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ARTICLE

THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP: BRANDS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

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"We have no doubt that this year's Women's World Cup will become yet another milestone for sports. The level of talent on display will be history's best. Before all the doubters, women's soccer will prove itself a thing of the present, not a distant dream"

Fatma Samoura, FIFA Secretary General, in an interview for Folha de S. Paulo Newspaper

June and July remain the most emotional months of the year in the soccer world. Teams of athletes will compete in the **Women's World Cup**, with this year's roster boasting the highest participation in the competition's history.

The World Cup, organized in France, is a great exposure opportunity for players trying to make a name for themselves. This championship's 552 players represent not only their teams, but also the fight for gender equality and resistance to societal limitations.

The path to the respect and professionalism these women deserve for their talents and achievements is a long one, but this tournament could represent a paradigm shift. Furthermore, it is a good example of how brands can influence important social transformations, such as the fight for gender equality.

"Women must fight for what they believe they deserve and should never surrender. For us, it is not just a fight to improve sports for women in years to come. This is about inspiring women to fight for what they believe in"

Megan Rapinoe, Captain of the United States National Team

GIRLS POWER

The World Cup showcases the growing importance of women's soccer, and it is on course to hit multiple milestones this year. Never before in the history of the sport has the Women's World Cup been so significant. For the first time, tournament coverage has massive press interest, and ticket sales have far surpassed even the most optimistic estimates. In April, FIFA announced that over 720,000 tickets had been sold, setting a new record for the category.

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According to a 2018 Nielsen survey titled "Top 5 Global Sports Industry Trends," global public interest in women's soccer has skyrocketed in recent years. In another survey, 43 percent of sports fans interviewed stated they were interested in women's sports. This provides a baseline of roughly 105 million potential fans.

FIFA aims to turn this interest into tournament audiences and break their attendance record of 750 million people, set in 2015. The organizations current goal is to reach 1 billion spectators.

One reason for this surge in interest in women's soccer—especially among women—is the feminist movement. It has been continuously gaining ground in all societal spheres, encouraging women to occupy spaces once considered to be solely for men. Today, we see women holding top positions at large companies, leading important political entities and making names for themselves in the sciences, and soccer will follow this trend. Women are an increasingly common presence in soccer stadiums and on soccer fields.

Another of this paradigm shift's determining factors is technology. There is a great deal of opportunity to empower women through communication, idea propagation and information exchange, thanks to today's hyper-connected world.

This empowerment, present both on and off the playing field, presents an excellent opportunity for brands and companies. But, are brands participating in this game themselves, or are they simply leveraging the opportunity to convey their own messages?



SPONSORSHIP ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

"We keep hearing that we women should be grateful for having the opportunity to play professional soccer, and even more for being paid at all"

Hope Solo, goalie of the United States National Team

For a long time, brands ignored soccer's female demographic. Several decades ago, all women-focused advertising focused on family and home care. After some time, home appliance ads in magazines turned to fashion and beauty. Today, some companies have taken down their barriers and created sports products exclusively for women.

Leading companies already know gendered consumer profiles have changed and they must adapt to the new era. However, the focus should not be limited to product development and launch campaigns. It is also necessary to invest in athletes and teams themselves. Moreover, companies need

to take a more active role, committing themselves to gender equality and actively working toward societal improvement.

The example of soccer shows that communication is an agent of female empowerment. Support from large companies generates visibility and creates public interest, thus attracting media attention and raising general interest in their brand.

This incentive is essential, but is it enough? The gender gap in soccer is huge, and women athletes, with little media support or exposure, dream of putting an end to that inequality. This reality in women's soccer has been highlighted by initiatives in multiple countries.

The U.S. national soccer team decided to file a lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation for institutionalized gender discrimination. In the lawsuit, players declared that discrimination had affected not only their financial gain as part of the national team (as compared to the male national team), but many other facets of their lives, including their training facilities, medical treatment, assistant technicians and even travel conditions for away games.

So, what is expected from brands in these sorts of situations, in which players prosecute their home federation in the name of equal rights? What do athletes, fans, consumers and even society itself expect of companies? The answer is commitment. Organizations and companies can influence the rules of the game, and they can contribute to real change in an area where women remain disadvantaged by a wide margin.

"Today is about equality. It is about equal rights. It is about equal payment. That is what we're fighting for. We believe the time is now, because it is our responsibility toward female sports and, especially, female soccer. It is our duty to demand the same rights. And it is our right to be treated with respect"

Hope Solo, goalie of the United States National Team

Ada Hegerberg, star of the Norwegian team, refused to play on her national team during this year's World Cup as a form of protest, demanding total gender equality for soccer players. Hegerberg says the men and women in her country do not have equal opportunities

in soccer, despite the fact that soccer has been Norway's most popular women's sport for years. Since her 2017 announcement that she would boycott the World Cup, the NFF (Norwegian Soccer Federation) promised to eliminate gender-based salary differences (amounting to 40 percent), but Hegerberg asserted that this is not just an issue of money, but also of training and professionalism.

"It is impossible to play soccer in a world where men and women do not exist on equal ground. We are all feminists. Playing soccer is not only very difficult, it is also a daily fight for equality, and that is a fact"

Ada Hegerberg, Norwegian forward, the first woman to win the Golden Ball

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: MORE THAN ACTIVISM

In recent years, the relationship between brands and society at large has gained a new dimension. Consumers now keep an eye on corporate social responsibility, reflecting this directly in their purchasing decisions. Discussions of equality, diversity, gender, race and environmentalism are dominating headlines and impacting all business sectors. In this environment, corporate social responsibility and social license to operate both rely on consistent commitment.

Consumers expect commitment and coherence from brands. These two ingredients are essential if companies want to generate change in order to garner visibility.

Brands cannot afford to be caught unaware by social circumstances. Activism, more than any other corporate strategy, presents an excellent chance to generate engagement, something underexplored in many companies. If executed properly, involvement in activism begets possibilities for long-term customer relations. However, without the proper focus, any action taken may be rendered moot.

Telling a story may be easier than communicating with actions, but this latter option has the benefit of cementing shared values, demonstrating a clear narrative and, especially, highlighting a firm purpose. Brand activism is much more than a support measure; it is a strategy that requires legitimacy.

When a company takes action for a cause, staying true to its stated goals will quickly garner attention. Without proper care, the brand's position may come to be viewed cynically, giving the impression that the brand is merely opportunistic. In the worst cases, this can lead to a reputational crisis.

"Activism, more than any other corporate strategy, presents an excellent chance to generate engagement"

Supporting a cause simply to generate buzz and drive marketing potential is doomed to fail. When taking a stance, it is important to take into account this inherent risk. To avoid this outcome, companies must ensure the actions they take align with their mission statement.

GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

The Women's World Cup presents a great opportunity for brands to publicize their efforts to solidify their goals. Listed below are some pioneer initiatives from companies in various sectors, all using the Women's World Cup as springboard for emphasizing one single purpose: supporting female empowerment with targeted action.

Adidas

This German company posted a [tweet](#) saying if any of its sponsored players win the Women's World Cup championship, they will receive the same bonus as sponsored athletes playing in the Men's World Cup in Russia.

Nike

This U.S. company has strongly invested in gender equality messaging. The brand organized an event in France to showcase new uniforms for the company's 14 sponsored teams. This year marked the first time Nike created uniforms exclusively for the women playing in the World Cup, collaborating with female players to develop the garment. Recently, the brand also released a touching video called "Dream Further," ensuring women and girls everywhere know that they, too, can become soccer stars.

Guaraná Antarctica

This famous soft drink brand has sponsored the Brazilian women's national team for over 18 years. Recently, it invited three players to a photo shoot simulating commercial appearances in multiple areas, including beauty, sports products and credit cards, among others. The images were then sold to interested brands, and the money raised was distributed to the players and an NGO for female soccer players. This project was a great success, even encouraging commitment from other brands who embraced the campaign, including El Boticário, DMCARD, Gol and Lay's.

VISA

This brand, which sponsors the Women's World Cup, launched a TV commercial recreating real stories of players' life-changing experiences, then broadcast this campaign across 33 countries around the globe. The brand has said women's soccer is at a turning point, and that just one moment could be enough to change everything, with messages expected to reach younger generations.

Twitter

As part of its global coverage, this platform created the #GoldenTweet award, which selects notable tweets with the hashtag #FIFAWWC. Throughout the Women's World Cup, the Twitter team will identify the best tweets posted during matches played by teams from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Spain, South Korea, the United States and the United Kingdom. The most popular tweets overall will be awarded the #GoldenTweet, a limited-edition physical trophy shaped like a bird, the platform's logo. Furthermore, the @FoxSports account will be reporting on all matches in detail, a result of a partnership between the two companies.



BRANDS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Recently, it has become increasingly clear that discourse alone is not enough. Brands must act. Below are some good practices for brand activism, based on the lessons the Women's World Cup has taught us.

“It has become increasingly clear that discourse alone is not enough”

- **Choose your causes.** Brands can and must aid in cultural transformation. To that end, they must define their purpose, and, based on that purpose, identify the causes they can strengthen through their support.

- **Work together.** After defining a purpose and choosing the appropriate causes, a company should work to create a value proposal that will allow both the company and cause to evolve through discussion. As part of this, it should allow all parties to define their roles and contributions.
- **Remain committed.** Any activity that promotes or benefits a cause is welcome, but one-time actions can cause suspicion or lead to the company being viewed as opportunistic. For this reason, a brand that wants to be seen as legitimately embracing a cause must commit itself to continuously supporting that cause's initiatives.

“We support one simple purpose: gender equality. Equality for all men and women. We must have total freedom to do what we wish, be it in sports or anything else”

Marta Vieira da Silva, player for the Brazilian National Team, named best player in the world 6 times

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