

# Sports branding: The image makers

Brand identity can help sporting organisations become big businesses. Danielle Veldre reports.

The unceremonious dumping of cheerleaders by the South Sydney Rabbitohs and the establishment of the A League to overhaul the code's image are small and large-scale examples of the importance of brand identity in sport.

One particular challenge for sports branding is to encapsulate all the emotion, colour, movement and history of a sporting organisation or team in a one-dimensional logo. Couple this with the fact that a sporting brand has to be so many things to so many people — from fans to sponsors — and it's clear that anyone devising to create a brand has their work cut out.

Melbourne-based company R-Co works with many sporting brands, including AFL and Cricket Australia. Founder and creative director Richard Henderson has worked on identities such as the Sydney Olympics and Melbourne Commonwealth Games and says inspiration is the key to a successful sporting brand.

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## TEAM BUILDING

Amantha Imber, consumer psychologist at Leo Burnett, says sporting brands must reach out to their communities.

"In terms of sporting clubs, people join to experience a sense of belonging to a group of like-minded people — even if all they have in common is the team they barrack for. Sporting club brands that tap into this motivation through activities that promote and encourage inclusivity and a sense of togetherness will be the ones that succeed."

She says a good example of a sports brand that promotes this sense of community is Nike, particularly with its "Run yourself ugly" campaign.

"It certainly showed an understanding of runners and how they define 'success' from a run. Another nice thing about the campaign is that if you weren't a runner, you probably wouldn't 'get' what Nike was saying," Imber says.

Henderson says juggling the different interests of a sporting organisation is a key challenge for sports branding.

"One of the things that characterises sports branding is the number of stakeholders involved, quite often this is far more extensive than consumer branding," he says.

Henderson cites some of the best sporting brands as Manchester United and Ferrari because they have become universal shorthand for the emotion that goes into their respective sports.

The brands that are the most effective



can transform a club from a grass-roots participatory club into the big business sport has become today.

## IDENTITY CRISIS

"Over the years, some of these businesses have structures within them that are

then use design identity to articulate that and to move hearts and shift minds," Henderson says.

Melbourne Football Club is one brand that is evolving its branding to match the business demands of modern sports, according to MFC CEO Steve Harris.

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possibly inhibiting their growth, so the management has to look at the organisation, look at where it wants to be positioned in five and 10 years' time and

"We are only one of nine clubs in Melbourne, and from a consumer and commercial point of view it's very competitive," Harris says.



## Go for it: Nike creates a winner with its "Run yourself ugly" campaign

He said they have evolved the brand away from focusing on the AFL team's nickname, the Demons, to hone in on the Melbourne part of the identity as a way to draw together business, the community and the grass-roots fans.

Henderson says the brand also needs to be nimble in a visual way to achieve all these aims.

"We use design to shape and deliver messages. What we are doing nowadays in sports design is shattering stereotypes. The old idea of the badge, the club, the traditional elements you might have brought into sports, a lot of that is no longer relevant because you're communicating on a different level with a different community. [The brand needs] to express itself on an athlete's top but also be animated in an advertisement or in a broadcast," he says.

He says this is key when the brand identity is leveraged into merchandise.

"Fans want to own a bit of that brand DNA, they then export that memory with them all around the world. Great identities are those that capture an essence about an event that people can go back and return to a memory, a graphic memory." ■

**Back to basics: Melbourne Football Club is developing its brand to build a sense of community**