



CHAMPIONING THE BRAND

Since its inception in the early 1990s, European football's Champions League has become one of the most successful and well-known brands not just in sport, but the corporate world. We look at its journey.

A BRAND WHOSE name has entered the colloquial dictionary is one that has made a major impact. In the case of UEFA's Champions League, that is unquestionably the case.

To find out exactly how strong the Champions League brand is positioned both within sport and the wider corporate world, brand consultancy Interbrand was commissioned by TEAM Marketing – the commercial sales agent of European football's governing body UEFA – to undertake a study into the strength of the Champions League relative to other mainstream and everyday brands, not specifically within sport.

The research was qualitative and quantitative across global markets, comprising interviews with TEAM and UEFA staff, broadcasters and sponsors of the tournament, as well as fans.

"People now talk about the 'Champions League' of certain professions to demonstrate if something is the 'best of the best', and of course several other sports have borrowed the Champions League name," Interbrand's brand valuation director, Calin Hertogea, told *SportBusiness International*.

"Most brands would kill to enter the common vocabulary in such a way.

"It is a very well managed brand that has achieved great strength in a short period of time. Of the top 100 global brands in 2013, the only brands that were younger than the Champions League were technology and internet-based, such as Google and Facebook."

The study found that the Champions League's brand has a monetary value of 3.14 billion, with particular strengths in terms

of its clarity, differentiation, consistency and, to Hertogea's surprise, authenticity.

"I expected the tournament's authenticity to be low, but it was actually very high," he adds. "This is backed up by ad hoc examples.

"I saw some recent interviews with players who featured in Steaua Bucharest's European Cup final victory over Barcelona in 1986, and they kept talking about how they had 'won the Champions League'. There was no mention that the Champions League is only 22 years old."

New Faces, Old Values

To achieve such authenticity is particularly impressive given the relative infancy of the brand, and the fact that the Champions League format underwent several changes in the early years after replacing its predecessor, the European Cup, in 1992.

Since the second group stage was eliminated ahead of the 2003/04 season, the basic structure has remained unchanged. However, UEFA is certainly not averse to radical competition revamps. The governing body's second-tier club knockout tournament, previously known as the UEFA Cup, has transformed into the Europa League in recent years, while the national team European Championship will expand from a 16 to 24-team competition for the next edition in France in 2016.

"We devote a lot of time to evaluating the performance of competitions and we are continually assessing whether we can make improvements," UEFA's director of marketing, Guy-Laurent Epstein, told *SportBusiness International*.

"We use research, we talk to the clubs and our partner network, and we discuss internally. At the moment our work still shows that, across many metrics, the Champions League continues to grow.

"As a result we still believe that the format of the Champions League is very good and that radical change is not needed, but we will continue to review its performance in search of opportunities to further enhance the competition."

"The Champions League has developed into a very strong brand since its relatively recent inception," adds TEAM chief operating officer Simon Crouch. "The Interbrand study has highlighted the need to continue to work very hard to protect the areas from which the brand derives its strength, whether that is in how the competition is positioned, structured or promoted. This careful management of the brand is what delivers benefits and commercial value beyond the pure media value of the competition."

The Partnership Approach

Partners play a crucial role in promoting the Champions League's values, says Epstein.

"The partners are the 'lenses' through which the majority of the fans see and engage with our competitions," he adds. "Whether on TV or online, via marketing campaigns or in retail, they are the presenters of the brand. We see our role as being both a brand promoter and brand guardian.

"We encourage our partners to use the brand as much as possible so they have flexibility to use the rights creatively and in ways that deliver against their objectives. Meanwhile, we must also ensure that there is a complementary fit between partner activity and the brand.

"UEFA has recently strengthened its marketing department to develop the strategy

and framework for long-term promotional campaigns that can be activated by UEFA and its partners. We wish to tell a strong and consistent story that can help strengthen the brand further."

The players and clubs are also well aware of the values of the Champions League, as are those within UEFA and TEAM, contributing towards a crystal clear brand identity, according to Hertioga.

"Internally the brand is very well communicated by UEFA and TEAM," he adds. "It is one of the best cases you will see. When we asked internal stakeholders what the Champions League stands for, their answers were invariably very close to the brand essence."

The Partnership Approach

The Interbrand study did find, however, that the Champions League's brand could be improved by becoming more responsive.

"They are already listening to fans and partners but perhaps they just need to act on more opportunities," adds Hertioga. "However, it is difficult to repair something that isn't broken, and when you are a leading brand – like Coca-Cola, Apple or Google – your strength can be your biggest vulnerability.

Changes and new ideas have to be carefully evaluated because there is much to lose in terms of brand value

"Risk can be managed through pilots, though, and UEFA has other properties, like the Europa League, through which it can test things out. The Champions League seems to have reached a balance whereby it works for the market, but the market is changing and we don't know how viewing habits are going to alter."

In many ways, says Epstein, an element of unresponsiveness is to be expected: "Changes and new ideas have to be carefully evaluated because there is much to lose in terms of brand value and commercial value if we get it wrong.

"Nevertheless, the report reminds us that we need to continue to work closely with all our stakeholders to listen to their feedback and test new ideas if and when appropriate.

"We are working on a number of initiatives and we continue to look for ways to engage fans via digital channels. We still

want to continue to grow the global reach of the competition.

"For example, we launched a marketing campaign to promote the 2014 Champions League final. Using the insight that fans wished to see more behind-the-scenes action, the 'Get Closer' campaign was launched.

"The campaign featured elements such as 'Trophy Cam', offering fans a view of life through the eyes of the iconic trophy as it travelled from UEFA headquarters around the world to finally end in Lisbon. Supported by digital innovations such as the 'Trophy selfie' app, we grew our Facebook following from 11 million to 31 million across the season."

The study has clearly given UEFA and TEAM plenty of food for thought, and Crouch says further research is likely.

"This initial study has provided a starting point," he adds. "We will consult internally, with UEFA and the commercial partners, and use our research studies to develop and refine initiatives.

"One specific point to note is that we do plan to repeat the exercise in the future. The most appropriate time for this is likely to be at the end of this season as the current sales cycle draws to a close and the development work for 2018 to 2021 intensifies." ■

Global Brand Ranking

2012 Rank	Brand	Brand Value (\$bn)
1		77.84
4		69.73
36		10.95
69		5.42
97		3.85
-		3.14

KEY FINDINGS

- The UEFA Champions League would qualify in the top 200 most valuable brands with a market value of \$3.14 billion
- Impressive brand value given the relative infancy of the brand
- The brand has a significant role in value creation through its influence on purchase – 40 per cent of the purchase decision for sponsors is linked to the brand.