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Millions tune in every day to compete and watch esports. But how can brands win with these huge audiences? Misha Sher, Vice President of Sports and Entertainment at MediaCom, explains...

Imagine being in a stadium packed with tens of thousands of screaming fans glued to their seats, mesmerised by the talents battling it out to be the best team in the world. If you're thinking this is the World Cup final or the Superbowl, you'd be wrong.

In fact, this is a new kind of sport which has taken the world by storm: esports organised multiplayer video game competitions. According to <u>NewZoo</u>, the global esports economy is estimated to be valued in the region of \$900m this year, up 38.2% on 2017, and predicted to reach \$1.65b by 2021.

This is big money and tournament prizes already stretch into the tens of millions. In fact, in 2018, Dota 2 International, the world's biggest esports tournament, offers \$25m in prize money. Put into perspective, the winner of the Tour de France, the 100-year-old cycling competition, gets just \$2.5m.

Esports has become mainstream for consumers and players but it remains new territory for many brands.

Understanding esports

Many marketers still think gamers are a bunch of nerds playing in their parents' basements. The reality couldn't be further from the truth. Professional esports teams train 8-10 hours a day, have coaches and nutritionists and receive salaries like other sports people.

What makes esports different from traditional sports though is the audience: millions of tech-savvy, affluent and highly engaged millennials. These are people who have become all but unreachable through traditional media and advertising.

While these millennials have taken control of their media consumption by deleting cookies, using private browsers, and blocking ads, esports gives marketers a way to reach them.

While the initial sponsors of esports tournaments were pretty native – think energy drinks and hardware brands – in the last 18 months, we've started to see mainstream brands enter the space. Mercedes-Benz, Gillette, Coca-Cola, LG, Mastercard, Unilever and Snickers have all invested advertising dollars and Nike has just signed a global endorsement deal with a League of Legends star, Jian Zihao.

This trend is only going to accelerate as the genre grows but right now the level of investment remains relatively cheap compared to traditional sports. The added benefit of getting in while the industry is still developing is that the early runners and riders will enjoy the biggest benefits in the longer term.

Engaging with esports

If your brand's desired audience consists of tech-savvy, affluent millennials then it would be negligent not to consider how esports can play a role in your marketing and communications mix.

To have a chance of building trust and equity with these audiences, however, your brand needs to go well beyond exposure and the typical spots and dots. As marketers, you need to ask yourself: what you can bring to the table that will benefit the viewers, the players, and the games? The esports community is eager and open to welcome brands into the fold – just so long as they bring value to the equation.

Time spent planning or thinking innovatively will be rewarded because first impressions are everything as esports fans can be unforgiving if they feel a brand is in it for themselves.

One brand that has authentically leveraged its presence within esports is Gillette. The male grooming brand teamed up with ESL, one of the largest tournaments, to reach a younger male audience. Adopting an experiential approach, the brand offered to groom the players and gave fans the chance to personalise razor handles using a 3D printer.

Unilever brand, Axe Hair, meanwhile, collaborated with Cloud9, one of the leading esports organisations, following players on the road, capturing digital and print content around the players' matchday styling routines.

The esports ecosystem is new and fast evolving and will be unfamiliar to many. Knowing where to invest and how to execute can appear daunting. Your agency can help with navigation and identifying the right audience and event.

The key to getting esports right is to ask where the sweet spot is for a brand in your vertical and develop a clear strategy around that. The space is there to own, you just need to work out how to play the game.

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