

PADDYPOWER.

**RIGHT BEHIND
GAY FOOTBALLERS**

Executive summary

This paper is all about cause-related creativity on a shoestring. Or at least a bootlace. It tells how Paddy Power invited Stonewall to help tackle one of the toughest challenges in sport: homophobia in football. The game had remained silent on this issue for years – or had been hostile. The media wasn't interested. And of 5,000 professional players, not one would speak out – let alone come out. However, in just one week in September, we managed to change all this.

Our big idea was to send rainbow laces to every professional football player in Britain, and ask them to wear them, to show that they were “Right Behind Gay Footballers”. We then used a barrage of advertising, PR, digital and social media to marshal wider public support.

The result was a cultural phenomenon.

Players from 54 professional clubs wore the laces, from Arsenal to Aberdeen, Everton to East Fife, Norwich to Newcastle. Other sports joined in. Plus politicians, pop stars, actors and even other brands. The public clamoured for their own laces, so we had to produce another 10,000 pairs.

In just 7 days, our campaign generated 400 media stories (with a reach of over 500M) and another 320M impressions on Twitter. In fact, our hashtag alone was used 72,000 times and trended worldwide. Not once, but twice.

Overall, an amazing 43% of betters were aware of the campaign and of these, 47% thought better of Paddy Power, versus only 4% who thought worse.

As a result, Marketing has already named this one of the campaigns of 2013, other countries are adopting it and plans are afoot for an even bigger event this year.

All this for £150k: less than 1% of Paddy Power's annual budget and less than 0.2% of category spend.

Success on a shoestring indeed.

The social challenge

Homophobia in football is often referred to a sport's last great taboo¹.

At best, the game has been silent on the issue. For instance, in 2005 the BBC asked all 20 Premier League managers for their views on the subject, but every single one declined to answer. Likewise, in 2010, the FA asked players to take part in an anti-homophobia video, but not one would take part. At worst, there has been active hostility. World-famous managers have publicly stated their disdain for gay footballers², several players have been criticised for homophobic remarks³ and the tabloids have often been guilty of using similar language⁴.

As a result of this culture, as we entered 2013, we had the bizarre situation whereby not a single one of Britain's 5,000 professional footballers was openly gay (and indeed the only high-profile player who had come out in the past had tragically taken his own life⁵).

At Paddy Power, we calculated the odds of this as over a quadragintillion to one (that's 1 followed by 123 zeroes). But instead of taking bets on the subject, we decided to do something positive, with our first ever brand-led CSR campaign. After all, we pride ourselves on being the punters' champion, symbolised by the mantra: "We hear you". Well, in this case, the public's views were already well ahead of the authorities': research⁶ showed that 49% of British adults agreed that "homophobia in football needs to be addressed", with only 9% disagreeing.

The communications challenge

To be fair, we weren't the first to tackle this thorny issue. Various organisations had tried to make a difference over the years, but to no avail.

This was partly because these attempts had been rather worthy affairs, devoid of any creativity. As one observer put it: "However commendable, these initiatives are mostly below the radar. They make very little dent on the public consciousness and are not directly reaching most players and fans. The average person in the street is unaware they exist⁷."

But on top of this, previous campaigns had also fallen victim to football's bureaucracy. With so many parties involved⁸, each with a slightly different remit and agenda, it is difficult to reach a consensus and the risk is that nothing is done. As the BBC reported in 2013⁹: "There is understandable frustration... in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community that football is dragging its heels. They are fast learning that the gears in football grind at a much slower pace off the pitch, than the football played on it."

As a result of all this, conventional wisdom as recently as March 2013 was that "A large scale campaign against homophobia in football is unlikely to take off at the present time¹⁰."

1. E.g. The Independent (17/9/12)

2. Most famously, Brian Clough and Luiz Felipe Scolari

3. E.g. Federico Macheda, Nile Ranger and Manny Smith were all fined in 2012

4. E.g. the Sun described Cristiano Ronaldo as a "nancy boy" in 2009

5. Justin Fashanu in 1998

6. YouGov 2013

7. Pink News 14/8/13

8. E.g. in England these would include the FA, PFA, Premier League, Championship, League Managers Association, clubs, agents, sponsors, fan associations, individual bosses and players. To complicate things, the other Home Countries often have similar, separate bodies.

9. 19/9/13

10. Inside Left blog (1/3/13)

A fresh strategic approach

It was obvious that we would have to do something different, to succeed where so many others had failed.

Recognising the scale of the task, we invited Stonewall to join us, so that we could tap into their experience in this area.

In some ways it was an unlikely combination: Paddy Power is often described as the enfant terrible of marketing¹¹ while Stonewall, like any charity, has an intrinsically serious purpose. However, this apparent mis-match is precisely what made this partnership so powerful.

We defined our joint strategy as a mixture of “Mission and Mischief.” Stonewall obviously had lots of experience when it came to the former, while Paddy Power could supply plenty of the latter. Both elements were crucial and complementary: too much “Mission” and people would dismiss the campaign as worthy (as they had done other initiatives in this field), while too much “Mischief” and the public would complain of trivialisation.

Specifically, we set ourselves 3 objectives:

- Get people talking about this taboo
- Generate and show mass support for gay footballers
- Do this in a way that was true to both partners’ brands

Equally crucially, we determined to avoid 3 things, which would undermine the cause:

- We actively didn’t want to “out” players
- Or pressurise people to give support
- Or seek a direct financial return.

A big creative idea

This strategic balancing act was dramatised in our big idea. We sent out rainbow coloured bootlaces to every professional football club in the land, and asked players to wear them in their next match. But to get people talking, we borrowed some deliberately provocative language, to declare that we were “Right Behind Gay Footballers”.

Sir John Hegarty named our idea his pick of the year, calling it “Brilliantly simple...everyone wins... I love it¹².” Creative Review also named it one of the top campaigns of 2013¹³. BuzzFeed called it “Brilliant¹⁴” and Thinkbox described it as “Great stuff¹⁵”.



11. E.g. Marketing 23/8/12
12. Marketing 12/12/13
13. 19/12/13
14. 16/9/13
15. 18/19/13

A powerful activation campaign

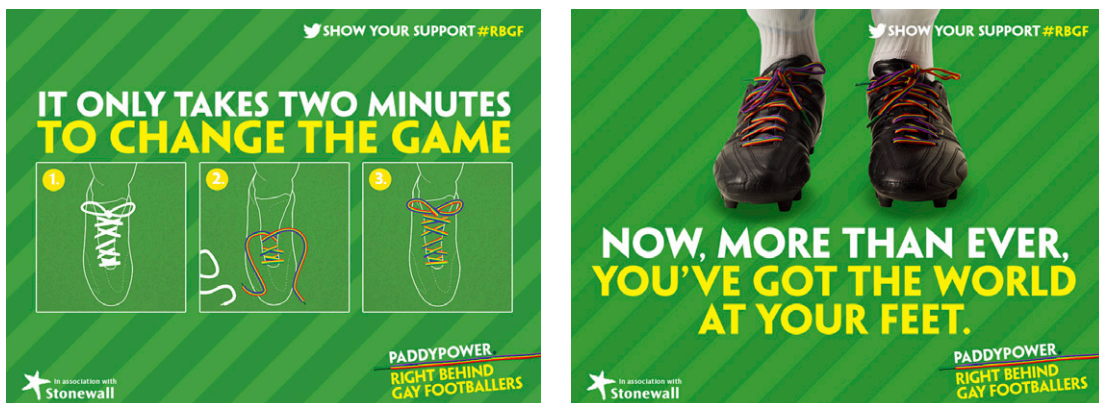
We now used advertising, PR, digital and social to amplify our big idea and generate as much public support as possible. To make the most of our limited (£150k) funds, we focused our activity on one week in September.

In particular, we formed media partnerships with Metro, Twitter and Talksport. We met twice a day and adjusted our messaging, in line with events, to make sure that we were always shaping the news agenda.

For instance the first few days of the campaign were just about establishing the idea.



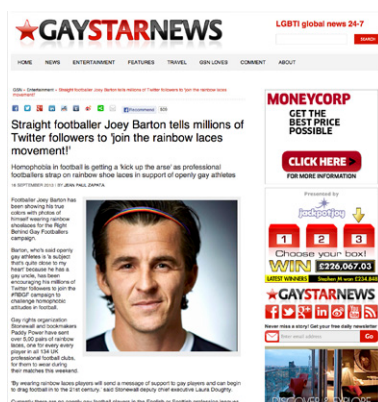
Then midweek, we needed to address criticism from some clubs, who had complained that they had not been given enough warning. We had anticipated this (our surprise tactics had been a deliberate ploy, to ensure that bureaucracy did not neuter the campaign). And we knew that the public would see these complaints as “pathetic...eerily similar...almost as if centrally controlled.”¹⁶ So all we had to do was poke fun at the lack of logic and empower players to take action:



Later in the week, our focus turned to the big Manchester derby, and one last push. Then on the Monday afterwards, we felt it was only right to thank everybody for their extraordinary support.



In addition to these key media partnerships, we picked Joey Barton as an ambassador for our cause. As with all the celebrities who supported us, he didn't receive a penny, but he was a particularly strong advocate given his huge social following and strong personal belief.



So did all this work?

Results

The campaign more than met its 3 objectives.

a) Getting people to talk about this taboo ¹⁷

The campaign attracted over 400 media stories, with a combined reach of over 500M. These included 35 pieces of TV coverage, 161 radio items and 250 print/online stories.

Meanwhile, we generated another 320M impressions on Twitter. Paddy Power's launch tweet received 2,206 Re-tweets (20 times the norm) and the brand picked up 3,600 new followers in the process.

Social engagement levels rose by 74% in 5 days and by the end of the week, our #RBGF hashtag had received 72,000 mentions. In fact, the hashtag trended worldwide, organically. Not once, but twice that week.

In the words of one media blog, the campaign "Seemed to appear overnight but then suddenly it was everywhere."¹⁸



17. All data in this section is from Paddy Power, unless stated otherwise
 18. AcupofteawithPHD (20/9/13)

b) Generating support for gay footballers

Players from 54 professional clubs wore the laces, from Arsenal to Aberdeen, Everton to East Fife. Big name managers like Arsene Wenger were also vocal in their support and Newcastle boss Alan Pardew even wore some rainbow laces on the touchline. Famous ex-pros like Stan Collymore, Matt le Tissier and John Hartson chimed in. Gary Lineker wore laces on Match of the Day, David Ginola showed his off on BT Sport, while Max Rushden donned his on Soccer Am.

After years of silence, it seemed like everybody in the game was making up for lost time. But crucially, the campaign soon began to spread far beyond football.



A host of celebrities tweeted their support, from Stephen Fry to Boy George, Claire Balding to Matt Lucas, Ed Miliband to Ed Balls .

The Scottish Parliament passed a motion in favour of the campaign, the Department of Culture and Sport did likewise and MPs even sported rainbow laces in their annual kickabout.

Other sports joined in. Rugby players at Wasps wore the laces. Legendary figures from tennis (Boris Becker and Martina Navratilova), racing (Ruby Walsh) and boxing (Ricky Hatton) tweeted support for their footballing peers.

By the end of the week, even other brands were getting Right Behind Gay Footballers – most notably Umbro, Aviva and Dr Martens.

And, crucially, thousands of fans got involved: in fact we had to produce another 10,000 sets of laces to try and meet public demand.

In the words of the independent Gay Footballers' Supporters' Network (GFSN): "We are thrilled by the outpouring of support for LGBT footballers...it's really captured the imagination of the public....this campaign is a watershed moment ¹⁹."

c) Being true to both partners' brands

At the end of the week, the CSO of PHD, David Wilding wrote that “The respective strengths of the brands make this the perfect collaboration. It has been a highly impressive effort, with each part gaining more energy from another ²⁰.” This subjective view was borne out by quantitative research by YouGov. Encouragingly for Paddy Power, 43% of regular betters were aware of the campaign, and of these 47% thought better of Paddy Power as a result (versus only 4% who thought worse). Equally positively for Stonewall, Google analysis shows that - 4 months after the activity – all top 10 search results for “Gay footballers UK campaign” mention the charity (with 9 of them specifically referring to Rainbow Laces), and none of them mention other initiatives

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As we noted above, this activity was explicitly not designed to generate a profit. So how can we say whether the campaign was money well spent?

Well, first there's the value of our free editorial coverage. This is a notoriously hard thing to quantify, but to state the obvious: the value of 500M media impacts and 320M Twitter impressions is far, far higher than the cost of our £150k campaign.

Secondly, there's the impact on brand equity. In this case, our quant survey showed that over 687,000 regular betters (more than half of our core audience) were more favourable towards Paddy Power with respective increased purchase intent as a result of the campaign.

Lastly, but most importantly, there's the impact on society. This is the hardest measure of all. But given that millions of people saw and talked about a previously taboo issue, tens of thousands actively supported our campaign, wore the laces, and joined Paddy Power and Stonewall on social media with countless individuals writing to thank us, we would again say that this was £150K well spent.

In summary: the campaign cost less than 1% of our annual budget, less than 0.2% of category spend and less than half of Wayne Rooney's weekly pay. We like to think it was money well spent.

The future

So the one remaining question is: is the campaign sustainable? Well, of course we recognise that things won't change overnight. But like the GFSN spokesperson quoted above, many observers feel that we have now reached a “watershed” ²¹. A second round of the campaign is being planned, this time with much more support from the football clubs and authorities. Requests for laces continue to pour in and other countries are set to adopt the campaign ²². Finally, Thomas Hitzlsperger has just become the first ever ex-Premiership player to come out – a decision described as “impossible” less than a year ago ²³.

In the words of one journalist: “[The Rainbow Laces campaign] has been very positive and set the right tone... it has widespread support in the LGBT community and has promoted positive attitudes ²⁴.”

While we acknowledge that there is plenty more to do, we think that's a pretty good start.

20. AcupofteawithPHD (20/9/13)[§]

21. E.g. BBC (14/1/14)

22. Paddy Power will be launching the rainbow laces in Italy, later this year

23. Guardian (29/3/13)

24. Angela Haggerty, The Drum (21/9/13)