

# TOP 25 MOST INNOVATIVE SPONSORS IN SPORTS





# Introduction

**The Most Innovative Sponsors in Sports list is a novel approach to benchmarking innovation in sports sponsorship.**

Sponsorship remains a significant revenue driver for the industry. However, to this day, it is mainly executed through traditional approaches—branded content, in-venue signage, and branding on kits—all examples of what we call “association sponsorship.”

But in the age of the Fluid Fan™, brands and properties can do better, and this data-driven ranking is the perfect benchmark for what success in the next generation of sponsorship can look like.



# Methodology

***What makes a sponsor innovative?*** We put a stake in the ground and identified three core metrics, which we believe most accurately represent innovation, where being innovative means a sponsor is exploring new ways to acquire and engage with Fluid Fans.

## CS Community Strength

We believe that innovative sponsors focus on building communities, not just audiences. The Community Strength metric measures the ways that brands facilitate and grow their consumer communities. In particular, the method pays close attention to efforts that allow communication between multiple consumers and community events centered around an experience, the brand, and sport.

## BE Brand Energy

We believe that innovative sponsors generate market energy. The Brand Energy metric measures fans' interest in the brand over time. This metric combines social media metrics and search behaviors in a sports context to estimate the brand's overall energy or buzz. Social media metrics are not solely based on the sponsors accounts, but rather we explore how the brand shows up in the social conversations hosted by sports entities—teams, leagues, and athletes.

## ET Emerging Tech

We believe that innovative sponsors must lean into the creative use of technology and become empowered with emerging consumer behavior trends. The Emerging Tech metric is a measure of how sponsors are leveraging new tech in sports partnerships and platforms. The emerging technologies for 2021 were: Mixed-Reality, NFTs, The Metaverse, Sustainability, Smartphone Technology, and Data Collection.

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from Sports Innovation Lab



**Red Bull**  
(Beverage)



**Nike**  
(Apparel & Accessories)

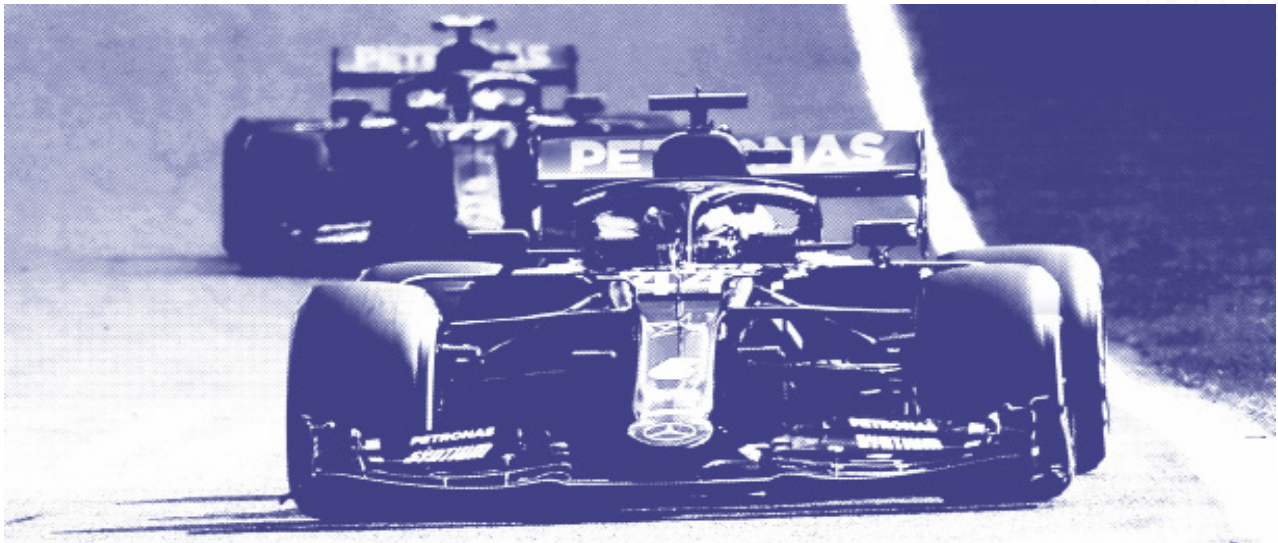


**T-Mobile**  
(Telecom)



# An Ambitious Goal: Research Points to Consider

*Benchmarking all global brand sponsors in sports is an ambitious goal. We didn't take the process lightly, and this is just the beginning. This report represents our first stage in an ongoing research process to collect the most relevant data we can find to help brands achieve better activations and design more meaningful sponsorship programs. We are confident in the findings and have tested and retested our methods to ensure adequate rigor. To that point, there are a few specific details about our research method that all readers should consider:*



- Not all brands are the same; so to compare appropriately, we took mathematical measures to level and standardize the scoring across brand categories.
- There are many brands throughout the world that sponsor sports at varying levels of investment. At this point, to control for the scale of the research, we created a list of brands to benchmark, starting from SportsPro's 50 Most Marketable Brands list and then adjusting the brands in each category to include companies that, based on our expert analysis, were missing from SportsPro's list.
- We compared brands only in category to ensure that we were comparing like-companies.
- We scaled scores by company size (based on total revenue in 2021) to account for assumed marketing spend differences, giving more credit to smaller companies that outperformed their larger competitors in category.
- We focused on only sports-specific Google Trends search criteria to ensure our measure was of engagement in the sports sector.
- With our Zoomph Data, we measured social value from team and league accounts and the engagement rates on these posts to identify success at the partner level.
- Most of the data is global, but a small portion of our Brand Energy metric favored mostly North American leagues based on the information available.

# Implications

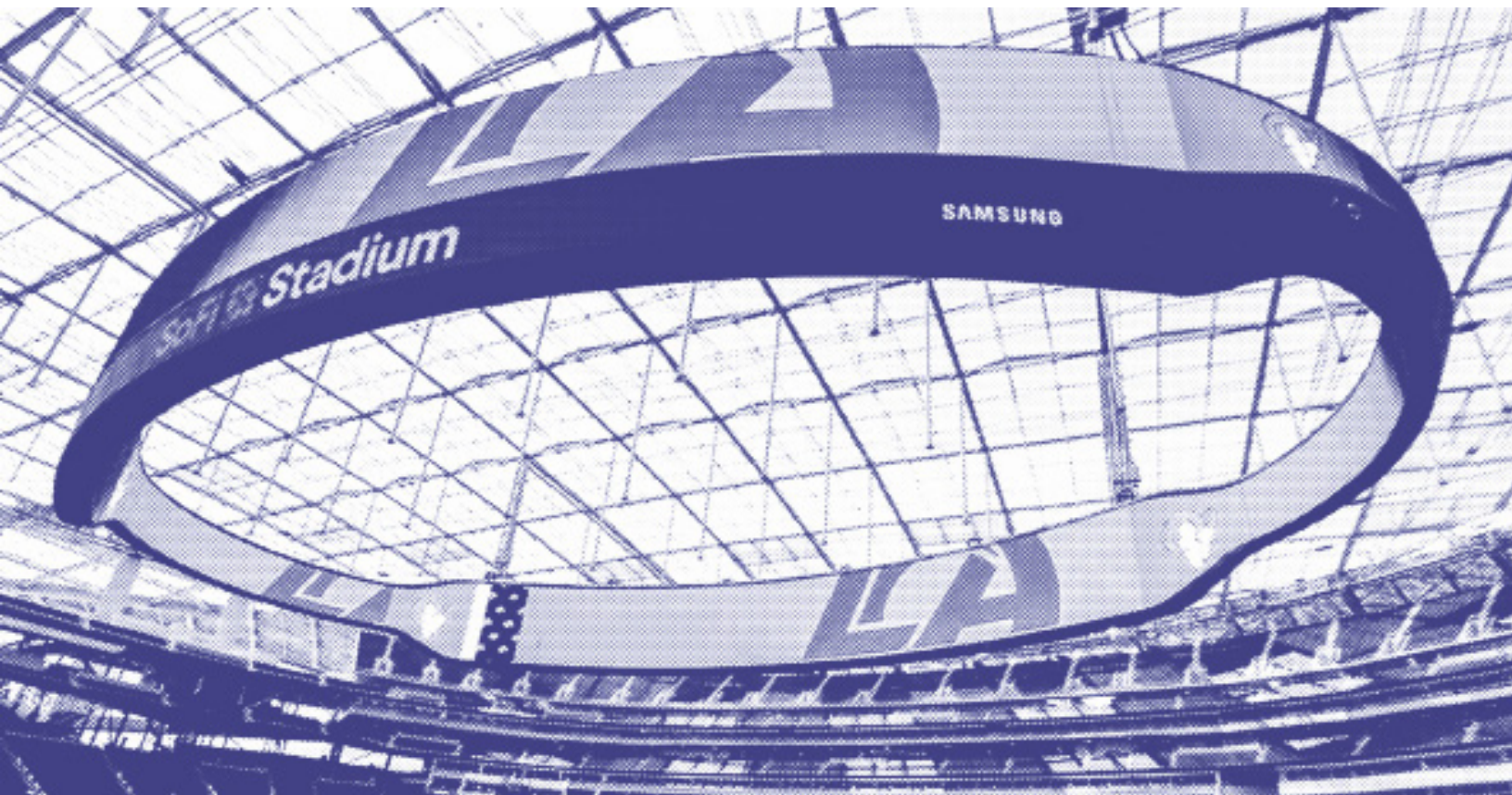
**This list is an important measure for guiding sponsorship dollars in the sports industry toward more impactful activations that can build brand affinity in authentic ways.**

Today, the vast majority of sports sponsorships focus on building brand awareness, which is a worthwhile goal for some brands; but for many, it doesn't advance the acquisition of Fluid Fans or maximize the value of the existing fan base. Our approach to evaluating sponsorship focused on "fan communities" and this list of brand leaders provides a map that brands, agencies, and properties should follow to reach and engage fans more meaningfully.



**Our specific sponsor guidance based on our research:**

- Challenge your agencies and property partners to demonstrate how a sponsorship will help acquire fans into, or engage fans within, a branded community.
- Push for more direct access to fan data, which often times comes hand in hand with owning a fan community platform.
- Go beyond game time to work with teams and leagues who see the opportunity for creating conversation pre-game, post-game, and in between games.
- Test emerging technologies with low barriers to entry to explore where you can provide the greatest value for fans without overcomplicating the experience (e.g., NFTs as tickets).



RED BULL NIKE TIMONEX ZIPP AT&T COCA-COLA GOOGLE PLAYSTATION ADIDAS PERIZONA PEKINER VODAFONE

SAMSUNG NIPTIS AIR MICROSOFT MERCEDES-BENZ STARS FORTI WINN-DIXIE

PERIZONA TARGET SAMSUNG AMALISSA SUSHI MICROSOFT MERCEDES-BENZ STARS FORTI WINN-DIXIE

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# Sports Innovation Lab

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