

A journey to delight: How GMR helps brands boost the fan experience through technology and communication

Innovation drives fan experience far beyond stadium confines

Fans don't just experience sporting events any more. They go on journeys that innovations in content and technology make more exciting than ever.

Designing fan experiences for brands like Lowe's, Esurance and Visa at events from the Super Bowl to the Olympics to NASCAR, GMR Marketing's approach blends decades of event experience with forward-thinking views on marketing and consumer engagement. That philosophy has also manifested in several proprietary and custom digital offerings that teams, brands and properties can use to engage fans.

"Fan usage of social media and consumption of content now allows us to think about fan engagement not as a moment in time, but as a continuous process," says Lesley Pinckney, GMR's SVP, Digital Strategy. "Fandom is always there, and the right content at the right time allows for connections that don't have to be tied to the stadium or arena experience. Think about your own experience — when you have football tickets, the excitement, conversations, and passion start way before game day."

Taking that larger approach, GMR is helping brands deliver an experience that — through content, social outreach and live activations — can bookend the actual game or event and enhance the event itself.

Pre-pre-game

It starts with engaging fans before the event begins.

"We're encouraging our clients to really start to extend their conversation around the fan experience," Pinckney says. "Pre-event, we're looking to do everything from helping sell more tickets, to promoting activities happening on site, to just getting people excited."

GMR knows that for most sporting events there's a steady ramp up of anticipation as the event approaches, an observation backed up by social listening. Brands need to find organic ways to be part of that early excitement.

For example, GMR managed Lowe's sponsorship of Jimmie Johnson when the driver was chasing his historic seventh NASCAR Championship.

"We knew that every single week, there would be a tremendous amount of fan excitement surrounding his race journey toward the seventh win. So we created a series of social promotions that would happen prior to each race weekend," Pinckney says.

GMR combined insights into each



"When you get a consumer at a sporting event, it's an extremely passionate environment," says Pete Smith of GMR. Brands can provide experiences like this one, in which fans get to be batters.

race location with audience targeting to encourage fans to share their experiences. The agency then collected and distributed that content in advance as a way to get people engaged with Lowe's for each upcoming race.

"Right before the race started, we would push the curated content out to our



Positive experiences for fans during sporting events, done well, can drive brands' activations

fan base, and gather that excitement to put Lowe's on the map as a place for you to get exclusive information," Pinckney says. "In that scenario, we were developing, mining and curating user-generated content, which could be used to educate fans on interesting events happening on the ground."

In addition to massive campaigns like the one to position Lowe's as a go-to source for Jimmie Johnson information, sponsors are using the pre-event time to "deliver surprise and delight," Pinckney says. For instance, a sponsor can use social listening to find people who might need tickets, and engage with fans around ticket giveaways.

"We're seeing that those types of activations up front can really pay dividends in the back," says Pinckney, by putting brands in touch with fans, and gathering insights that can help those brands remain engaged during and after the event.

The augmented event

Innovations in the fan experience carry all the way through the event itself, says Pete Smith, GMR's SVP, Digital Solutions.

"When you get a consumer at a sporting event, it's an extremely passionate environment," Smith says. "Fans are excited to be there and see their teams play. Sporting events offer a unique opportunity to introduce a brand as part of the excitement, which creates a memorable experience for that consumer that they can relate to."

With that level of initial interest, sporting events offer brands a chance to issue a call to action, or to drive fans to post on social media.

When designing memorable brand experiences, GMR differentiates fans into two very broad categories: ordinary fans and those seeking a VIP experience.

For VIPs, the agency uses a proprietary hospitality management tool called Orchestrate to manage all aspects of a guest's experience at marquis events such as the Olympics, World Cup, or Super Bowl.

Orchestrate allows event hosts to track everything from guest travel and check-in to scheduled activities surrounding the event like a spa day or golf outing. For instance, Visa's guests in Pyeongchang will be treated to a fully-managed experience across every aspect of their trip, from hospitality to unique excursions, all coordinated through Orchestrate. The platform also integrates RFID technology to assist guests with difficult travel/directions, and to deliver relevant content to their personal devices based on location.

It's all about making sure the experience is as seamless as possible, allowing for maximum brand communication and engagement and a positive relationship with the brand.

Smith also sees plenty of opportunity for brands to engage regular fans and

enhance their experience at the stadium, ranging from giant screens to virtual reality. For example, at the MLB All Star game, GMR created a virtual reality experience for client Esurance in which fans could put themselves in the place of San Francisco Giants catcher Buster Posey — the online insurance company's spokesman — and experience what it is to be a catcher in the major leagues by calling the pitch and trying to catch it.

"The realistic experience generated a ton of buzz at the event and post-event through media outlets," Smith says, and connected the brand to fans' experience of the All Star Game.

At-event experiences are also an opportunity for brands to capture data through GMR's NowPik, a photo, video and GIF platform that extends a brand's reach by creating shareable content in realtime.

"That then sets us up to do a bunch of interesting things once they leave," Pinckney says.

Omnichannel opportunity

One of the challenges of sports events is that no matter how great the experience, "we're still reaching a limited number of people," Pinckney says. When we look post-event, one of the key things that we consider is how do we bring this experience to more people?"

GMR tackles that challenge in a couple ways.

One is passion-driven content. Pinckney says the agency has an arm devoted to capturing content via video and pushing it out to fans so they can hold onto the experience and share it with friends.

Depending on the quality and exclusivity of the content, "you can get a tremendous amount of activation and expand to beyond just the people who are in the stadium," Pinckney says. GMR can then use the data and customized content to help brands reach audiences that mirror event attendees' interests.

"You're really in a place where you can take those thousand people that you saw at your footprint and, based on their Internet behavior and searching, you can create larger audiences that behave just like the people that came to your activation," she explains.

That's an experience that not only lingers but expands. ■



Virtual reality, shown here, is among the new technology driving brands' fan engagement efforts

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