

Digital makes the brand connection

Digital media is the activation that gets users to engage with the brand to get more out of the sponsorship, as German energy provider E.ON demonstrated with its successful online association with the FA Cup

By Charlie Dundas, *MediaCom*

Digital media can no longer be considered 'new' media. Display advertising is now well established and the majority of brands will include at least a basic use of digital media in their marketing communications.

Specialist digital agencies have sprung up to provide brands with support in this area and existing communications agencies of all types continue to build teams to service clients' requirements. This investment into resources and development of the medium by media owners and agencies alike reflects the ever increasing value of digital media.

With digital media, a key difference from established media channels is that new innovations are practically limitless, and for those brands that are willing and able, it is possible to break new ground in communication channels on a regular basis.

In addition, digital media is very accountable (providing, of course, objectives are well-known and clearly stated before activity

begins). Reporting of delivery stats and the effects of differing forms of digital advertising can be produced quickly and accurately.

It is worth noting that the growth in importance and usage of digital media has not actually pushed existing media channels into oblivion. Most brands have not chosen to ignore traditional media channels in their marketing generally or sponsorship specifically. While digital media has opened a world of new marketing opportunities, successful communications will be driven by media channels working in unison.

DIGITAL MEDIA SPONSORSHIP

For the sponsorship industry, digital media represents an unprecedented opportunity to enhance and develop sponsorship activation. The combination of innovation and accountability that digital media can offer is perfect for the task of creating a meaningful dialogue with fans. Online channels enable brands to reach and interact with audiences in a way that has

not previously been possible. Brands have long used sponsorship as a means to associate with the values of the sponsorship property. Brand names can be paraded in front of TV cameras via branding and signage, fans are engaged at venues and marketing channels are bought to build awareness of the association.

However, actual engagement with fans has been hard to deliver to wide audiences, and use of content from the sponsored property has been restricted to TV formats. The internet, on the other hand, is driven by consumer interaction and the thirst for new or unique content. This can be delivered, created and disseminated by fans in a way that goes beyond the physical installation of the sponsorship property or traditional one-way media channels such as print, TV and radio.

The effect of this engagement can be tracked in near real-time and strategy altered accordingly – it is no longer enough to wait until the end of the sponsorship and rely on equivalent media evaluations to assess the effectiveness of the activity. Digital media allows a brand to understand the effect of the sponsorship on consumer behaviour.

Of course it is one thing that digital media exists. Using it successfully is quite another. A problem with the rapid development of innovations is that it can be hard to focus on one thing for fear of it becoming obsolete before the strategy has been delivered.

Therefore, as with all media usage, it is important to establish clearly defined objectives up front so that a relevant strategy can be created and delivered. Typical considerations

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would be: what is the purpose of the digital strategy? Who is the target audience? What content needs to be sourced, bought or created? What is the ideal mix of display and editorial/advertorial space? What are the latest innovations and are they relevant to the task in hand? What is the support media strategy? What is the available budget?

It is worth stating that good digital media practice should not be limited to sponsor brands. Rights holders are also starting to embrace the benefits on offer, particularly to create a case for investment among potential sponsors. Fan bases are bigger and better than ever before and dialogue and interaction between fans and rights holder has increased. Even unofficial fan sites can be accessed and engaged as a means to really build an association with the audience.

When innovation in the use of digital media in sponsorship is driven by both rights holders and sponsor brands alike, the net gain for both parties can be significant. As with all sponsorship activation there is no guarantee of success, but any strategy that ignores digital media is missing a critical building block.

SUMMARY

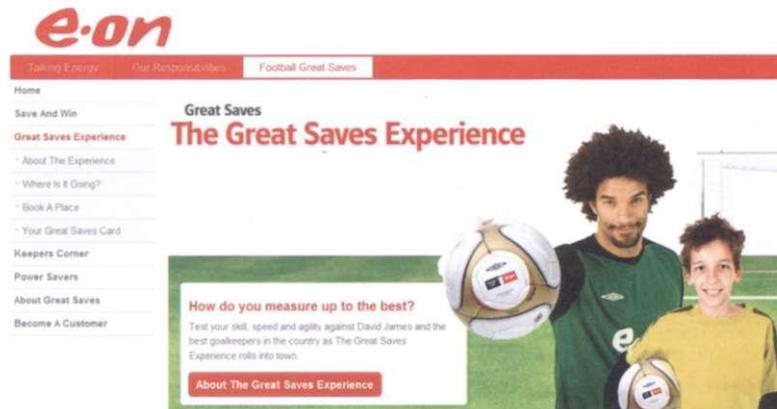
Despite the opinions of some in the media industry, sponsorship has never been a medium happy to fulfil a simple brand-building role. In this age of increased financial scrutiny, businesses cannot afford to spend money on sponsorship rights fees without having clear objectives, strong activation plans and rigorous accountability measures in place.

Sponsors and rights holders are constantly looking for new and better ways to connect with their audiences and fans. For some brands, sponsorship has become the foundation of their marketing programmes and these are the ones that have been at the forefront of sponsorship activation.

Digital media has a fundamental role to play in best practice sponsorship activation now. Further developments in technology will only make it easier for brands to reach fans and target audiences and to enhance their experience of, or interaction with, the sponsorship property.

It is certainly something that we at MediaCom are advocating strongly in the development of all sponsorship activity that we undertake with our clients.

CASE STUDY: E.ON



Augmented reality games have allowed the company to build awareness with sports fans

To support E.ON's sponsorship of the FA Cup, the brand undertook a trophy tour across the nation throughout the tournament in the 2008/09 season. This is by no means a unique or new concept, but it is one that has a proven track record of bringing a sponsorship to life above and beyond the actual match days.

However, E.ON's ambition did not end with the physical tour itself. In order to make the FA Cup accessible to a wider group of people and drive traffic to its website to encourage registrations, E.ON, with its agencies, saw a digital media opportunity.

The campaign concept was to enable fans of the two teams in the final to lift the FA Cup 'virtually' via emerging technology known as 'augmented reality'. In effect, fans could go online and through their webcam view capture imagery of themselves holding the FA Cup aloft. This incorporated either a photo or a video, with an introductory voiceover from TV football commentator Clive Tyldesley.

To promote this activity, E.ON used a combination of digital and traditional media. Digitally, a video showing fans how to lift the FA Cup was seeded out virally across a range of targeted sites. This activation was then supported by a national print campaign.

The aim was twofold: to raise awareness of the initiative and, again, to explain how to lift the FA Cup. In addition, this press activity included an 'augmented reality marker',

allowing those with enabled phones to access the Virtual FA Cup online via their phones straightaway.

This one-week campaign proved very successful. Publisher uptake of the content exceeded the averages for other campaigns by more than 5%. More than 90,000 users were driven to the microsite during the week. Click-through rate (CTR) from the seeded content to E.ON's site was three times higher than from its standard online display ads that were running at the same time.

The enduring success of the campaign is demonstrated by the fact that nearly 430,000 search results for "Virtual FA Cup" can still be found on Google.

As a result, E.ON is committed to using digital media in support of its FA Cup sponsorship. For the 2009/10 competition, the company has signed England goalkeeper David James as brand ambassador. One of the activations of this partnership has been a piece of viral content, showing James making great saves both with and without a blindfold.

The two-month campaign is already on track to significantly over-deliver against targets. CTR is 20 times greater than the average expected from standard online display ads and total views will be in excess of the estimated total by the end of the campaign.