their sponsorship value especially in this new climate we face. Corporate partnerships will always be the financial lifeline of rightsholders but with purse strings being pinched following the repercussions of the global pandemic, it is crucial that a successful commercial partnership becomes so much more than just a monetised transaction. A story needs to be told through every partnership, and with an ever-growing digital dominance, modern consumers need to feel that content produced is authentic and with purpose in order to be influenced into forming a relationship with that brand. The more the consumer is engaged, the more opportunity there is for data to be leveraged and emerging business intelligence to be utilised to form the best decisions and maximise partnerships.



Take Arsenal Football Club for example, their partnership with [Octopus Energy](#) has been widely regarded as a smart move, one that ticks all the boxes. It meets the modern day demands of the consumer who prioritises corporate responsibility towards sustainability above all else. This newly forged partnership is simply that, a union that benefits both brand and rightsholder. Octopus is the UK's largest investor in solar energy and together with the Club they are working towards the development of renewable power supplies, as well as providing special offers for Arsenal fans in the UK. This ultimately projects their own ambitions to become a more sustainable football club whilst giving Octopus Energy an invaluable platform to educate people on what their business model consists of.

Vinai Venkatesham, Arsenal's Chief Commercial Officer, said: "We are delighted to be partnering with Octopus Energy, who become our first official energy partner. This partnership with Octopus is a positive step towards improving our contribution to environmental sustainability. We look forward to supporting Octopus Energy in the growth of their business."

This is the perfect example of where sponsorship tells a story and demonstrates corporate responsibility to climate change, in place of simple exposure of a product.

Similarly, Volvo's relationship with The Ocean Race who built the 'Racing with Purpose' campaign which aims to act as a catalyst to help restore ocean health, demonstrates this undeniable trend. The campaign formed a platform to attract further engagement from their partners who were looking for a way to further enhance their contribution to sustainability. Along with Volvo, Blue Water and 11TH Hour Racing have been instrumental in a campaign which not only vies to clean up the ocean but also to educate people to understand how plastic is damaging the oceans. This is not a typical campaign you would associate with a car brand, but through the partnership with The Ocean Race it has allowed Volvo to show its contribution to a global issue and further connect with consumers.

Anne-Cecile Turner, Sustainability Programme Leader at the Ocean Race commented on the partnership "Volvo was committed to our Sustainability Program during the last edition of the race with Volvo funding our Science Program and [the] onboard monitoring systems we used to collect oceanographic data. Sustainability is at the heart of the race, complementing and building on Volvo's stewardship."

Sustainability together with CSR is just one of many pillars that hold up this ever-changing landscape of sports sponsorship but is increasingly under the consumer microscope. After a year that turned the sports world upside down, it is more important than ever to leverage the accessible data that allows brands and rightsholders to make the best business decisions and in turn use the powerful tool of sponsorship to not only raise awareness, but to also stamp your contribution towards the global issues that are increasingly at the forefront of consumer choices.

This is not a phase or a trend, it is an increasingly global issue. According to research undertaken by GlobalWebIndex 68% of online consumers in the U.S. and UK would or might stop using a brand because of its poor or misleading CSR, this highlights the importance of getting these partnerships right and exercising intelligent decisions when it comes to communicating such relationships.

