



Racing is having an Identity Crisis

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The initial idea behind this piece stemmed from Great British Racing’s “Everyone’s Turf” campaign – a £1.6m marketing initiative designed to attract audiences to the racecourse, with Jermaine Jenas as the frontman[1].

The announcement of this campaign received a mixed reaction on social media, but there seemed to be more criticism than praise which shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise; and while I wouldn’t be one to join the dogpile, I did find the 48-second advert[2] to be rather cliché and quite underwhelming given the level of backing the project has.

Influencer-led marketing has seen a huge growth in popularity in the past decade, and it has been tremendously successful in some instances when the “influencer” and the brand/product are well-suited; but it is not an automatic recipe for success and some studies[3][4] have suggested that consumer support and trust in these campaigns is declining. It would be rather apt for racing to adopt a marketing style just as it begins to decline in effectiveness – after all, we revel in being a few years behind the rest of the world.

My original article was going to delve deeper into the above, but the recent revelation of a “shocking fall” in racecourse attendance[5] and a few conversations with friends about the race day experience made me realise that the “Everyone’s Turf” campaign is simply an illustration of a wider problem: racing is struggling with its identity.

There is an increasing emphasis, when attempting to lure potential patrons to the racecourse, to focus on the amenities available to them once at the track rather than the sport itself, which is exemplified by the discussed advert’s focus on “great food” and the availability of outdoor space. The inevitable fashion trope also makes an appearance and while I understand the purpose of mentioning these elements of the racing experience, I struggle to believe that offering food, fresh air and the ability to wear clothes of your choice (as long as you’re abiding by the dress code) is the best we can offer as a sport. Those who have been following the Racing Post’s “Racecourse Price Index”[6] know that there are plenty of cheaper ways to spend an afternoon if you’re primarily looking for a social day out.

This isn’t intended as hit-piece on Great British Racing’s marketing strategy; rather, it is an acknowledgement that the horse and those involved in the sport are not the primary focus of the industries promotional activities.

And while I appreciate the view that these advertisements are not designed for the likes of me and those engaged enough with racing to be reading this article, it baffles me that we aren't focusing on what separates racing from other recreational activities. Considering the current economic climate and the fact there has never been a greater range of leisure activities to indulge in, we should be doing everything possible to stand out – not blend in.

We have a unique product; such a USP should be a marketers dream and yet it seems as though we are cautious of committing fully to making the racing the main attraction.

Perhaps there is an element of shame to all of this. Racing has plenty of critics as we well know, both for welfare reasons and indeed due to its innate link with gambling. Putting these elements front and centre will undoubtedly attract some criticism, which the authorities are increasingly wary of. Furthermore, the quantity over quality fixture planning of late has certainly taken some of the shine away from day-to-day racing; if avid fans are struggling to get enthused, how can we expect the casual viewer to care?

Ted Walsh's infamous "If you don't like racing go and watch Peppa Pig" line is coarse but does have merit. Those that are strongly against racing will never embrace it – and you won't entice them to the track with the promise of some fresh air and a £7 pint of Guinness in a plastic cup.

We should embrace what makes our sport great and unique. Although, we may need to address the glaring fixture issue if we are to get behind that message with conviction.

Formula One is a great example of an association putting the sport at the heart of its promotional activities. Following Liberty Media's takeover in 2017, they began to embrace the intricacies of the sport, using the incredible amount of data they had to connect viewers to the spectacle they were watching, which appealed to both hardcore fans and new spectators who were learning about the sport[7].

Of course, they combined this with a focus on the personalities involved, with the hugely popular "Drive to Survive" series helping to form a connection and an affiliation with the participants like never before.

Liberty Media had faith in their core product and have reaped the rewards, with their Chief Executive, Greg Maffei, recently stating that "By all indications, Formula One has never been healthier"[8]. Viewing and social media figures have continued to thrive[9]. And while anecdotal, I have been amazed at the number of my friends that have transformed into die-hard Formula One fans in just a few short years.

You can draw plenty of parallels between horse racing and Formula One; of course, they both involve racing but you can easily make comparisons between the horse/jockey/trainer & car/driver/constructor relationships. Equally, both may seem relatively hard to follow for someone that is new to the sport, but explaining it in a way that is informative without dumbing it down certainly helps increase engagement.

Lewis Hamilton, when discussing how to reach new audiences back in 2012, said "It's really a matter of getting the car in front of people... Once you hear it and see it, feel the noise – then maybe they'll turn out for a race". Ten years later and that's exactly what happened, although getting the car in front of people was mainly done through digital means.

Perhaps I'm naïve, but I believe a similar outcome can be achieved in horse racing. It's time to believe in the sport and focus on promoting those within it.

[1] <https://www.racingpost.com/news/jermaine-jenas-to-head-up-16m-campaign-to-woo-summer-crowds-to-racecourses/563898>

[2] <https://youtu.be/ztPeJxmXgLo>

[3] <https://www.marketingtechnews.net/news/2021/nov/22/juof-st-6-of-consumers-believe-they-are-swayed-by-influencers/>

[4] <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/10/31/grey-and-yougov-find-96-people-the-uk-do-not-trust-what-influencers-say>

[5] <https://www.racingpost.com/news/members/latest/racing-leaders-point-to-perfect-storm-behind-plunging-attendance-figures/565275>

[6] <https://www.racingpost.com/news/latest/ranked-how-much-is-the-cost-of-a-pint-at-british-and-irish-racecourses/558152>

[7] <https://thestrategy.com/2021/07/19/formula-one-marketing-strategy/>

[8] <https://www.planetf1.com/news/f1-liberty-media-financial-health/>

[9] <https://www.sportskeeda.com/f1/news-how-formula-1-became-world-s-engaging-sport>

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