

7 Reputation Lessons from the World Cup

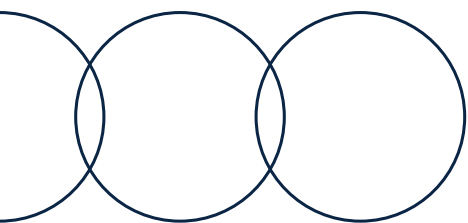
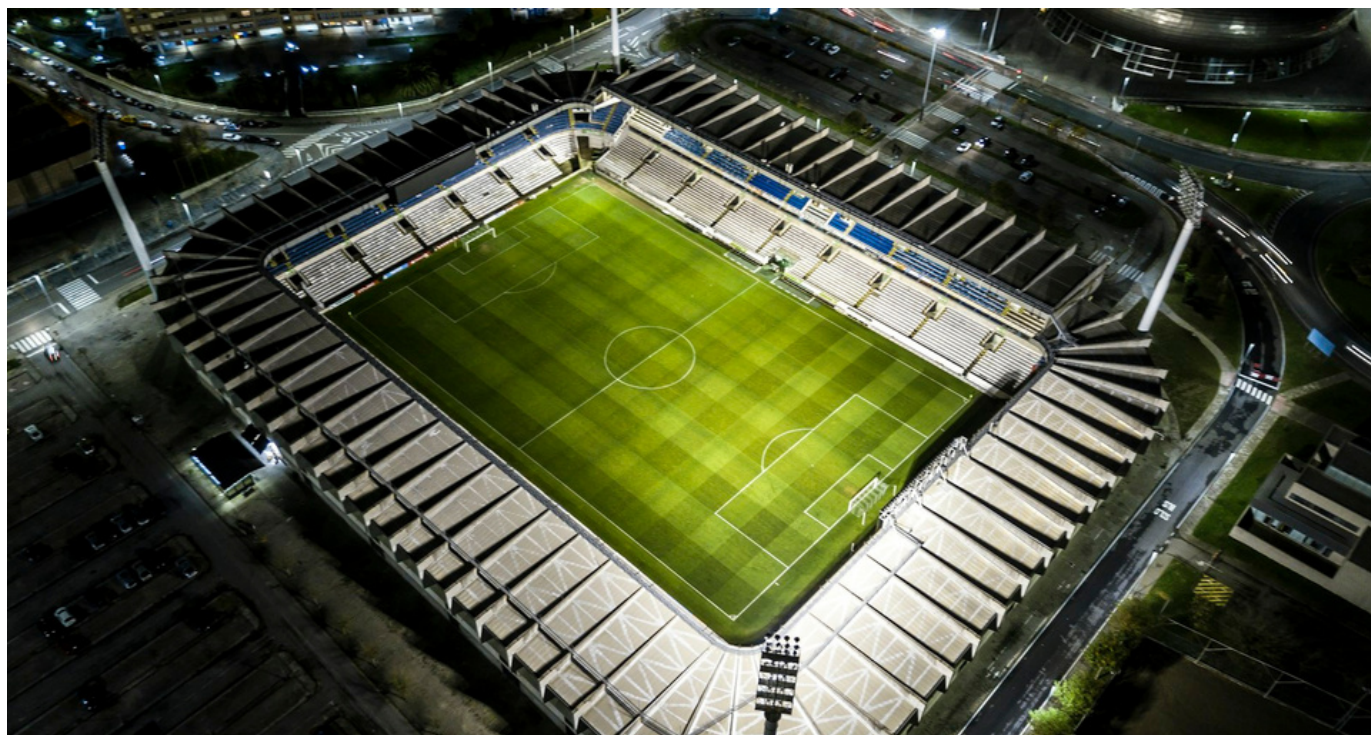
What the world's biggest stage teaches us
about reputation under pressure.



The Stakes: A \$2.8 billion stage, watched by six billion people

The 2026 World Cup generated \$2.8 billion in sponsorship revenue and \$10.5 billion in global ad spend, reaching roughly six billion viewers across 39 days in three host countries.

At this scale, spend guaranteed visibility. It did not guarantee the outcome. The brands that came out ahead were not always the ones who spent the most.



CASE STUDY

Levi's & Heinz: Two brands turned forced "debranding" into a viral compliance story.



Media Credits: [@heinz_ca](#) Instagram

Levi's, the denim retailer, and Heinz, the condiment brand, were not official World Cup sponsors, so FIFA's clean-stadium rules required their branding to be covered at host venues to protect paying sponsors' exclusivity.

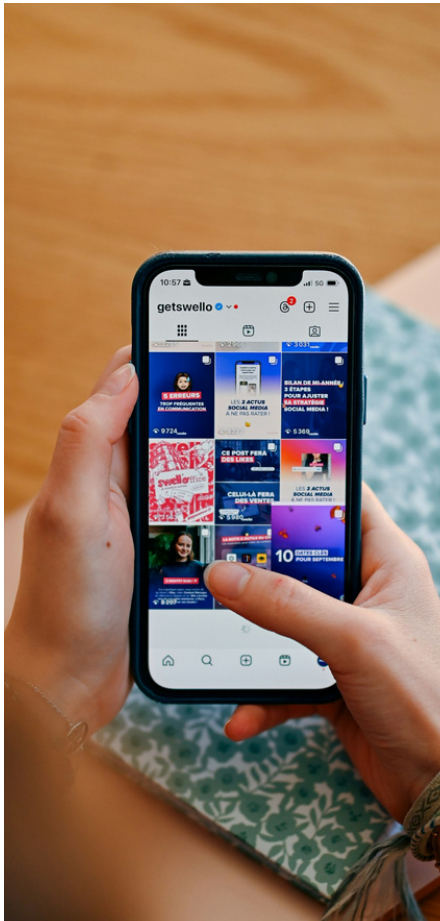
Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, the venue whose naming rights Levi's holds, was temporarily renamed and its logo tarped. Heinz condiment bottles inside stadiums were taped over.

Both brands leaned into the restriction publicly, and both went viral. Levi's beat paid media, and Heinz launched a limited "Unofficial Stadium Ketchup."

Why it matters: Compliance framed with wit outperformed a paid activation, and did so without spending a sponsorship fee.

CASE STUDY

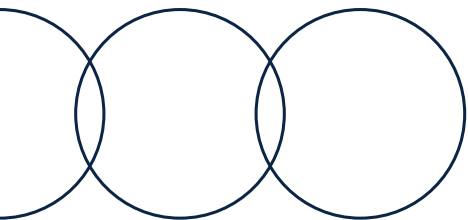
Burger King: Real-time posting beat bigger-budget sponsors on engagement.



Burger King, the fast-food chain, held no official World Cup sponsorship. Rather than running a pre-produced campaign, its social team posted fast, reactive content tied to live match moments as they happened.

Marketing coverage of the tournament credited this approach with consistently outperforming scripted activations from official sponsors with far larger budgets.

Why it matters: Speed and cultural fluency beat budget, confirming that sponsorship spend is not a prerequisite for cultural relevance at a major event.



CASE STUDY

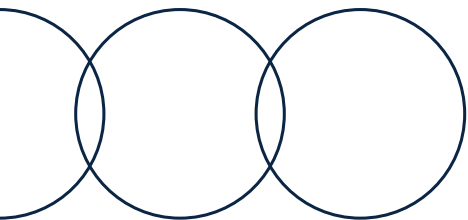
Coca-Cola & Powerade: One parent company, two opposite receptions.



Coca-Cola, an official World Cup sponsor, built its campaign around fan emotion, shared viewing occasions and a global trophy tour, largely avoiding controversy. Its subsidiary sports drink brand, Powerade, was tied to FIFA's mandated three-minute hydration breaks each half, introduced for player heat safety but filled with commercial inventory by broadcasters.

Independent social media monitoring found roughly 75 percent of online conversation about the breaks was unfavourable, and stadium crowds audibly booed the interruptions during several matches.

Why it matters: Reach and goodwill are not the same metric. The difference between Coca-Cola's reception and Powerade's came down to whether the activation felt earned by fans or imposed on them.



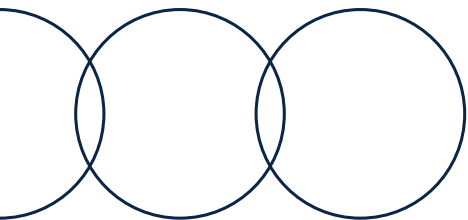
CASE STUDY

Player deepfake scam ads: AI-generated scam ads impersonating players surged during the tournament.



Revelum, a deepfake detection firm, documented over 10,000 scam advertisements impersonating football players over a 12-month period, cloning athletes' faces and voices to promote fake gambling apps and investment schemes they never endorsed, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Neymar. Scam ad volume linked to some players rose more than 1,000 percent in the days following the tournament's June 11 opening.

Why it matters: Reputational damage no longer requires a company's own action. Impersonation using a public figure's likeness can inflict the same harm as a real scandal.



CASE STUDY

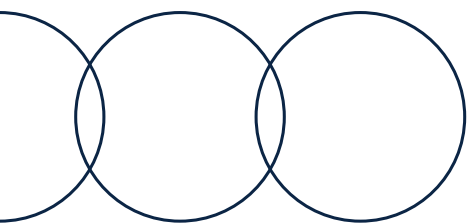
Home Depot: A sponsorship amplified scrutiny of an unrelated controversy.



Home Depot, the home improvement retailer and an official World Cup sponsor, faced sustained protest activity in Los Angeles over federal immigration enforcement actions at its stores and parking lots.

Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman had pressed Home Depot's CEO for answers over ICE activity at its stores, and advocates in Atlanta, where Home Depot is headquartered, had accused World Cup sponsors of "sportswashing" over the raids. During the tournament, a coalition of activists rallied outside the LA World Cup host committee's headquarters, explicitly naming the company's sponsorship. Home Depot has said it does not coordinate with federal agents and cannot legally bar them from its property.

Why it matters: A sponsorship can escalate scrutiny of a controversy a company did not cause and could not fully control, turning a high-visibility platform into a liability.



CASE STUDY

Infantino's plan to sell World Cup stakes collapsed within days.



FIFA, world football's governing body, unveiled a \$20 billion plan on July 28 to sell stakes in a new commercial entity that would run World Cup broadcasting, sponsorship and ticketing rights, backed by an investor group linked to Joshua Kushner.

UEFA, European football's governing body and FIFA's most powerful regional confederation, called an emergency meeting and its 55 member associations voted unanimously to boycott FIFA competitions over the plan.

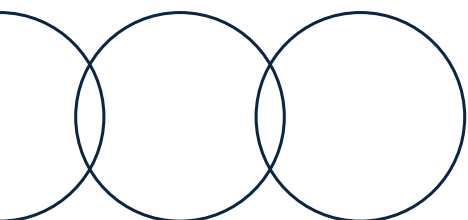
FIFA's own senior advisor, a former Goldman Sachs banker, resigned in protest. President Infantino abandoned the plan on July 31, three days after announcing it.

Why it matters: A major decision made without stakeholder buy-in produced a unanimous revolt and a public reversal inside 72 hours.

The tournament ended. The lessons did not.

Across seven cases spanning legacy consumer brands, a fast-food chain, a beverage sponsor, AI-driven fraud, a retail sponsor and a governing body, the organisations that controlled the narrative were not always the ones that caused or could control the moment itself.

Why it matters: A single high-visibility moment can build or damage a reputation built over years. Spend and scale did not determine who came out ahead. What mattered was how directly an organisation could shape the story once scrutiny arrived.



Could your organisation's response survive a moment like this?

Put it to the test before scrutiny does.

