

Evolving the sponsor/rights holder dynamic

By [Monique Vrey](#), issued by [Levergy](#)

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Three key focus areas that will help deliver more impactful sponsorship outcomes



The very recent past has exposed role players in the broader sponsorship industry who haven't had an eye on innovation in the past and, as a result, found themselves wanting when the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic created an environment that looked very different from anything that we were used to before. A new dynamic has forced local and international bodies to innovate at a more rapid pace than before, while finding new ways to continue events, tournaments, and content under new protocols.

The world might be returning to 'normal' in some instances but based on what we've been seeing, it's clear that effective collaboration between rights holders and sponsors needs real introspection and resolve if we, as role players, want to create meaningful impact for everyone involved.

This will unequivocally lead to work being created in a way that is mutually beneficial to both parties (and their objectives), while also generating better returns through planning and processes that enable a working environment where optimisation is encouraged.

In order to build a good foundation where a more aligned working dynamic between sponsors and rights holders is encouraged, I believe there are a few departure points that we should be focussing on:

1. Keep the fans at the heart of what you do

It has never been more imperative for sponsors and rights owners to keep the fans/consumers at the centre of their thinking, planning, and executions. Sure, we need to provide a platform for commercial returns through sponsorship activity, but I do believe that this is a natural by-product of people-centric campaigns that aim to enhance the fan's experience and deliver on preference, consideration, and advocacy metrics.

Attracting and retaining customers has never been more challenging, as a result of a globalised world and increasing consumer choices. It's up to the industry to optimise rights usage to ensure that we deliver jointly on the fan/consumer experience. Not only will this create more digitally led marketing opportunities for sponsors, but it will also help rights holders

to keep their content top of mind and relatable while their only way of reaching people is through their smartphone.

This also presents rights holders a challenge to provide meaningful replacement value for more traditional on-site rights that are no longer relevant or valuable. Most rights holders have access to significant audiences through their social media platforms – which means that it's probably worth investigating how this access can be used to make up for sponsors' lack of activation opportunities and diminishing AVE values. There has never been a better time to start including social media content amplification in rights packages, as well as a collaborative digital approach to the way that first party data is used to leverage relevant fan and consumers.

A recent example of where this has worked well for us in practice is the [#PlayYourPart campaign](#) that was used to relaunch the 2020 Nedbank Cup after the postponements brought on by lockdown. As Nedbank's sponsorship agency, we were in a great position to liaise between them and the rightsholder to ensure that everyone stayed aligned to the goals that we set out to achieve through the campaign. This partnership helped us to create a strong fan-centric campaign and an engaging match day experience that tapped into replacement values to ensure that a strong and aligned message was communicated to urge fans to act responsibly (and follow Covid-19 safety protocols) by supporting their teams from home. As a result, we saw a combined campaign reach of over 216 million and an all-time high spontaneous sponsorship awareness of 16.2%.

2. Better access

It's not news that rights holders have lost the personal in-stadium interaction between their primary asset, the players and the fans. Additionally, the Covid-19 situation (and likely the legacy of it in a post pandemic world) adds a layer of complexity to access because content teams generally won't be allowed anywhere near the teams, but there are effective ways to work around this by tapping into internal content teams working inside the team environment.

Generally speaking, better content is also in the interest of everyone involved. Not only will it add to the fan experience that has been limited to sitting on the couch, but it will also allow fans to make a personal (or at least closer) association with the tournament, teams, and players involved.

Sponsors are key in achieving this for the rights holder because leveraging budgets generally allow for the scale of production that is required to create this content, but also because they employ specialists who are equipped and experienced in coming up with targeted strategies, concise messaging, objective-led roll-out plans, as well as insights tools that are set up in a way that almost guarantees success. But without access and the opportunity to bring those ideas to life, campaigns will never reach their full potential or even get close to being as impactful as they could be.

The [#OfficiallyAwkward Snickers Bothlands campaign](#) is a recent example of how beneficial the outcome can be for everyone involved when access is provided through complete alignment.

3. More opportunities to innovate

Innovation is in everyone's best interest and it will ultimately benefit the rights holders more in the long run if they afford their sponsors with more opportunities to innovate and push the boundaries.

A recent example where I've experienced the value that innovation adds, is when we introduced [Fanmode](#) as a solution to the fans not being able to attend the historically sold out Nedbank Cup final in 2020 and again during the 2021 iteration of the tournament. This fully responsive, geo-located web app (an African first) seamlessly plugged into the over-arching [#PlayYourPart](#) campaign messaging by encouraging fans to watch the game from the safety of their homes, whilst giving them a platform to participate and react to the in-game action in real time. This fan engagement was integrated to in-stadium screens, as well as the live broadcast – and with over 2.4 million engagements during 90 minutes of football during the 2020 final, as well as a record-high net positive brand sentiment of 60.1%, it's safe to say that these innovations are well worth the upfront cash investment.

The bottom line is that times have changed and the sponsorship industry will probably never function in the way it did before

the pandemic. But that also means that there has never been a better time for rights holders and sponsors to come together and embrace the various opportunities that have arisen from the challenges. If we, as an industry collective, can create work that authentically keeps fans central to our thinking and executions, we have a real opportunity to create a lasting (and more valuable) impact across the board.

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