

Module 2. Digital and Marketing

Introduction: why digital and marketing strategy must be unified

Introduction

In today's hyper-connected landscape, the boundaries between digital strategy and marketing strategy have become increasingly blurred, and maintaining them as separate silos can limit both effectiveness and growth. Traditionally, marketing strategy has focused on positioning, messaging, and campaign execution, while digital strategy has dealt with infrastructure, platforms, and data capabilities. However, with rising fan expectations for seamless, personalized experiences across platforms, these two strategies must now operate in lockstep.

In the sports industry, this need for alignment is even more pronounced. Fans now engage with their favorite clubs and leagues across a variety of channels, from mobile apps and e-commerce platforms to social media and in-stadium screens. They expect not only real-time access to content, but also a consistent and personalized journey across touchpoints. These expectations are shaped not just by sports competitors, but by industry leaders in e-commerce, entertainment, and tech. This shift requires sports organizations to rethink how they design and execute strategy: moving from channel-centric planning toward a customer-journey-driven approach.

Research shows that high-performing organizations are those that embed digital capabilities into the core of their brand and marketing operations. Rather than treating digital as a support layer, they leverage it as a strategic driver of engagement, loyalty, and revenue. For example, leading sports clubs are using customer data platforms (CDPs) and CRM systems to unify fan data and personalize experiences in real time (Deloitte, 2023).

By aligning digital and marketing strategies under a unified, customer-focused plan, organizations can break down internal silos, activate rich fan data, and deliver more effective and coherent brand experiences. This integration also supports broader transformation goals, helping organizations move from disconnected campaigns to fully orchestrated customer journeys (McKinsey and Company, 2021).

This reading explores how sports organizations can successfully unify digital and marketing strategy. It introduces key mindset shifts, operational enablers, and case examples that demonstrate how strategic alignment creates value across the fan lifecycle.

The shift from channel-centric to customer-centric thinking



Introduction

In the evolving digital landscape of sports business, marketing and engagement strategies are being redefined. The traditional approach, where each communication channel operated in isolation, is rapidly being replaced by a model centered on the fan experience. Today's sports organizations must deliver seamless, personalized, and consistent journeys across all touchpoints. This section explores the strategic shift from fragmented, channel-specific execution to an integrated, fan-first marketing model.

From channels to journeys

Historically, sports clubs built their marketing around discrete platforms: social media, email, websites, and in-stadium screens were treated as separate units, each with its own goals, teams, and technologies. This channel-centric model made coordination difficult and often led to disjointed fan experiences.

In contrast, a customer-centric mindset focuses on understanding the fan's end-to-end journey and delivering value across all stages, from awareness to loyalty. Fans today interact with organizations across multiple touchpoints, often in rapid succession. They expect their experience to be connected, responsive, and tailored. A campaign delivered through Instagram should align with what the fan sees on the mobile app or receives via email. Managing this requires a shift in planning and measurement — away from siloed metrics and toward journey-based KPIs like fan lifetime value, churn risk, and conversion velocity.

The role of data and personalization

Customer-centricity depends on access to accurate, real-time data. Modern customer data platforms (CDPs) serve as the foundation by aggregating behavioral, transactional, and engagement data from across systems, including ticketing, e-commerce, CRM, apps, and content platforms. With this unified fan profile, sports organizations can execute more relevant communications and product recommendations.

For instance, a fan who watches highlights of the women's team on YouTube, browses related content on the app, and recently bought a related jersey might be presented with match-day ticket offers or loyalty program rewards. This level of personalization increases the likelihood of conversion while strengthening the emotional connection between fan and club.

Sophisticated segmentation — based on real-time behaviors, not just demographics — is also key. Clubs are moving beyond basic categories like age or location and instead analyzing frequency of engagement, recency of purchases, and content preferences. These behavioral segments power hyper-relevant, automated content journeys that reflect what the fan actually wants to see and when (Accenture, 2021).



Organizational alignment around the fan

Customer-centric strategy is not only a data or technology challenge, it is an organizational one. Success requires a shared vision across departments: marketing, digital, ticketing, content, and analytics teams must collaborate with a unified understanding of the customer journey. This means working toward common objectives, sharing insights, and coordinating execution.

According to McKinsey and Company (2022), companies that use cross-functional journey teams to manage customer experience see improved revenue growth and fan satisfaction. In the sports context, this could mean combining merchandising insights with app behavior to trigger targeted e-commerce offers, or syncing social media engagement data with CRM profiles to tailor email campaigns more effectively.

Without this kind of alignment, personalization becomes inconsistent and fragmented, defeating the very goal of customer-centricity. As such, rethinking internal collaboration models is essential to unlocking the full value of unified marketing and digital strategy.

Building blocks of a unified strategy

Introduction

Creating a unified digital and marketing strategy in the sports industry requires more than aligning campaign calendars or sharing data dashboards. It calls for an integrated operational model where both strategic intent and daily execution revolve around the same customer-centric principles. To succeed, organizations must combine the foundational building blocks of technology, collaboration, and measurement in ways that enable shared ownership of the fan journey.

Shared goals and unified KPIs

A unified strategy begins with unified objectives. Too often, marketing and digital teams operate with different success metrics: one measuring campaign performance, the other focused on platform usage or system uptime. This disconnect can dilute strategic impact and create internal competition for resources.

Leading sports organizations are increasingly adopting shared KPIs that reflect customer outcomes rather than departmental outputs. These may include fan engagement scores, digital revenue contribution, conversion rates across channels, or loyalty index tracking. By aligning on these metrics, teams can prioritize work that supports holistic value creation instead of localized wins (KPMG, 2022).

For example, FC Bayern Munich adopted an integrated strategy that brought together data, content, and digital operations under one cross-functional team to support club-



wide goals, not just digital traffic, but revenue, engagement, and fan retention (FC Bayern Munich, 2021).

Centralized data and connected systems

Data is the critical connective tissue between marketing and digital strategy. Without centralized access to reliable fan data, personalization remains limited, and cross-channel planning is guesswork. A modern CDP or integrated CRM system acts as the central intelligence layer that supports both campaign targeting and digital product optimization.

When data from ticket sales, e-commerce, content engagement, and social media is centralized, teams can segment audiences more accurately, personalize journeys across channels, and analyze performance across the full funnel. This kind of shared visibility creates stronger alignment between campaign planning and customer experience management.

Real Madrid, for example, invested in a centralized digital platform to connect all touchpoints, from mobile apps to membership programs — enabling real-time fan personalization and deeper commercial activation (Real Madrid, 2023).

Cross-functional, agile teams

Siloed structures often prevent the kind of real-time collaboration required for unified strategy execution. Many digitally mature sports organizations now organize around cross-functional teams or squads focused on specific customer journeys, lifecycle stages, or business objectives.

These teams typically include members from digital, marketing, content, analytics and tech working together in agile sprints to test, learn, and iterate based on performance data. This operating model shortens feedback loops, increases innovation speed, and ensures that every touchpoint is optimized for the customer, not the channel (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

For example, City Football Group implemented agile structures within their digital transformation program, allowing faster alignment between creative, technical, and strategic functions across their global network of clubs (City Football Group, 2023).

Alignment of brand, content and media strategy

Unified strategy also depends on cohesive messaging and storytelling. A club's brand identity, digital presence, and marketing communications must be designed and distributed as part of a singular experience, not fragmented narratives across different



platforms. This requires shared content planning, governance, and workflows between marketing and digital teams.

For instance, centralized content calendars, shared brand guidelines, and joint campaign roadmaps can ensure consistency across channels while allowing adaptation for different audience segments and formats. A unified asset management system (such as a digital asset management platform) also streamlines content usage and version control, particularly useful for organizations with high content volumes or global brand reach (Bynder, 2022).

Summary table: key building blocks of a unified strategy

Table 1. Key building blocks of a unified strategy

Building block	What it enables
Shared goals and KPIs	Unified direction and measurement across departments
Centralized data and connected systems	Real-time personalization, better segmentation, full-funnel performance analysis
Cross-functional agile teams	Rapid iteration, collaborative execution, and fan-focused planning
Brand and content alignment	Consistent messaging and storytelling across platforms and audience segments

Source: own elaboration.

Case examples from the sports industry

Introduction

While many sports organizations are still working toward integrated digital and marketing strategies, several leading clubs have already demonstrated what is possible when data, content, and technology are aligned around the fan. This section highlights real-world case examples that illustrate how a unified customer-focused plan delivers tangible results across engagement, loyalty, and revenue.

FC Barcelona: a club-wide digital ecosystem

FC Barcelona has been a leader in transforming its digital operations from fragmented initiatives to a cohesive ecosystem that supports marketing, fan engagement, and



commercial goals. The launch of Barça Innovation Hub, followed by the consolidation of digital content, CRM, OTT (Barça TV+), and e-commerce into one platform, marked a turning point in the club's digital journey.

By integrating fan data from various channels and using a centralized content strategy, the club has been able to tailor its digital communications and offers more effectively. Email campaigns, app notifications, and web banners are personalized based on fan behavior and preferences, improving open rates, click-throughs, and conversion to sales. This unified approach has also enabled the club to create audience segments for targeted campaigns — such as global merchandise promotions or subscription bundles tied to specific fan personas (FC Barcelona, 2022).

Importantly, this transformation was not only technological — it involved rethinking workflows, team responsibilities, and measurement. Cross-functional squads were created to align marketing campaigns with digital content production and product development, allowing for greater agility and shared KPIs.

Manchester United and HCL Technologies: platform-led strategy

Manchester United's partnership with HCL Technologies demonstrates how digital strategy can serve as the infrastructure for personalized, large-scale marketing and fan engagement. By building a centralized digital experience platform, the club has been able to connect over 659 million global fans to a unified content and commerce ecosystem.

The platform enables fan data capture from across touchpoints, including the club's website, mobile app, ticketing portal, and CRM system — and powers real-time content delivery, merchandise recommendations, and targeted communications. A major milestone was the integration of data analytics and AI tools that personalize offers based on browsing behavior, location, and purchase history (HCL Technologies, 2022).

Marketing teams are able to launch campaigns based on customer lifecycle triggers rather than static calendar schedules, for example, re-engaging fans who have not opened emails recently with tailored content, or offering merchandise discounts to app users who just watched a replay of a match. This demonstrates a strong bridge between digital capabilities and marketing strategy.

Juventus FC: journey-oriented content strategy

Juventus has adopted a journey-first content model to align its digital strategy with fan marketing efforts. Rather than planning content around internal timelines or promotional cycles, the club maps its output to fan lifecycle stages, including awareness, onboarding, engagement and loyalty.



The club uses behavioral data to identify fan intent and adapt content delivery accordingly. For example, new international fans may receive onboarding stories about club history and legends, while long-time supporters are targeted with interactive features like behind-the-scenes access or AR/VR experiences. Email flows, app messaging, and social media are orchestrated to work in tandem, based on unified content guidelines and cross-department collaboration (Juventus, 2021).

This holistic strategy has not only improved campaign performance but also supported Juventus’ goal of expanding its global footprint through relevant and meaningful digital experiences.

Summary table: sports organizations leading unified strategy execution

Table 2. Sports organizations leading unified strategy execution

Organization	Strategic focus	Impact
FC Barcelona	Integrated digital ecosystem across channels and teams	Increased personalization, commercial efficiency, and audience segmentation
Manchester United	Digital platform enabling marketing automation and AI	Lifecycle-driven campaigns and global fan engagement
Juventus FC	Journey-based content planning and personalization	Higher relevance of communication and international growth

Source: own elaboration.

Key success factors for strategy integration

Introduction

Successfully aligning digital and marketing strategies in the sports industry requires more than vision or investment. It demands deliberate structural shifts, leadership commitment, and cross-functional coordination to translate ambition into execution. Clubs that succeed in this integration share several common characteristics, these success factors form the operational foundation for a unified, fan-centric model.

Board-level ownership and leadership commitment

Digital transformation and marketing evolution cannot succeed as isolated departmental efforts. The most successful sports organizations ensure that digital strategy is embedded



into the overall business strategy, with direct sponsorship from top executives and board-level stakeholders. This ensures long-term prioritization, budget allocation, and cross-functional cooperation.

For example, Real Madrid created a digital strategy office reporting directly to the club's executive leadership, ensuring that data, content, and marketing activities were fully aligned with commercial growth objectives (Real Madrid, 2023). Similarly, FC Bayern Munich appointed a chief digital officer as part of its executive team to lead the integration of digital capabilities into all areas of fan and partner engagement (FC Bayern Munich, 2021).

Cross-departmental collaboration and structures

Strategy integration requires close collaboration across departments, particularly marketing, digital, content, ticketing and IT. Rather than functioning in silos, these teams must align their roadmaps, share goals, and jointly manage the customer journey. This may involve creating cross-functional squads, establishing journey ownership roles, or building shared performance dashboards.

City Football Group, for example, restructured its internal operations to build agile squads responsible for specific fan journeys (e.g. acquisition, onboarding, loyalty), enabling faster delivery and greater coordination across marketing and tech teams (City Football Group, 2023).

Investment in customer-centric technologies

A unified strategy relies heavily on the right infrastructure. CDPs, integrated CRM systems, content management tools, and analytics platforms are essential for enabling personalization, automation and real-time decision-making.

Without these technologies, even the best strategy can fall flat due to disjointed data and disconnected execution. For example, a club that lacks a centralized data platform may send generic emails to fans while missing the opportunity to trigger personalized messages based on recent engagement. Modern tools ensure that content, offers, and journeys are delivered with precision and relevance, increasing both fan satisfaction and commercial outcomes.

Deep understanding of fan behavior and needs

Finally, integration works only when the organization develops a shared, evolving understanding of its audience. That means going beyond demographic segmentation to study fan motivations, content preferences, lifecycle behaviors, and emotional drivers. Clubs must invest in continuous research, A/B testing, journey mapping and behavioral analytics.



By understanding what fans value, and how that changes over time, teams can develop unified plans that evolve alongside fan expectations. As highlighted in the PwC Sports Survey 2023, the ability to adapt quickly to changing fan behavior is one of the top differentiators of digitally mature sports organizations (PwC, 2023).

Summary table: success factors for digital-marketing integration

Table 3. Success factors for digital-marketing integration

Success factor	Why it matters
Board-level ownership	Provides vision, accountability and investment alignment
Cross-department collaboration	Enables cohesive planning and coordinated execution across channels
Investment in customer-centric technologies	Supports real-time personalization, automation and performance tracking
Understanding fan behavior	Drives relevant messaging, content strategy and journey optimization

Source: own elaboration.

Conclusion and strategic takeaways

The strategic imperative for integration

In today's digitally driven sports business environment, fans are not just spectators, they are connected consumers who expect personalized, real-time, and value-driven interactions with their favorite clubs and leagues. This shift has forced sports organizations to rethink how digital and marketing strategies are created, executed and measured. No longer can digital be viewed as a support function, nor can marketing operate in isolation from technology and data.

Instead, organizations must embed customer-centricity into the strategic core, creating unified frameworks that link fan expectations to content delivery, data intelligence, and commercial outcomes. This integration is not just an operational upgrade, it's a fundamental transformation of how clubs generate growth, loyalty and competitive advantage.

What leading organizations are doing right

The case studies and frameworks explored in this reading make one thing clear: success requires leadership, alignment, and adaptability.



- Leadership ownership ensures that digital strategy aligns with overall business vision, enabling prioritization and budget continuity.
- Cross-functional alignment ensures campaigns, content, and technology work together toward the same KPIs, not separate agendas.
- Real-time data platforms like CDPs allow organizations to personalize experiences at scale, increasing both fan satisfaction and revenue.
- Understanding fan journeys, and planning strategies around them, ensures relevance and engagement across every interaction.

These practices are not theoretical. Clubs like FC Barcelona, Manchester United and Juventus have operationalized them to create measurable outcomes: higher fan retention, increased direct-to-consumer revenue, and global reach through personalized engagement.

Avoiding pitfalls: legacy thinking and silos

At the same time, many organizations still fall short due to legacy structures and thinking. Common barriers include the following.

- Treating digital and marketing as separate cost centers.
- Operating on outdated KPIs (e.g., impressions or open rates) instead of customer lifetime value or engagement depth.
- Failing to share data between departments, leading to fragmented fan experiences.

These challenges are not merely tactical, they reflect an outdated model of business that no longer fits the modern, connected fan ecosystem.

Looking ahead: strategic takeaways

To future-proof their customer strategy and digital growth, sports organizations must adopt a new mindset. The following takeaways can serve as guiding principles.

- Unify strategy around the customer journey. Align planning, content, campaigns, and technology with fan needs and lifecycle stages.
- Invest in platforms that centralize data and automate personalization. Without connected infrastructure, integration is not scalable.
- Redefine success metrics. Move from campaign-based reporting to outcome-based KPIs that reflect business impact.



- Build agile teams and governance. Speed and flexibility are essential for staying relevant in a fast-changing fan environment.
- Make fan insight a shared responsibility. Marketing, tech, and leadership must collaborate to interpret fan behavior and respond accordingly.

Closing thought

Digital and marketing strategy integration is not just a digital transformation task: it's a business transformation imperative. As the sports industry becomes more global, more connected, and more competitive, the clubs that win will be those that truly understand and act on what their fans want, need and expect, before their competitors do.

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