This Girl Can: inspiring millions to exercise

Marketing Society Awards 2016
Brand: Sport England
Category: Not-for-profit-marketing
Executive Summary

Despite the best efforts of the biggest sports brands and the health and fitness industry, 1.75 million fewer women than men were exercising regularly¹ in 2014 – a worryingly large and stubborn gender gap in England’s exercise participation levels.

Whilst exercise levels were increasing, considerably less women than men were taking part, and so Sport England briefed FCB Inferno with an exciting challenge:

“The aim of the campaign is simple: to get more women from the age of 14-40 regularly active and into sport and to keep them playing.”²

The aim was simple, but the target audience was broad. The solution needed to elicit mass behaviour change, and needed mass influence.

In just one year, This Girl Can has inspired 2.8 million women to do more exercise: of whom 1.6 million have started exercising, and 1.2 million have increased their activity levels. But its impact doesn’t stop there.

This paper is about a campaign that has reshaped the way we think about women and exercise, and shows the importance of a powerful insight and marketing bravery in changing behaviour.

¹ Active People Survey results released January 2014
² Sport England pitch brief, 2014
Where are all the women?

In 2014, 1.75 million fewer women were playing sport than men\(^3\). Overall participation levels had grown over the past decade, but the gender gap had not closed. The biggest sports brands had spent millions targeting women, yet the disparity remained. Health experts had proved that inactivity was twice as likely as obesity to cause an early death, but to no avail.

Sport England has been concerned about the gender gap in sport for some time and is committed to closing it. Having driven some improvement in the supply side, they knew that to tackle the issue, something dramatically different would be required – something that addressed the demand side and talked directly to women.

This lead to Sport England's first ever 360° marketing campaign. Launching a high profile behaviour change campaign with communications at its heart meant that the stakes were high and expectations higher.

The brief to FCB Inferno had a number of objectives...

- Be relevant and inspiring enough that women aged 14-40 would want to become a part of, talk about and share it with friends and family
- Reshape the language around sport and exercise
- Be endlessly adaptable for all channels
- Create impact, quickly
- Allow for multiple partners to leverage it

... with the ultimate goal of getting more women in England aged 14-40 taking part in activity regularly.

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\(^3\) Active People Survey results released January 2014

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A VERY STUBBORN GENDER GAP

![Graph showing gender gap in sport participation from 2006 to 2014](image_url)
The starting point: enticing women to exercise

We began by looking for the benefits of exercise and found three potentially powerful claims:

- Exercise releases you from everyday stresses
- Exercise can be a fun, social way to bond with friends
- Exercise produces endorphins, which make you feel ‘great’ post-activity

Unfortunately, they weren’t universal. Even the endorphin effect which, in theory, is true of everyone who exercises, is not felt by all.

We’d hit a dead end, so went back to the research. Here, something stood out – the target audience already understood the benefits of exercise and 75% said they wanted to do more. But they weren’t.

We were looking for the wrong thing. We didn’t need to incentivise exercise; we needed to uncover what was stopping women from doing it.

A wall of barriers

We conducted qualitative research to understand our audience further. As might be expected with an audience spanning 26 years, the barriers to exercise were incredibly diverse. Firstly, they were endless.

- Not being fit enough
- Showing their body
- Being seen in Lycra
- It’s too far away
- It’s too expensive
- Not knowing the rules
- Having a red face
- Being sweaty
- Wearing sports clothing
- Being the worst one there
- Not appearing feminine
- Not being competitive enough
- I can’t get there
- Bringing the wrong equipment
- Family should be more important
- Not being good enough
- Holding back the group
- Changing in front of others
- Wearing tight clothing
- Studying should take priority
- Need childcare
- Time with friends should be more important
- Exercise isn’t cool
- Being the only new person
- Wearing the wrong clothing/kit
- Not looking ‘made up’
- Housework takes priority
- Developing too many muscles
- Being ‘too’ good
- Body parts wobbling when exercising
- Being seen as too competitive
- Looking silly

Removing the logistical barriers

Looking at the barriers, there was a clear set that couldn’t be solved; logistics. The absence of time, money or childcare are key barriers, but couldn’t be addressed by advertising. Having removed these from our long list, an interesting pattern emerged.
**A unifying barrier**

Every remaining barrier could be traced back to something truly unique, fresh and emotionally powerful...

**THE FEAR OF JUDGEMENT**

Fear was stopping women from exercising. If you haven’t experienced this fear it can be hard to comprehend, but it was a powerful force over our audience, and one they didn’t fully recognise themselves.

Women worried about being judged on their appearance, during and after exercise; on their ability, whether they were a beginner or ‘too good’; or for spending time exercising instead of prioritising their children or studying. Every barrier we’d encountered fitted neatly into one of these three areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being judged for:</td>
<td>Being judged for:</td>
<td>Being judged for:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Being sweaty</td>
<td>- Not being fit enough</td>
<td>- Spending time exercising when time with family should be more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Having a red face</td>
<td>- Not being good enough</td>
<td>- Spending time exercising when time with friends should be more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Not looking like I usually do (made up)</td>
<td>- Not being competitive/serious enough</td>
<td>- Spending time exercising when time studying/working should be more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Changing in front of others</td>
<td>- Not knowing the rules</td>
<td>- Spending time exercising when there are other things I should be doing that are more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Wearing tight clothing</td>
<td>- Not knowing what equipment to bring</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Wearing sports clothing</td>
<td>- Holding back the group</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Wearing the wrong clothing/kit</td>
<td>- Being too good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Showing their body</td>
<td>- Being seen as too competitive/serious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How their body looks during exercise (jogging)</td>
<td>- Not appearing feminine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Not appearing feminine</td>
<td>- Developing too many muscles</td>
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We also found encouraging evidence that an increase in women’s confidence would lead to an increase in exercise.

“Gaining self confidence was a major influence towards increasing activity.”

We had found the universal insight we needed.

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4 Source: Health Education Research, ‘Girls and women’s participation in physical activity’
A clear role for communications

The role for the campaign became clear:

**To liberate women from the judgements that hold them back.**

Rather than turning this into a creative brief, a short manifesto was written to express our intention.

![Image of a handwritten note: “Women come in all shapes and sizes, and all levels of ability. It really doesn’t matter if you’re rubbish, or an expert. The point is that you’re a woman.”](image)

Challenging the status quo

Sometimes, we are so used to something, it is hard to see that it might be part of the problem. This was the case with the genre of fitness advertising.

The accepted ‘aspirational’ imagery (glowing six-packs and slim waists) was intimidating and pushing women away. Uncompromising lines about winning fell on deaf ears – our audience found this demotivating.

![Images of fitness magazine covers: Women’s Health and Knockout](image)

We needed to redefine ‘aspiration’. The key was not in appearance or achievement, but in showing women of all shapes, sizes and abilities with an aspirational confidence: a **“don’t give a damn” attitude.**
The resulting creative was ‘This Girl Can’, a celebration of the triumph of attitude over society’s judgement. We championed active women across England who were doing their thing no matter how they do it or how they look.

The campaign name itself armed women with positivity and empowerment. It had ‘hashtaggability’ at its heart - women could use and own it themselves easily.

The premise was simple but phenomenally powerful, and empowered women in two ways.

Firstly, it provided positive role models. We street-cast women from across England with jiggly bits, sweat patches and importantly, that vital “don’t give a damn” attitude. The kind of attitude we’d all like to have.

Secondly, it provided women with a strategy for dealing with the judgement they fear: the riposte. The art of taking an insult, acknowledging it and throwing it straight back with an added piece of wit. Cognitive behavioural therapy suggests that to beat a fear, you have to face it, so we took the fear of judgement head on. Every campaign line or ‘mantra’ we armed our audience with was based on the woman it featured alongside and therefore came with the power of a human truth.
A campaign with social at its core

To ensure the campaign landed in the best way possible, Sport England and its PR agency, Blue Rubicon, engaged a range of influencers and partners during the creative development process, creating a base of supporters before launch. In parallel FCB Inferno developed a three-phased behaviour change approach:

1. Realisation

Whilst fear of judgement was the universal barrier to exercise, it wasn’t necessarily talked about and women didn’t realise others felt judged too. We set out to spark conversations online and in social media to help women realise that they were far from alone in feeling that way.

The campaign soft-launched in October 2014, announced by Sport England CEO Jennie Price at the Women In Sport conference. Blue Rubicon worked with select media titles to create a succession of articles discussing the fear of judgement to introduce our creative work:

a series of online films, each telling the story of one hero woman (Kelly, Julie, Victoria or Grace) overcoming their individual barrier to exercise.
Using a unique social algorithm we identified women Tweeting their exercise anxieties and, in a truly social way, started proactive conversations to support and encourage confidence in the women who needed us most.

2. Inspiration

Our second stage focused on inspiring women on a mass level.

To encourage as many women as possible and create a new societal norm, we launched with broadcast creative on primetime TV. The 90”/60”/30” TV campaign was supported by a 90” cinema ad, YouTube takeover, digital and social ads and a national poster campaign.
3. Self-identification

Behavioural economics suggests that making a public statement improves the likelihood of cementing new attitudes and habits. Phase three focused on encouraging women to self-identify by using the campaign. If we had managed to empower women with the confidence to exercise, we wanted them to shout about it; whether that be talking about their activity, sharing their exercise photos or simply by using #ThisGirlCan.
The results: Girls Who Can

Since This Girl Can launched, it has received an overwhelmingly positive response.

The campaign landed incredibly well amongst media, influencers and our target audience.

Within days of the broadcast launch the campaign trended twice on Twitter, made it into Google’s Hot Trends and Top 12 Trending Searches. We received twelve consecutive days of positive news coverage with more than 110 pieces, and every TV breakfast show in England wanted an interview.

The core film has racked up over 57.1 million views and 806,400 shares. Starting from scratch in October 2014, we now have 327,000 fans on Facebook, 86,300 on Twitter and 81,000 on Pinterest. Campaign mentions have reached 690,000 and incredibly, women were sharing the outdoor executions and cinema ad, turning paid-for media into earned media.
Olympians, Paralympians, politicians from across the House, leading feminists and fellow brands have shown support for the campaign. However it is our audience who have fully embraced the campaign as their own.

Online, we have an army of supporters, or “Tinkerbells” (our term for the antithesis of online trolls), who add their own words of positivity to support women they’ve never met before and voluntarily defend the campaign on the rare occasion that it comes under criticism.
Weeks after launching we were so inundated with requests for merchandise that we partnered with Marks & Spencer to create This Girl Can clothing range. We’ve since launched two t-shirt ranges and an activewear collection, the first of which sold out online in just one day.
We launched a ‘mantra app’ - so women could create their own This Girl Can poster – which has had over 16,000 uploads since launching last Summer. And a Facebook fan even revealed the first ever This Girl Can tattoo.
A vast array of partners have taken the campaign on as their own.

Over 7,700 partners have signed up for the This Girl Can toolkit. This includes the BBC, who invited us to speak as part of an expert panel about appealing to women just three months after the broadcast launch.

Local authorities, parents, schools, libraries, universities and companies as large as Credit Suisse are using This Girl Can to encourage women to become more active.

Wembley, the home of football, asked to host the ad for free. Sports clubs, universities and even the BBC created their own versions of the 90” film and we have recently become an official partner of Sport Relief 2016.
The campaign has reached 111 countries with no international spend, and has resonated so highly that governing bodies in Australia, Scotland and other nations are asking how to replicate its success.
We are reshaping society's approach towards women and exercise.

The Government and media industry are changing the way they talk to, and about, women. Students have featured This Girl Can in dissertations about the future of the sport industry and it has been discussed in Parliament and featured in the Public Affairs Update email.

At the end of last year Nike launched “Better For It”: a step away from their usual competitive advertising style, which has been widely attributed to the influence of This Girl Can.
But most importantly, This Girl Can is changing behaviour.

We have been inundated with women attributing their return to exercise directly to the campaign. It has encouraged them to do something that they may have not done otherwise, and they are recognising the effect and thanking This Girl Can for it:

This anecdotal evidence has been heavily supported by our own research. Independent qualitative research undertaken by Future Thinking concluded that “almost all who have viewed the campaign talk of a shift in feeling – an increase in motivation to participate in sport and exercise”. A national quantitative study conducted by TNS BMRB has found that the campaign has inspired 2.8 million women to do more exercise: 1.6 million of whom have started exercising, and 1.2 million who have increased their participation.
Whilst the initial aim was simple - to get more women aged 14-40 to exercise regularly - achieving this was exceptionally challenging. But by uncovering a powerful insight, challenging the status quo and being creatively brave, we got women up and down the country inspired and exercising on an unprecedented level.