

Legal Alerts

Avoid a Penalty Card: The Legal Playbook for World Cup Marketing

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With the World Cup approaching in June 2026, many brands are beginning to plan marketing campaigns aimed at engaging soccer fans across a global audience. While the term "World Cup" is commonly used in everyday conversation, it is a trademark that the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) guards closer than a goalkeeper facing a penalty kick in stoppage time.

Because there is a fine line between permissible, non-promotional references to the event and commercial uses that may infringe FIFA's rights, brands should carefully evaluate how references to the World Cup are incorporated into marketing efforts to ensure they are not called offside.

1. **Ticket Giveaways.** FIFA prohibits using World Cup tickets for promotional purposes, prize draws, contests, sweepstakes, lotteries, incentives and online auctions, unless expressly authorized by FIFA or conducted in cooperation with an official FIFA rights holder. Tickets distributed through unauthorized promotions may be cancelled once identified, and consumers may be denied stadium access. As a result, even well-intentioned giveaways or customer appreciation promotions present significant risk.
2. **Promotional Association.** Brands should avoid marketing that suggests a relationship with FIFA or the World Cup when none exists. Using the term "World Cup" in advertising, social media, packaging or labeling may create an implied affiliation with FIFA or a particular team or club, particularly when used to drive sales. Messaging that positions a product or service as being connected to, sponsored by FIFA or a particular team or club or intended for the World Cup should be avoided unless it is explicitly authorized.
3. **Intellectual Property Rights.** FIFA and individual teams or clubs own and actively enforce a broad portfolio of trademarks related to the World Cup, including names, logos, emblems and other protected imagery. Unauthorized use of these assets, even when altered or combined with other content may trigger enforcement action. Brands are generally required to obtain a license from FIFA to use official World Cup trademarks or branding, or from a particular team or club to use its trademarks. While fair use defenses may apply in limited circumstances, they are highly fact specific and must be approached with caution in commercial marketing.
4. **Third-Party Partners.** Advertising agencies, retailers, influencers and promotional vendors may attempt to incorporate World Cup themes or ticket giveaways into campaigns without fully appreciating FIFA's or a particular team's or club's restrictions. Brands should proactively educate partners and, where necessary, revise contracts, statements of work and campaign guidelines to prohibit unauthorized World Cup references and ticket-based promotions. Enforcement risk may extend to both activities by a brand and its partners.

5. **Consider Safer Alternatives.** Some brands reduce risk by avoiding direct references to the World Cup and instead using more general soccer-related language, such as "the tournament," "global matchups" or references to the timing of the event. While these approaches do not eliminate risk in every instance, they are commonly used to avoid implying affiliation with FIFA, the tournament, teams or clubs and to mitigate concerns around unauthorized marketing.

As planning continues for World Cup-themed campaigns, brands should focus on setting clear internal guardrails, aligning with partners early and testing promotional concepts before launch. Taking a measured, compliance-first approach, particularly around ticket use and implied associations, can help reduce avoidable risk. With the right strategy, brands can stay engaged with fans without earning a costly red card or being sent off the field.

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