

SA sports media is missing the point with sponsors

 By [Michael Vismas](#)

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The world of sports sponsorship is often limited to the two main players in this game - the brand and the successful sports star or team it is aligning itself with. And the fan watches from the sidelines.



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I've covered professional sport for 25 years, so I've seen a number of variations of this model. There are fan outings and autograph sessions or company visits. And a sport such as golf offers the unique ability of playing with the professionals in pro-ams, although this has yet to realise its full potential.

But the transaction generally stays the same.

Right time, right place stuff

Few sponsors in top professional sport are able to realise the maximum value for the people they sponsor these stars and teams for – their clients. And even fewer are able to get so creative about it that they get the full buy-in of the teams they sponsor.

I'm also going to tell you why the mainstream media is following a dead model in which they've been left behind as

sponsors, fans and teams have moved on. The sports media revolution has been so swift it's gone straight past them. They are so confused that they'll use the great content sponsors send them in press releases, but then drop the sponsor's name from the team. They think they are making a point. The truth is, they've missed the point.

Vodacom has truly excelled in the sports sponsorship department. When they launched in South Africa in the early Nineties, the company immediately identified that the best way to the South African's heart is through sport. So, they threw millions at sports sponsorships. They snapped up the best teams and events, and they shaped the sports sponsorship landscape of the new democratic South Africa. It was right time, right place stuff and sports fans loved it.

But as others caught up, they had to evolve their strategy. So, they took it the way of the fan. The team would no longer be the hero. It would be the partner in making the fan the hero.

#BullsRedTour

The recent #BullsRedTour was a perfect example of how professional, refined and globally cutting-edge this strategy has become. An example of how South African sport and its sponsors are truly setting a global benchmark for what you can accomplish with a sponsorship. In fact, in my 25 years of covering international sport, I have yet to see this level of excellence in terms of a brand and sports team working so well together to create value, substance and significance for clients and fans alike.

The #BullsRedTour saw Vodacom Red take its payoff line of "Expect More" and reward 20 of its top clients with a trip to New Zealand to watch the Vodacom Bulls play the Crusaders in Christchurch and followed by three days to enjoy the sights of Sydney.

Simple enough. No real differentiator there.

But when you are truly successful with your sponsorship is not when you receive world-class ROI values. It's when you have a relationship with the team that allows you to do the following. A dinner with the coaching staff and selected players on the eve of the match. The guests stayed in the same hotel as the team, met them in the lobby and then walked to dinner together.

Personal connection

A casual connection of massive value to the fans. They sang happy birthday for head coach John Mitchell as he was presented with a chocolate cake after dinner. In this age of almost unlimited access to information through social media, any fan can sound like they are speaking from within the inner circle about team affairs. There are no longer bonus points around the braai for this. But not many can have a personal connection they can talk about, and this was it.

The next day, the fans were invited into the team room. I remember a time when as an accredited sports journalist you did not get access to the team room. Now a fan can have this experience and see the noticeboard with strategy plays on it. Even better, they can be part of their own jersey handover ceremony, receiving Vodacom Bulls jerseys with their names on it and handed to them by Mitchell himself.

As Mitchell told me, "It's always special to give people insight into what you do. If people can come inside the inner sanctum and witness the final stages before kick-off, see what we do and then receive a jersey that is a replica of what the players will run out in, it just opens up a whole new world for them as fans."

Content on a different level

I attended this tour as the official journalist. I was given complete access to the team and coaching staff. If I needed an interview, it was arranged. The result was content on a different level. This wasn't win or lose, and by how much, content. It was far more personal content because of the access I was afforded. And it brings with it an ability to produce different

journalism.

After the Crusaders match, a number of these fans gathered in the hotel lobby. They were later joined by Mitchell, who spent the better part of five hours chatting with them about everything from his own journey in the game to his thoughts on world rugby and his vision for the Vodacom Bulls.

This kind of direct feedback is what the fan used to have to go to the mainstream media to find. No longer. The sponsor is now making this possible. So what then does the fan who was on this tour have to gain from his daily sports report in his morning newspaper that he now hasn't heard straight from the coach or perhaps picked up in the digital space on social media? Herein lies the challenge for the traditional media. And it's one they're ill-suited to overcome as they continue to pursue a dead model of journalism.

By becoming a partner with the sponsor in this process, they will gain unrivalled access to the team and as such the quality stories they seek.

Sponsorship value is becoming personal

Yes, the sports media does still require the latitude to be able to criticise the team when needs be and must have its independence in this process. This requires a level of maturity on behalf of the journalist, sponsor and team to manage this process, and it's not so far-fetched to believe this is possible. After all, we can disagree and remain partners in a process when there is benefit for all parties.

At the moment, the sponsor is creating unrivalled value for its clients. The team is happy to accommodate this because they in turn are deriving financial benefit from the sponsorship and finding new ways to reach their audience more effectively. In Vodacom's case, they are enabling this process and doing the job of team marketing as well. It's a win-win for all concerned.

The mainstream media is currently sitting on the outside of this process. And to be honest, it's not being missed all that much. Sponsorship value is becoming about far more than just column inches. It's becoming personal.

The mainstream media needs to find a way to be part of this value chain, rather than to keep kicking against it.

ABOUT MICHAEL VLISMAS

Michael Vlismas is an award-winning sports journalist and broadcaster, and owner of a sports media agency. Michael Vlismas has worked in sports media for 25 years and for amongst others Reuters and the BBC World Service. He is the Africa correspondent for the international publication Global Golf Post and writes for a variety of South African and international newspapers and magazines.

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