



Building on its All Blacks partnership - Getty Images Sport

A NEW RUGBY CONNECTION

Paul Meulendijk, Head of Sponsorships MasterCard Europe, explains why the partnership with Rugby World Cup for the 2011 tournament is deeply rooted in the MasterCard brand.

"**RUGBY WORLD CUP** is a truly global property with the associated appeal and recognition levels, so it is just an ideal partner for our brand and for increasing our brand affinity," says Meulendijk.

Key to the partnership too is the fact that Rugby World Cup promotes cross-border travel and gives MasterCard a channel through which to reach a key demographic. Rugby's footprint, Meulendijk explains, provides a strong base for MasterCard in Europe, but also offers significant growth potential in the Americas, Africa and Asia.

"And in its established markets, rugby scores very well against an affluent audience, for example, in the UK, 65 per cent of rugby fans are in the ABC1 demographic and in Australia the figure is 79 per cent for fans with medium to high income levels."

The sport, says, Meulendijk brings MasterCard to a consumer group that has some cross over, yet is also distinct from those that it reaches through some of its other major partnerships within golf and with UEFA for Champions League football.

Rugby is also a sport MasterCard knows well. Over the past six years the company has been a sponsor of the New Zealand All Blacks team, demonstrating a commitment to helping grow the sport of rugby through its grassroots campaign in New Zealand.

With much written in the current economic climate on major sponsors pulling out of deals, the signing of any headline sponsorship is good news for the sports and sports sponsorship sectors. Still, any new deal is likely to come

under scrutiny both internally and externally. Meulendijk is confident though. The rationale, emotional connections and activation strategies are all clear he says and "this deal is predicated around creating value. Any activation spend will be well-thought-through, affordable and measurable and focused on MasterCard's key strategies, in particular capitalising on cross-border travel and engaging new and loyal end consumers and fans."

New Zealand can expect to attract as many as 66,000 international supporters for RWC 2011, as well as media representatives, and up to 2,500 corporate and VIP guests. MasterCard plans to create offers around RWC 2011 that bring exclusive business-building opportunities for its customer financial institutions and that will get end consumers out to the event. Once there, MasterCard is also the preferred payment brand accepted on-site at host venues.

For Meulendijk, the deal is collaboration with a like-minded partner. "In the IRB we have a partner that is very switched on to helping us to offer card holder programmes which capture the passion, energy and excitement of the sport. With this deal, we will again be able to offer priceless experiences to MasterCard cardholders."

Emirates Airline is also a worldwide sponsor for RWC 2011 and the IRB is aiming to sign four more brands. It says that a third will be announced "in the near future". Elsewhere, MasterCard remained in talks with UEFA over renewing their Champions League partnership.