

Games with frontiers



Perimeter advertising at soccer matches is becoming more animated – and more controversial.



Americans have always been far more accepting of the commercialization of sports than the finicky, soccer-obsessed Brits. For instance, an energy drink is about to change the name of a US soccer team formerly known as the MetroStars to the New York Red Bulls. Let them try doing that with Manchester United. (Although it's fair to point out that they have a team called Red Bull Salzburg in their native Austria.) British viewers were up in arms back in 2001 when animated ads first appeared on LED (Light Emitting Diode) perimeter hoardings, during a match between England and Albania. These electronic hoardings have become more prevalent since then, although the non-commercial BBC is less than delighted about them. "LED hoardings were quick to catch on in Europe, and

they've become more accepted in the UK," says David Judah, senior partner of Skyville, the sports media provider that first introduced LED hoardings during matches. "Both Arsenal and Manchester United have them at their grounds, and we hear that the Football Association – which initially made a fuss about them – is looking at getting some for the refurbished Wembley Stadium."

IMPACT

Initiative has certainly bought LED advertising for its clients. UK sponsorship manager Nick Moore says: "They're better than fixed perimeter hoardings in that they have more impact and can carry a creative message. There's a certain amount of debate about whether they affect the game – but at the end of day, if you



want viewers to see your brand, it's better to have something that moves."

Skyville's Judah is skeptical about claims that animated hoardings distract players. "I once heard a rumor that [England team manager] Sven Goran Eriksson was furious about some animated hoardings during a match. A few weeks later, I found myself sitting next to him on a plane. When I asked him about the incident, he said: 'What hoardings?' In my view, players concentrate on the game, not the perimeter."

LED hoardings at soccer games also offer exceptional value for money, given the potential audience. Nick Moore says: "In fact, the biggest expense is installing the equipment, which can be the responsibility of the stadium or an external contractor. And because of the numbers the medium can deliver, they know they are going to get advertisers, so it makes sense to them."

QUESTIONS SURROUNDING MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS

Space on LED hoardings is sold in five-minute packages, for example, each minute for England away games costs around £7,000 (US\$12,300) – although this is negotiable depending on the size of the package. The animations themselves are relatively light digital files that can be sent by email. Although there are technical questions about where on the pitch the LED should be placed for maximum impact,

for the right client, it's still a very tempting vehicle. But are LED screens as advanced as marketing in football grounds gets? What happened to the idea of digitally projecting brand messages onto hoardings – or even the pitch – during the television broadcasts of matches? It turns out that while the technology is avail-

Hoardings at soccer games offer great value for money, given the potential size of the audience

lable, it remains in its infancy.

Skyville's David Judah says: "The idea was that if the game was being broadcast in ten different markets, you would be able to sell the same hoarding space ten times over. In reality, it didn't work that way. The technology was not up to scratch and the images weren't sharp enough."

For now, the technology is mainly used to project the team's crests onto the pitch just before play commences; and perhaps again at half time, accompanied by the score. However, Formula 1 motor racing has adopted the technology more enthusiastically.

"Rather than erecting scaffolding and a huge banner on the side of a hill overlooking the track, you can project an image digitally," says Judah. "For the moment, applications like that are where the technology has found its niche." ■



England team
manager
Sven Goran
Eriksson