

Russia 2018:

A tournament where to be different, was to be normal, and where brands that gave back to consumers, gave themselves the upper hand.



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Curating 'Brand England': ~~A Nation Expects~~ A Nation Respects.

This time two years ago, with the now-iconic Icelandic clap still ringing in its ears, the nation fell un-ceremoniously out of love with the England football team. It wasn't the first time, and it will certainly not be the last; just a quick look back on England's relationship with the British media throughout the modern footballing era throws up countless examples of sorrow, scandal and scathe been between the two parties, in both directions.

However, unlike their predecessors, the players and coaches who make up this current England team have earned a hitherto unprecedented air of genuine support from key individuals in the press. And while this novel fondness with which the tabloids viewed England throughout the four weeks that the team spent in Russia was certainly in part down to their underdog status, it was equally a result of the unprecedented access granted to the media by Southgate & co, not to mention the refreshing, media-friendly image which the team curated throughout. Epitomised by the pre-World Cup NFL-esque press day at St. George's Park that gave journalists individual access to every member of the 23 man squad, this new approach also included 'player vs press' darts matches and intense duels in the bowling alley, all of which provided media with positive stories which in turn relieved the pressure on the players.

Looking back, albeit fairly cynically, on the way England played, it wouldn't be wholly unreasonable to suggest that Southgate 'getting' the media and the importance of keeping the headline-writers on-side, meant a few of the team's more forgettable performances were left relatively un-criticised. Should it have been the much-maligned Beckham, Gerrard and Lampard-generation donning the shirt as the team stuttered to a last-minute 2-1 opening win against Tunisia, or were it to have been Rooney that missed the opportunities which the irreproachable Kane had on Wednesday's game against Croatia, the headlines would have no-doubt made for less savoury reading.

This current crop of England players have understood the importance of good PR, not just for the consolidation of their public image, but – as they reunite their respective clubs – more importantly their potential to be a major international footballing force.

FHFavourite Hijacks: A purposeful and principled Paddy Power

Major sporting events will never be short of attempts by brands to capitalise on the hype and eyeballs which they inevitably attract both by official sponsors and non-sponsors alike.

Brazil proved to be an attractive hijacking opportunity due in part to the iconic imagery and sites for which the country is renowned – think Christ the Redeemer on cereal packets and/or yellow and green colour schemes. This year's tournament provided an equal ambushing opportunity to brands, but for markedly different reasons.

In its selection of an autocratic, oppressive nation-state as the host of the World Cup, FIFA perturbed some brands from investing in the tournament, for fear of appearing to condone the host-nation's values. And while the location of the year's World Cup led many brands to play safe and steer clear of any significant statement or position, there were a few notable exceptions where brands stayed true to their principles and activated clever and effective campaigns despite the tournament's contentious political context.

Paddy Power 'came out' all guns blazing – with two punchy and purposeful stunts which both shined a light on, and pledged funding around two contentious Russian policies, and who therefore claim the crown of our FHFavourite brand hijack.

Using 'Agee' the polar bear as the protagonist, the bookmaker's first stunt – the initial reveal of which caused considerable furore – was a terrific exposé of the Russian Arctic's environmental and geographical secrecy and a pledge to Polar Bears International. Next, came an equally commendable promise to donate £10k to an LGBT charities for every goal the Russian football team score, both to highlight and rebuke Russia's 'policy of discrimination'.

Paddy Power aren't alone in speaking out on important, and sometimes divisive issues; but they are among the bravest and most imaginative. In appealing beyond the 'liberal set', Paddy Power has used its unique brand power to shine a very bright and uncomfortable light on LGBT and environmental issues in a way that speaks as loudly to the fan as it does the activist. And where other brands would have paid lip-service to such causes they deem worthy, Paddy Power parted with £110,000 of its own money to prove its point.

In the hijack-campaign space, British Airways and Ikea also receive worthy mentions for a series of quick, but effective reactive activations and campaigns. The flat-pack furniture brand released [a series of dry, witty posters](#) which will have cemented the brand's place as one of the UK's funniest. Meanwhile British Airways celebrated England's success with [a waistcoat give-away to its customers flying to Moscow](#), and releasing a ticket [for 'Football' scheduled to fly from Moscow to 'Home'](#). In doing so the airline showed a sense of humour that it has hitherto left un-tapped; something that will no doubt resonate well with consumers.

FHFavourite Sponsors: The King of Beers reigns supreme in Lidl England.

Being the official beer partner of the World Cup, or indeed a national team, is a lot harder, and more complicated than it looks. The big spend which it entails does not necessarily equate to increased affinity with consumers, and the large amount of money which being a sponsor requires, needs to be matched by an equally large idea that often requires multiple layers of approval, unlike the aforementioned hijacks.

On a domestic level, the German supermarket Lidl won the hearts of many a British consumer, by exercising its partnership and endorsement of the England national team to create its 'Dream Big with Lidl' campaign. Placing the work that it has done in grassroots football at the heart of its messaging, the retailer managed to put together a pair of video clips both of which we have no shame in admitting made us feel all warm and fuzzy inside. The campaign, headlined with Lidl's commendable claim that it has created over 3-million footballing opportunities, was complimented by unrivalled social activity that included [in-game coverage which used content of its 'Lidl England' team](#), and [quick-witted, personable use of GIFS](#), all of which complied with stringent FIFA regulations.

Adopting a less UK-centric lens, it was Budweiser's 'Light up the World Cup' global campaign, complimented by several consumer-driven, experiential activations on a local level, which orchestrated the most effective, consistent and comprehensive campaign across the globe.

The AB InBev Company's distribution of over eight million cups that use sound-detecting LED lights, which respond to the crowd's volume, is just one example of how the brand has put the consumer's experience at the forefront of all of its World Cup activity. This consumer-first mind-set was complimented by local activations which, in the UK and Moscow alone, consisted of Bud Boats swanning their way up and down The Thames and Moscovia River respectively, and the now-iconic Bud Hotel setting up shop in the Russian capital. It also created 'The Bud Bot', which gave fans the opportunity to vote for the Man of the Match, enter competitions and order home deliveries of beer so fans needn't worry about missing kick-off (or worse, God Save the Queen) at the expense of a last-minute dash to the nearest off-licence.

Too often brands look to capitalize on the attention and devotion which sport and – ergo – major sporting events are recipients of. However, the most successful interventions, campaigns and activations don't capitalize on the fan experience, but add to it. In Lidl (via its commitment to grassroots football and Budweiser (in its relentless focus on the consumer), this World Cup found two companies which were willing to do just that. And in adding to the fans' sporting experience, the two of them will have slowly earned their respect and trust. It is then, and only then, that as a brand you have the right to operate successfully in a space which, were it not for the un-solicited attention and indeed love which fans devote to sport, would not exist.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: THE MAGIC OF FOOTBALL AND GEOPOLITICAL DISRUPTION

The 2018 World Cup in Russia was defined by disruption. Powers like Italy and the Netherlands sitting at home watching Iceland and Panama make their World Cup debut. The passing of the torch from Ronaldo and Messi to new superstars like France's Kylian Mbappé. And the controversial introduction of VAR, able to spot the subtle shirt tugs and mistimed tackles that previously may have gone unnoticed.

The geopolitical dynamics of Russia 2018 are similar to VAR, a radical re-shaping of the old order, in part defined by little moments of great significance.

Emboldened Russia

Heading into the tournament, host Russia has been the world's disruptor. Active interference in the 2016 U.S. election...accusations of chemical weapons usage in the UK Skripal poisoning...interference in Syria, the Baltics and Eastern Europe...all have put Russia in the spotlight. The 2018 World Cup offered a timely opportunity to Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin to present a different picture to the world, both of his country and its people.

The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi gave Russia the roadmap to host a high-profile event showcasing the country, despite criticisms about LGBT protections and human rights and a legacy defined by the doping scandal. Russia faced similar questions ahead of the World Cup, along with concerns about hooliganism and safety that received particular attention in England. The slightest problems would have triggered an intense international backlash.

In contrast to expectations, President Putin had his country on its best behaviour, creating a month-long event that presented Russia as friendly, welcoming and open, complemented by the Russian team's strong performance and jubilant Russian fans. The positive optics of the tournament didn't just counter the negative rhetoric; they presumably also will give President Putin the cover to continue his disruptive behaviour around the world. Just days after the Sochi Olympics Closing Ceremony, Russia began the annexation of Crimea. This year, Presidents Putin and Trump met for the highly controversial Helsinki summit.

The Political World Cup

Football culture has long been intermingled with politics, from the sectarian divide between Rangers and Celtic in Scotland, to the political divide between Barcelona and Madrid, to the regional divide between Northern and Southern Italian clubs. Even with FIFA's desire to unite the world through the magic of football, this year's World Cup was marked by subtle but significant political actions on and off the pitch.

The double-headed eagle hand motion by Switzerland's Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri, both of Kosovar Albanian background, wasn't just a goal celebration. The symbol comes from Albania's flag, and represents the longstanding conflict with Serbia, Switzerland's opponent in the match. Both players received fines for unsporting behaviour but avoided match bans.

Similarly, videos of Croatian defender Domagoj Vida shouting "Glory to Ukraine" ignited controversy following his country's win over Russia. Facing intense whistles from Russian fans and Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova declaring that "There is soccer, and there is politics, and the two are different things", Vida issued an apology.

Egypt based its players at a camp in Chechnya, prompting in a wave of attention after star player Mohamed Salah was made an honorary citizen of the Russian region by Kremlin-backed leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who has faced international condemnation on human rights and other issues.

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And finally, Martin Selmayr, Secretary General of the European Commission, enraged Brexit-supporting England fans after a tweet of football and EU flag emojis minutes after Croatia knocked the Three Lions out of the tournament.

Like VAR, all involved small moments that suddenly thrust players, countries and geopolitics into the spotlight. And like VAR, all left football supporters debating who was right or wrong, and whether the rules were applied fairly. As a global sporting body, what right or role should FIFA have to adjudicate such disputes?

World Cup 2022: Qatar's Opportunity or Biggest Burden?

Hosting a major sporting spectacle can mark a socio-economic turning point or can be a high-profile moment of political difficulty. For FIFA and Qatar, the 2022 World Cup will almost certainly present tremendous challenges.

Qatar's desire to host the World Cup aligns with its aim of projecting itself on the world stage, and will undoubtedly feature a level of opulence that showcases the country's economic and diplomatic power to the world's sporting, political and business elite. Even with the current blockade by its Gulf neighbours, the World Cup could be a boon for tourism, FDI and Qatar's longer-term reputation.

However, Qatar is already facing a level of scrutiny beyond that of Russia that will only escalate over the next four years. The country has endured several years of debate about corruption in bidding, human rights and now the disruption of shifting the tournament from the northern hemisphere's summer to winter.

For a country that is naturally conservative and religious, the World Cup also will involve a sudden exposure of its culture, laws and way of life. In turn, it will introduce to Qatar a different type of political expression, social behaviour and media consumption.

Not only does that risk disrupting the fabric of Qatari society, but it could also force FIFA and Qatari officials to make difficult choices about how to manage freedom of expression, opposing viewpoints and historically unacceptable behaviour in the Emirate. The ramifications will extend far beyond the 2022 World Cup, Qatar's borders or the football world.

TECHNOLOGY: AN INITIAL LOOK AT VAR

The 2018 World Cup will be remembered as an historic moment in football; it was the first major tournament that adopted the use of Video Assisted Referee (VAR). And whether you're pro-VAR or not, it certainly had an impact.

FIFA cited the elimination of clear, obvious and often result determining errors as the reason for VAR's introduction. The technology was a long-overdue nod to the widely held, common sense belief that whereas referees on the pitch cannot see everything that happens during the 90 minutes, an official sat in a studio somewhere, can. VAR was also adopted to clean up the sport's reputation for foul play; one which it could be argued is growing – be that through cynical tackles or the improved 'quality' of exaggeration/diving from Messrs Neymar, Busquets, Suarez et al. by reducing the temptation for players to commit violent conduct on the pitch. But has it worked?

Though the media has hounded VAR throughout the tournament, not least for its controversial use in the final itself, a quick review of the statistics and the opinions of senior officials in the game show promising signs.

A supposed 95 percent of all refereeing decisions were correct pre-VAR, but with VAR assisting the 2018 World Cup, across all 62 matches, accuracy has risen to 99.32 percent. FIFA president, Gianni Infantino, has also proudly announced that in this World Cup that there have been "zero red cards for violent play". As for the impact to gameplay itself, BBC pundits, like Gary Lineker and Alan Shearer, have been commentating in similar vein, commending the introduction of the technology into football, albeit needing some fine tuning, like speed and consistency of use.

While VAR is proving popular with spectators and match officials, players too are starting to wise up as more cameras, with more accessible replays of their actions, are filming them at all times. Once a time where referees could be fooled by over-exaggerated reactions to fouls and diving, players know that the 35 or so VAR cameras are there to call them out. Although some may still try, players are being smarter about their actions during play – such as checking their run before they play offside or not calling for undeserved penalties.

Despite a few teething problems, it seems as if it's a case of 'so VAR, so good' – and FIFA's introduction of the new technology looks to have more positives than negatives.

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