



# Tackling the opportunity of rugby sponsorship

## Starting whistle

September 9th 2011 sees the kick-off of the 7th official Rugby World Cup in New Zealand, the country where the first RWC was held 24 years ago. Most discussion will be based around which players will shine, what the upsets will be and the big question, can the host nation win for the first time since 1987?! However amid the talk of celebration, wins and losses... there will also be reference to the sponsors... 'I didn't know BrandX were sponsoring rugby', 'Did you see that viral of the England team – brilliant!' etc. Without sponsors, the Rugby World Cup would not be half the tournament and spectacle it is today. The big question for marketers, advertisers and potential sponsors is therefore what can rugby uniquely offer and how can interested brands capitalise on the opportunity?

## Ruck and maul – the uniqueness of the game

The RWC offers the potential for massive reach as arguably the third most popular and viewed sporting competition globally (behind the Olympics and the Football World Cup). In comparison to other major team sports, it reaches a wide and affluent demographic with 63% of those interested in rugby in the UK being ABC1, compared to 55% for football<sup>1</sup>. Rugby fans also support in a different way to other sports fans: they are fans of the game first and the team second. This gives a tournament sponsor more cut-through than other sports due to the unprecedented opportunities for 'coming

together to support'. And, rugby union is characterised as assertive, brave, adventurous and passionate<sup>2</sup>. These are brand values which are sought after and demanded, especially in shaky economic times, and sponsors have the opportunity to 'borrow' such values to reiterate and enhance their brand's image.

## Scissors, miss pass, side step - the tactics for association

The affluent fan base has historically led to a heavy sponsor presence from financial services and technology brands such as Blackberry, Microsoft, HSBC, Société Générale, and has helped to drive the current c.\$80m<sup>3</sup> worth of sponsorship revenue for the 2011 RWC. We would expect to see the sport's UK fan base grow, especially with the hosting of the Rugby World Cup in the UK in 2015. This will usher in new brands who recognise the opportunities from partnering with a sport whose star is in the ascendancy. Every potential sponsor will have different objectives, market priorities and budgets, and rugby provides a myriad of opportunities should the audience reach and relevance be right for that brand.

The most powerful brand associations with rugby have traditionally been founded on official rights; whether they be global or domestic, team or tournament based, online or offline. The box below shows just some of the official entry points.

Competition	Broadcast coverage	Key Sponsors
Rugby World Cup	119 markets	Mastercard, Toshiba, DHL
6 Nations	Europe	RBS, Accenture
Heineken Cup	Europe	Heineken, FedEx, EDF, Amlin
Aviva Premiership	UK	Aviva, Land Rover, QBE
Home Nations	Europe	O2 (England), Admiral (Wales), Murray (Scotland), O2 (Ireland)

<sup>1</sup>Source: TGI 2011 Q3 incl. BMI and TGI Sport+

<sup>2</sup>Source: MediaZ

<sup>3</sup>Source: TWSM 2011

Increasingly we expect to see more unofficial routes of association being explored, whereby an association with rugby is based on more creative partnerships. This might include sponsored viewing areas/tents for finals through to individual ambassador deals, apps and content etc. With the 2011 RWC taking place in the Southern Hemisphere, and therefore much of the UK match screenings being in early mornings, the role of digital media and content will be more

relevant than at any other World Cup. Due to advances in VOD and mobile, fans in different time zones (mainly Northern hemisphere) will be able to view the whole game, highlights and exclusive content at the office or on the move. To ensure official sponsors and broadcasters maximise their desired ROI, they have created smartphone apps and specific online content to drive traffic to their owned platforms and not those of other online broadcasters.

### The winning try, the glorious drop goal – rugby activation that has caught our eye

Whether a brand has official or unofficial rugby associations, it will need to apply the principles of effective activation to deliver return on brand and business objectives. The following campaigns are a selection of those that have resonated so far:



• **EDF Energy – National Schools Rugby:** EDF Energy supplement their official rugby sponsorships with a UK grassroots schools rugby campaign. They focus on increasing youth participation through a national mixed tag rugby tournament and linking each school with their closest Premiership club for training and inspiration. The school regional winners play at half time during Premiership games, culminating in the finals at Twickenham. EDF Energy also use local ambassadors to drive regional awareness and England internationals to stimulate national coverage. The campaign has introduced over 112k children to tag rugby and increased EDF Energy's touchpoints to parents and schools.



• **O2 – The Blue Room:** O2 have looked outside of traditional experiential and paid, owned and earned media to create their own asset within rugby. They have taken the mantra that watching a match live is not just about the 80 mins of the game but it is the whole day out with friends, and have introduced the Blue Room to Twickenham's famous West car park. This gives O2 customers the chance to get a free beer, pie and to meet the players within the comfort of the O2 tent. To gain entry there is a text and response metric for O2 customers. A powerful example of on-the-ground brand experiences being used to reward loyalty.



• **Adidas – All Black Cameras:** Adidas encouraged a two way dialogue with rugby fans by encouraging fans to submit photos to be used in the next ATL ad campaign. 100,000 disposable cameras were distributed at All Blacks games and fans were asked to document their day. Around 70% of the cameras were returned, with shirt sales reportedly up 19% (compared to 5% in previous years). A creative way to generate content and engage current and prospective customers.



• **Land Rover – England & Josh Lewsey:** Land Rover created a brilliantly entertaining, short and easy to share piece of content when they created a viral showing England player, Josh Lewsey, getting one up on a brash footballer. The viral ad swept across the UK and generated 200k views on YouTube within days raising awareness of Land Rover, their rugby sponsorship and leveraging the desired personality values of the sport.



• **IRB World Cup app – DHL & Land Rover:** DHL and Land Rover have teamed up with the IRB and are leveraging the increasing reach of smartphones by providing a free smartphone app. This will give fans across the world live text commentary, score updates, video highlights at half time, travel and stadium guides

### The team sheet – how to be a part of the first XV

Following the wrap up of the 2011 RWC, there will be opportunities for renewals and new partnerships at Worldwide Partner, Official Sponsor and Tournament Supplier level. The 2015 RWC will take place in the UK, providing increased reason for both domestic and global brands to be involved. Away from the RWC there are numerous opportunities within European and domestic rugby as highlighted above, as well as options for grassroots engagement. Regardless of the entry point, any brand needs to be clear about their objectives and the principles of effective activation to make an association work, taking learnings from both the benchmarks for success above and activation in other sports. Rugby offers the opportunity to actively engage a passionate audience and it can generate clear return on objectives; so long as it is done in a way that is entertaining, relevant and credible.

## Contact

For more information on how you can create market-leading sponsorships and activation programmes across all platforms, please visit [www.mecaccess.com/uk](http://www.mecaccess.com/uk) or contact:

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