

Sponsorship doesn't equal signage

Sponsorship or Surroundership? Which is right for you?

Spending on sports sponsorships averages \$27 billion annually in the US alone. US music sponsorships are near \$1 billion annually. The opportunity for visibility and engagement is vast; and as our desire for more IRL experiences continues to grow, activating around these passion points only becomes more attractive. The power of their presence is underscored by the ability of these passion points to still unify most Americans—across ages, genders, socio-economic brackets, and professions—even in the most divisive of times.

But what's the right way for your brand to tap in?

There's no silver bullet for leveraging these passion points. Business objectives, audience targets, brand ambition, and investment ranges are all considerations.

Sponsorships often require significant investment. There's not just the sponsorship itself, there's the activation of it and the common multi-year commitment. That right there is enough to give many brands pause.

Surroundership offers a shortcut. This isn't about trying to undercut teams or leagues guerrilla style; rather, it is a way for brands to participate in and around the culture of a sport, team, or artist that exudes similar benefits to sponsorship. Surrounderships can happen on their own, or can involve partners of different kinds. While the most basic form of 'surroundership' may come from buying media in and around the broadcast of an event, we see it as a deeper opportunity.

Surroundership

Windermere Real Estate Services

Windermere Real Estate is the largest regional real estate company in the Western U.S.



A family-run business anchored in Seattle, the brand was keen to support the 'home teams' but budgets wouldn't align. Seattle Sounders FC was not only a brand and organization that valued family, it was an increasingly valued franchise in the MLS and in its home market. Windermere worked with the local Fox affiliate to brand the persistent broadcast scorebug with audio drop-ins throughout the game. The result: most agents believed the brand was now a sponsor. The brand took a similar approach around the Winter Olympics, wrapping local athlete vignettes on the NBC affiliates and celebrating how they all go 'All In' just like the real estate agents that fuel their brand.

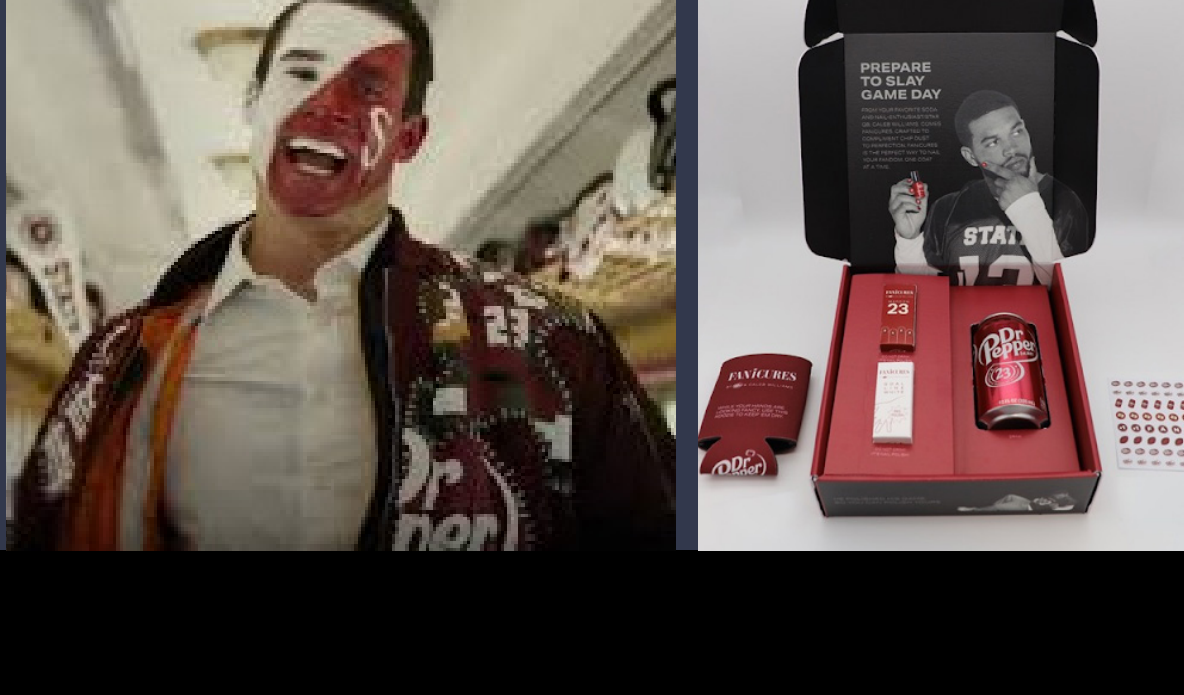
Sponsorship

Dr. Pepper

Dr. Pepper has gone all in on college sports—creating their own culture of sorts.



Fanville has evolved into a cult following. They understand and push off the nuances of college football fandom. They've been agile in execution, leaning into unique moments such as USC's Caleb Williams' nail painting tradition—inspiring the launch of the Dr. Pepper Fanicles nail polish set. And they've proven their commitment to the audience through meaningful programs like the Tuition Giveaway. Today Dr. Pepper is tied with Pepsi as the number two soft drink brand in the United States, behind only Coke.



The Trade-Offs

Sponsorships clearly come with IP rights and (potentially) bigger stages for brands to engage around. For starters, team or concert sponsors may have rights to marks and the ability to say they are the official (insert category) of the team/event. They often earn promotion from the team/artists themselves, have access to talent, and can engage with fans very directly.

Surrounderships require more creativity and flexibility. Surrounderships can involve athletes, but not teams. Or neither. Brands must be okay with leaning into general color schemes, broader references to the event or team, and relying on other channels outside the team to make the connection.

Allies for Surroundership

Leagues, Teams, and Event Producers are the clear allies for sponsorship opportunities. But allies for surroundership can be found in many areas.

Media partners are ripe for surroundership opportunities.

In a world where CTV and programmatic buying have become go-tos for effectiveness and efficiency, direct-to-publisher relationships carry great value when it comes to surroundership. And it may be one area where local broadcast and publishers still carry a unique carrot; offering unique integration opportunities in and around those events.

Consider:

- Own a Grammy's digital countdown clock on a local broadcast or news site with creative work that leans into the power of music.
- Working with local sports media to create and sponsor a weekly segment around your sport of choice—sponsor the 'play of the week,' 'save of the week' as a retail brand, or 'fan of the week.' Create a moment that works for your brand story *and* taps into the fandom of your team(s).
- Leveraging national/local partnerships to 'get inside the stadium.' Outlets like NBC Sports Regional Networks offer unique opportunities to bring non-sponsor brands into affiliated team stadiums rather than solely in external media at much lower costs than sponsorships.
- Geo-fencing event areas to push meaningful interactions/engagements to attendees.
- Joining forces with adjacent event teams. Teams like BYG Music are focused on connecting brands and artists. They bring the unique ability to integrate brands into Grammy or CMA parties, music videos, and more without the costs of official event sponsorship. But to the attendees or viewers, it all feels one in the same.



Experiential and Outdoor around stadiums/events

Think about how you can show up around an event. This could be anything from street teams and street minders that create a connection between you and fans. It might be teaming up with a local bar or a vacant building to create a watch party or post-event event. Consider branded ride-swarms that help people get to or from an event. In any of these situations, creativity matters. The success or failure of these surrounderships relies on meaningfully connecting your brand to fan needs/wants.

Athlete/Artist collabs

NIL deals present new opportunities for brands to tap into the culture of college sports without a direct team affiliation. Look at college athletes who represent your brand values or are organic fans of your brand (just please don't just pick a top player without a strategic reason.) Access emerging musicians that connect with your target audience through partners like Music Audience Exchange. Teaming up with prominent people creates moments that aren't sponsorships, but may feel like it to other fans. Think of them as social influencers or creators in their own right. Those budgets might also be where you unlock investment for surroundership.

Aflac Doubles Down on Women's Sports

For several years, Aflac has partnered with strong SEC sports personalities—from Nick Saban to Dawn Staley—as an SEC sports sponsor. As they saw the rise of women's sports, they shifted their focus from men's college basketball to women's college basketball and deepened their relationship with Staley. Beyond that official sponsorship and partnership, Aflac partnered with TOGETHXR to raise the visibility of women's sports and hosted watch parties at female sports bars like The Sports Bra. Without being a full sponsor of all women's sports, they surrounded the culture of women's sports in meaningful ways that put them at the center of the conversation.



Where The Fans At?

10 insightful differences that may inform where your brand leans or how they activate.

Not all sports fans are alike, and the stereotypes of each league may or may not hold. Music fans aren't always who they seem. After all, 39% of those who attend music festivals have an HHI of \$100K+, yet 70% of those who say they support brands who sponsor live music and events have an HHI of under \$100K. Understanding the fan bases of various leagues, conferences, teams, and entertainment properties is critical to driving a successful sponsorship.

Just consider this handful of differentiators between fans.

Music and sports aren't distinct. Of the 17MM people who attended live music events or festivals last year, about 1/3 also follow sports/athletes on social media. The same can be said for nearly every sports fan, with 1/3 of fans also following music groups on social media. In fact, UFC fans have the greatest propensity to also follow music groups on social.



Gameday rituals and traditions reign supreme in college... College sports fans are on average 10% more likely than professional sports fans to think in-stadium rituals and traditions are important to the game day experience. In fact, it's most pronounced in the Big East, where they're an average of 30% more likely to think rituals are very important.



...and around the pitch. Out of professional leagues. MLS and NWSL fans highly value game day traditions and rituals, much like those we see on soccer pitches overseas, and are on average 25% more likely to think these are very important to their experience.



Soccer Fans Love Their Selfies. Of all fans who love to participate in social media photo opps at a game, nearly 50% of them are fans of either the MLS or NWSL. In fact, MLS fans are 82% more likely than the average American to participate. Nearly 50% of fans who love to participate in social media photo opps at a game are MLS or NWSL fans and NWSL fans are 110% more likely than the average American. This is 20-30% more likely than fans of other pro sports leagues.



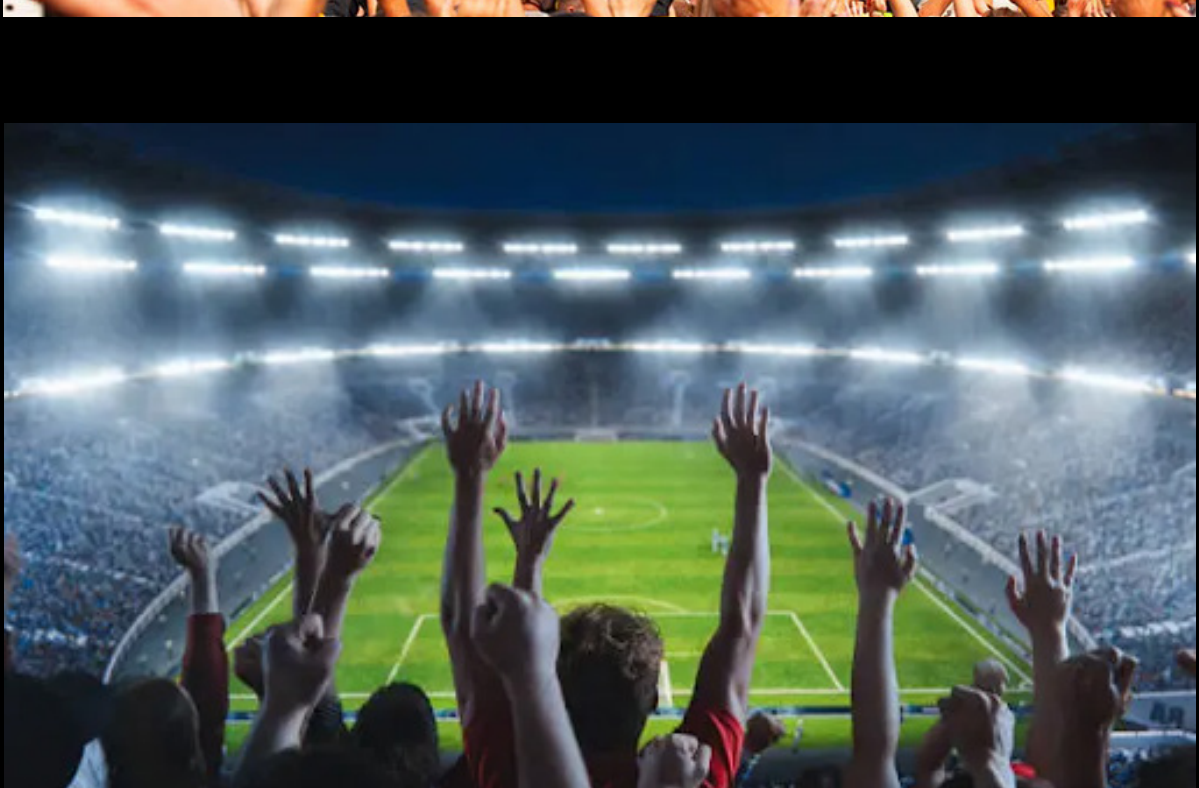
College fans love their mascots. CFB fans are 6% more likely than NFL fans to participate in mascot meet and greets. And, CBB fans are 9% more likely than NBA fans to participate in these moments.



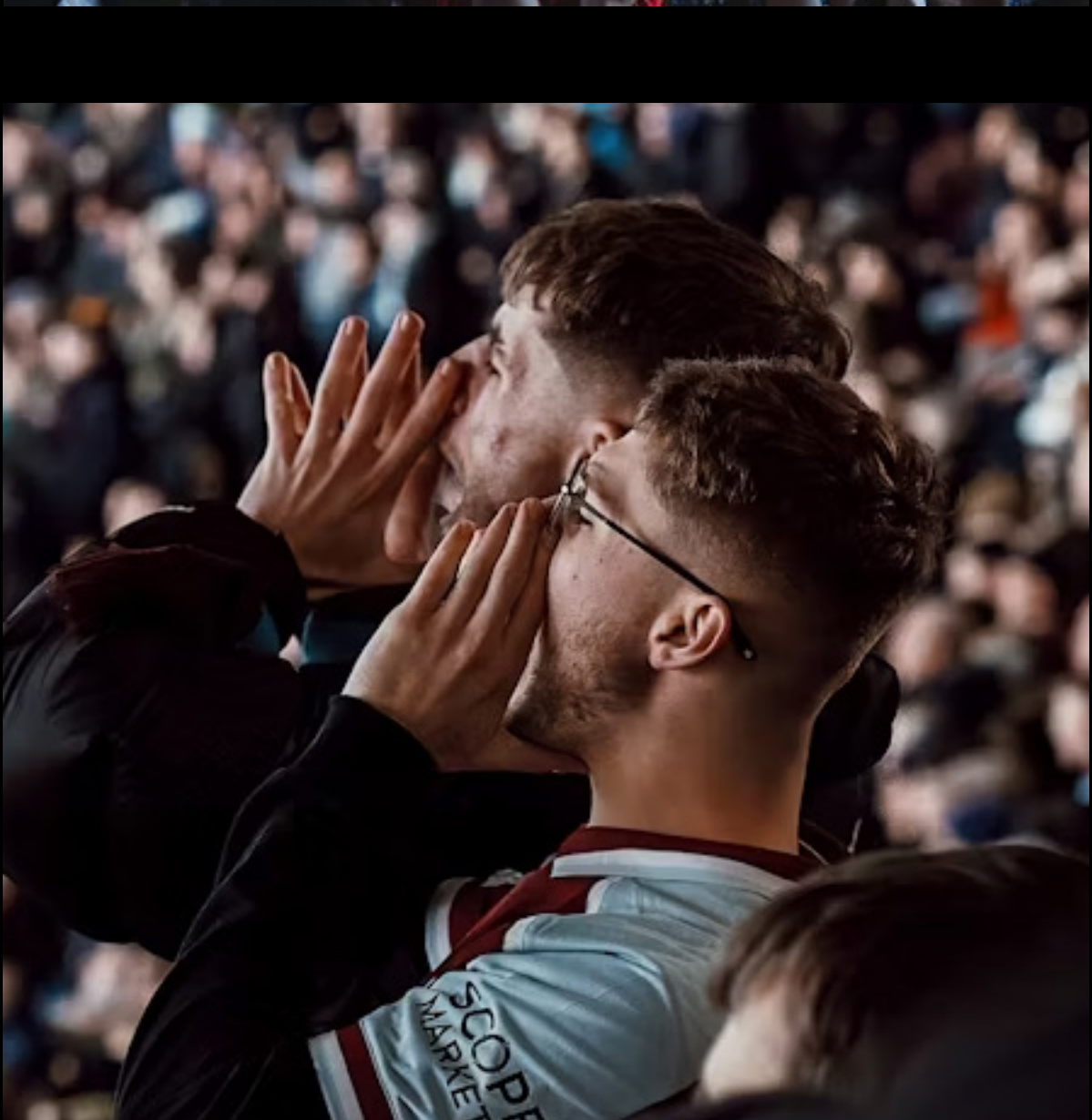
NBA fans are community-driven. NBA fans are an average of 10% more likely than NFL/NHL/MLS fans to say it's very important sponsors of their favorite teams/athletes contribute to the community.



NBA and WNBA fans deeply value diversity... Fans of both leagues are on average 20% more likely than other pro sports (NFL/NHL/MLB) to strongly agree they feel really good about seeing celebrities in media that share their ethnic backgrounds. **...and music festival lovers are more diverse.** Of the 18 million Americans who say they like to support brands that sponsor music festivals or live events, nearly 40% are non-white. They are 57% more likely than the average American to be Black/African American.



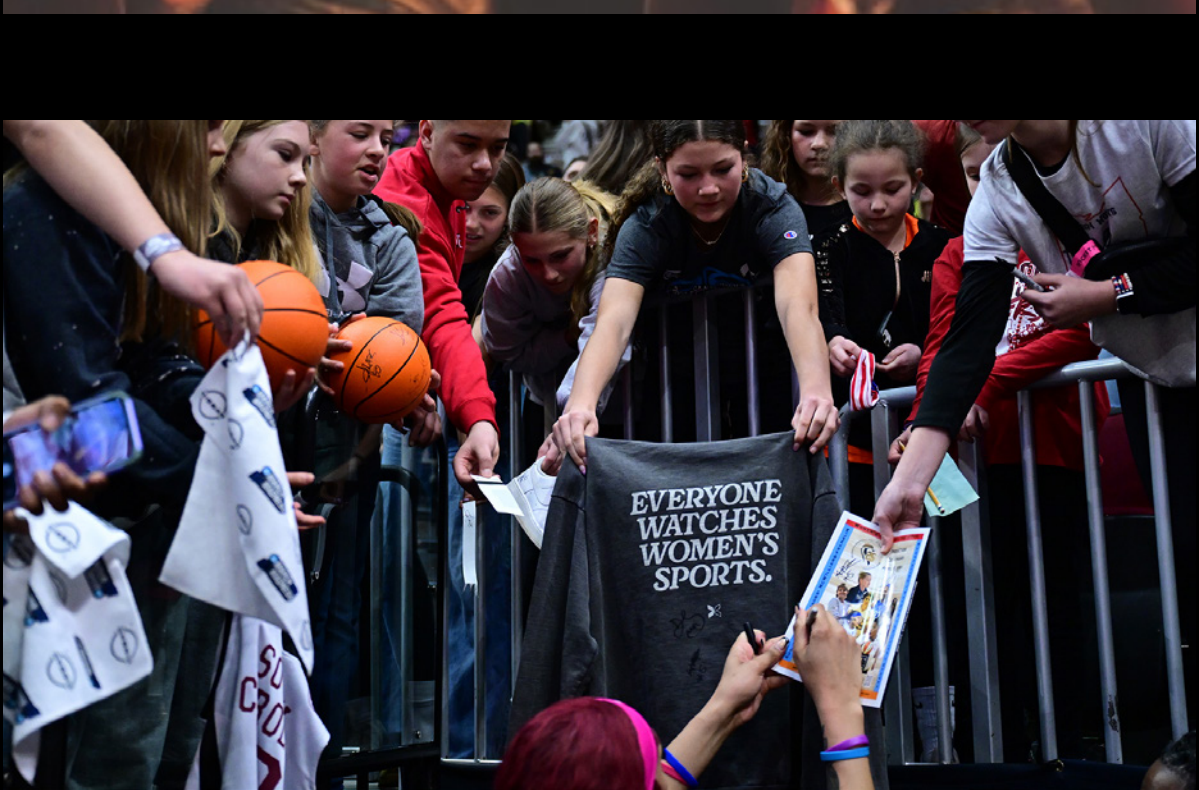
Concourse action is for arenas. Fans of leagues who play inside an arena are more leaned into what's happening on the concourse, away from the action. NHL and NBA fans are on average 25% more likely to think branded pop-ups (games, raffles, bonus experiences, etc) throughout the stadium are very important in their experience. Conversely, football fans want to stay closer to the on-field action. NFL fans are 10% less likely to participate in promotional booths, and college football fans even less so (14% less likely on average to participate).



Environmental issues matter more to music lovers. The 16 million people who have attended a music festival in the past year are 32% more likely than the average American to find it important people see them as environmentally conscious, whereas fans of any league or college sport are less likely than the average American to care. Music festival attendees are also 37% more likely than the average person to want to find ways of helping the environment, where fans of any sports league are less likely than the average person to want to do that.



Contrary to popular belief, football fans aren't the only ones who like a tailgate party. Compared to NFL fans, NHL fans are 40% more likely to participate in pre-game mobile tailgate parties and they are 35% more likely than College Football fans to participate in tailgates. This is not a common activity in the NHL and offers a cut-through opportunity to offer a new and relevant moment they're accustomed to at other sporting events.



In women's sports, support begets support. Fans of women's sports are more likely to reward league sponsors with their wallets. WNBA fans are on average 29% more likely than fans of other pro sports leagues to buy from a brand if they sponsor their favorite athlete, team, or league. And NWSL fans are on average 61% more likely than fans of other pro sports leagues to buy from a brand.



Age is but a number? The younger the league, the younger the fan base? In some cases that is true with the MLS, NWSL and WNBA carrying the greatest share of Gen Z fans. But even the PGA carries a greater share of Millennial and Gen Z fans than the NFL. And Gen X represents the smallest share of fans across every league.

In short, no two fans are alike. Insights like these help great sponsorships develop into powerful moments that separate themselves from a standard deal.

Okay, you’ve signed a sponsorship deal, so now what?

5 Key Questions to ask yourself as a Sponsor.

While this may not be a popular opinion, the hard truth is merely having a sponsorship isn’t automatically valuable. The real value comes when sponsors don’t simply “show up” but actively leverage the partnership with smart activations whether that be experiences, influencer tie-ins, retail programs, or other innovative activations. Pop-Tarts activation around the [Pop-Tarts Bowl](#) is a brilliant example of maximizing an opportunity. From creating a trophy that toasts the product and leaning into the power of mascots to creating a sprinkled sideline and branded merchandise—the brand didn’t simply show up, they showed out. In 2023, the brand sold 21 million more Pop-Tarts than the eight weeks prior and spawned 1,000 memes.

To maximize the true value of a sponsorship, brands must strategically pursue partnerships that help them meet specific objectives and they must have the hunger to creatively activate in ways that drive value for fans and the brand.

So if you’ve got a deal signed (or are about to sign it), here are 5 questions to ask yourself to get the most out of your investment.

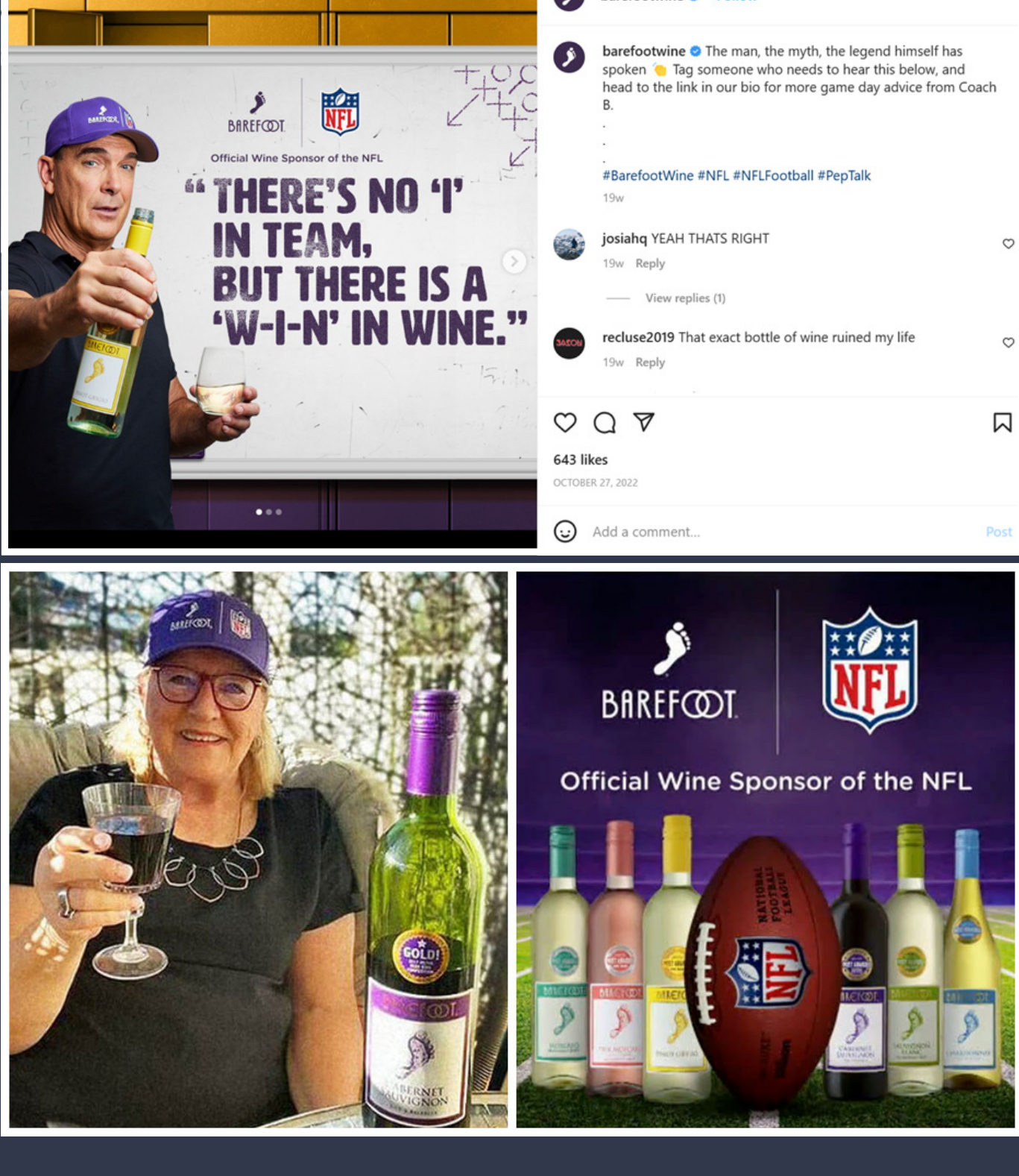
1 Why are we here?

Too often the answer to this is simply “exposure”, or truthfully, ego. Sponsorships are sexy, no doubt. And they absolutely can help lift the visibility of brands. However, maximizing the value of sponsorships starts with understanding the end goal and its relation to the business. Is this partnership designed to help introduce the brand to more people or new people specifically? Is this partnership designed to increase the favorability of a brand and change perceptions? Is this partnership designed to reframe the use case for a brand? Whatever your business/brand objective, it ought to go beyond simply client entertainment. And it should be measurable beyond simply impressions.

Take a moment to ensure the sponsorship fits the brand's overarching growth plans, rather than just placing a logo and hoping for impact. If it doesn't, either use that as a cue to reverse-engineer its role in the brand's plan or look for a different opportunity.

E&J Gallo

E&J Gallo has always been keen to win new wine fans. And as they watched the rise of female fandom in the NFL they jumped at the chance to have Barefoot take the reigns as the official wine partner. Not only was it a new fan opportunity, it was a new usage occasion that a brand like Barefoot could own—demystifying the wine



occasion. Since becoming an official partner in 2022, Barefoot has seen “2 million new consumers” and outperformed the declining wine category—clear data points that validate their strategy. This underscores the power of explicit metrics—like new customer growth, brand awareness lift, or sales—and how a partnership can address a brand’s core challenges. But brands must be clear and focused with those from the onset.

2 What do we know about these fans?

Don’t assume that your brand audience and the team fans are absolutely one in the same. Take the time to understand the overlap. Understand why fans love the team, the experience and the culture surrounding the team. All can be helpful insights to fuel where your brand can authentically and meaningfully enhance their fandom. Fandom is about respect and mutual admiration. Find the small things and turn them into big moments of connection. It will pay out.

3 What value can we add?

Sponsorships are about strategic activation, not just presence. The truth is, the deal points of your sponsorship are only a starting point. Creativity makes them meaningful and magical for both the brand and consumers. A social post is a social post. Generic in-game or on-stage moments like the dance-cam or the athlete fashion-cam are only meaningful if they really meet your brand story. Do your own ideation, bring big thinking, and ask for what you want rather than taking a standard off-the-shelf offer.

Filson

turns the Seattle Kraken’s ice-cleaning team into ‘mannequins on ice’ by outfitting the crew.

The Minnesota Twins

built “The Dock” seating area for Winnebago. The section, designed to look like the open bow of a boat, offers seating for 12 people in comfortable “Captain’s chairs” and also offers lakeside-themed food and beverage options.

Bavarian Meats

has created the Bratzooka shooting brats, not t-shirts, into NFL stands.

Coca Cola

merged its participation in music and sport at the London Olympics, creating a unique music experience where DJ Mark Ronson took the sounds of each sport and created music tracks that attendees could experience, play with and ‘move to the beat.’




4 Where could we have some fun?

Timing and cultural relevance matter to maximizing sponsorships. A brand’s ability to be agile—tapping into trending moments, cultural buzz, or the right consumer occasions—can amplify their sponsorship ROI. A brand that swiftly aligns its sponsorship with current events or audience passions often outperforms those who rely on static, one-size-fits-all tactics.

Capitalizing on unique moments or happenings relies more on human investment than hard costs. Brands need people with an ear to the ground around what’s happening with their sponsored team. They need the ability to pivot quickly, creatively unleash some magic, and keep the sponsorship relevant.

Coors Light

Coors Light hit a home run by quickly building on the momentum of Shohei Ohtani knocking out an LED module in the brand’s ad at Citi Field. Replicating the ‘black box’ that then hovered above the brand logo in social, digital and ultimately a limited edition can—the brand struck gold and built fandom.



5 Do we have the infrastructure for success?

Investing in a partnership or sponsorship means potentially investing less elsewhere. Understanding the decision-making process is fundamental. That relies on objectives and core KPIs that can signal the returns (or shortfalls) of the sponsorship in the context of broader marketing spend. Does a sponsorship enable greater efficacy than simply experiential marketing? Can it lend more power to influencer programs? Having clarity and consensus about the role sponsorship plays for the brand and the few core metrics (not a laundry list) that it contributes to is vital.

A Moment for Self-Reflection

Before charging full steam ahead into the next year of your sponsorship or sponsorship plans, take a moment to audit what you've done or plan to do. A thorough audit doesn't simply measure your current sponsorship's value but also sets a framework for negotiating or optimizing future deals whether it's with the same property or a different one.

An audit of your sponsorship helps ensure every dollar spent on sponsorship drives quantifiable business value and real consumer connection, rather than being just another "logo slap" in a crowded marketplace.

Sponsorship audits can expose whether your brand is truly capitalizing on its sponsorship entitlements, or leaving opportunities untapped.

By looking at all elements from marketing touchpoints to experiential elements you can identify what's been done vs. what's possible, offering actionable paths to deeper engagement. An audit can also affirm that your resources are deployed in ways that deliver the highest impact.

Ultimately, a sponsorship audit formalizes this thinking, prompting brands to ask:

1. How does this sponsorship align with our business goals and brand story?
2. Are we maximizing our value?
3. Are we reaching a new or underserved audience?
4. Do we know what success looks like?

Knowledge about audience alignment, investment impact, and messaging synergy is the foundation for a blueprint that shapes smarter sponsorship decisions down the road.

If you want help, [give us a shout](#).

About PB&

PB& is an award-winning, strategy-first creative agency that helps clients unlock shortcuts to success. Named AdAge Small Agency of the Year NW twice, PB& has developed everything from award-winning branded entertainment and employee engagement programs to technology experiences and experiential sponsorship/surrounderships around the NFL, NHL, WNBA, MLS, PPA, PGA, Special Olympics as well as the Olympics, Grammys, Sundance Film Festival, Independent Spirit Awards and more. PB& is proudly independent and woman-owned.