

AN EPIC TALE OF STORYTELLING, AUTHENTICITY AND VALUE OF WOMEN'S SPORT

By Samara Kitchener, Founder & Director, House of Kitch Communications

I had the pleasure of curating last week's **Unleashing the Value of Women's Sport** forum hosted by the NSW Office of Sport, and MC'd by Adam Spencer at the MCA in Sydney.

Kerry Turner, Manager Office of Sport and former water polo World Champion athlete opened the day with her moving story about getting women's water polo recognised as an Olympic sport. "It's not ever about talent; it's about opportunity. Once we get to the stage our value is unleashed. Women's sport is a leap of faith, the brands that have taken the leap of faith have all recognised the return. The power of seeing women playing sport is intangible; it influences so many things – from a new generation of powerful role models; to a new generation of kids growing up with a redefined sense of self."

It was a day full of inspiring speakers at the forefront of women's sport in Australia. Six key themes emerged through the day that illuminate why women's sport is so hot right now.

1. WE ARE LIVING IN AN AGE OF PURPOSE, AUTHENTICITY AND STORY TELLING

"Studies find when price and quality are equal, the number one thing consumers care about is purpose," said Gayle While, Deputy CEO of Clemenger BBDO.

"Respected and loved brands, have a clear purpose. Today, people don't just want to buy something, they want to buy into something. They seek brands that deliver both great value and great values. There is a cause-and-effect relationship between financial performance and purpose."

"Authenticity matters because we live in an age of skepticism. Consumers today are doing more research than ever before about the products they choose to buy. And they're not just looking at product claims, they're looking closely at whether the values that a brand espouses are ones they themselves care about.

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GAYLE WHILE, CLEMENGER BBDO

“Millenials and Gen Xers are looking for brands they can believe in. Sports’ fan base, media coverage and attention-grabbing athletes is the highest profile channel for companies to promote their values and drive positive legacy change”, said Gayle.

2. STORYTELLING DRIVES EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

The hallmark of a good story has always been human connection, and an ability to connect with what matters to people. Kayla Ramiscal, Nielsen Sport, provided significant insights into female audiences. “Women – millennial women especially – connect with personal stories. They aspire and look up to other women who do things out of the ordinary, such as excel in sport, politics and show business.”

“72% of people are likely to follow up on an athlete and their sport after watching a personal profiling story,” said Kayla.

A brilliant example of such connection is the success of AFLW in engaging audiences and understanding the female market. Compelling content from the pre-season, game days, training, player profiles, and behind the scenes have been captured and shared. The resulting conversation across TV, digital and publisher platforms has driven interest well beyond what the AFL expected and raised the bar for all sports.



Darren Birch, General Manager - Commercial Operations at AFL highlighted how AFL needed to step back and bring in new expertise for AFLW. “It was AFL’s biggest learning curve and most uniting thing to work on.” On storytelling, Darren reflected that the emotional connection of AFLW players, depth of their stories, and lack of off-field scandal has given AFL a new kind of value. “With men players we shut down stories. With women players we let the stories flow.”

Thomas Dobson, Head of Media & Partnerships at NAB gave a sponsor’s perspective. “Our AFLW sponsorship has achieved higher brand consideration and hugely positive social sentiment. Our AFLW social videos achieved broad reach and many of our digital stories are watched to 100% completion. NAB AFLW content collectively reached a total of 6.6m people across our channels”.

One of the special moments of the day was when Thomas showed the conversion of his daughter and niece from Richmond Tigers fans to Brunswick Dragons players. They went from seeing it to being it.



samara kitchener @sam_kitch · Oct 19

Our AFLW digital stories are watched to 100% completion [@ThomasDobson](#) [@aflwomens](#) #unleashWIS



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“Demand on our female ambassadors is huge. They build financial, social and cultural capital, said Ryan Kaveney, Chief Fan and Commercial Officer, GWS Giants.

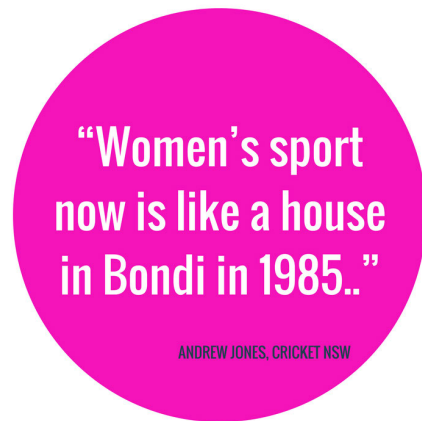
If you are ever in doubt of the power of storytelling you need to watch some of the GIANTS in all of us videos – particularly the one on [fierce, bold and inspirational AFL Women's captain, Amanda Farrugia](#); and [Jess Bibby](#).

3. INTEREST AND VALUE IS HERE, NOW!

“Women’s sport now is like a house in Bondi in 1985. Buy now – prices are low, impact is high, there is less clutter and better brand association,” was the quote of the day from Andrew Jones, CEO Cricket NSW.

“Cricket made a deliberate decision to professionalise women’s cricket. Why? It’s obvious – because men and women are equal and deserve equal opportunities.”

“Cricket has used income from international cricket to invest in Big Bash and women. We are investing in women; other sports are waiting for brand to invest before they do... If you wait, you get left behind,” said Andrew.



Similar sentiments were expressed by Kayla Ramiscal, Nielsen Sport – “Interest in women’s sport is the shining star of Australian sport. The good news is that Australia is leading the way in women’s sport. 47% of Australians are interested in at least one women’s competition. Women’s sport interest in general is increasing and the gap in interest between men & women is closing. This is important as 70% - 80% of purchasing decisions are made by women,” said Kayla.

“While most purchase decisions are made by women, 64% of women say they don’t have enough time. They only get 17 minutes of me time a day – how are you going to connect with them in a meaningful way in 17 minutes?” said Bec Brideson - author and female economy expert.

“You need to understand the female market to tap into that purchasing power. Using role model connections with authentic messaging drives meaningful connection that cuts through”, said Bec.

The Matilda’s are a true example of magical value just waiting to be realised. They are doing so well on so many levels. Power role models like Sam Kerr and Michelle Heyman are inspiring a whole new generation of kids.

Emma Highwood, Head of Women’s Football, outlined how FFA has placed the Matilda’s centrally in their participation strategy. They build engagement with open training sessions, school visits, and accessibility of their world-class players. “Community engagement is built into all Matilda’s home games. The players love being on the pitch after games and meeting their fans. We couldn’t get them off the pitch after the Brazil games,” said Emma.

“What is it that girls (fans) love? It’s not necessarily football – it’s the connection and access”, said Emma.

4. SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS RUN DEEP

Through the day we had incredible case studies from Lendlease, Kelloggs, Suncorp and NAB. These are not just sponsorships, they are partnerships that run incredibly deeply through the code, the brand and the corporate.



There was a moment when Courtenay Smith from Lendlease was interviewing Lendlease Breaker, Nicola Carey. You could almost physically see the bond that started with their connection, and then extended through Lendlease's commitment to backing equality, to the entire team. And the Lendlease Breakers are thriving - the most successful team in the history of the Women's National Cricket League with 17 titles in 20 seasons.

"Lendlease is committed to supporting an equal playing field in Lendlease and in cricket. The whole company is around pay parity for women, being able to do this in cricket is incredibly important for

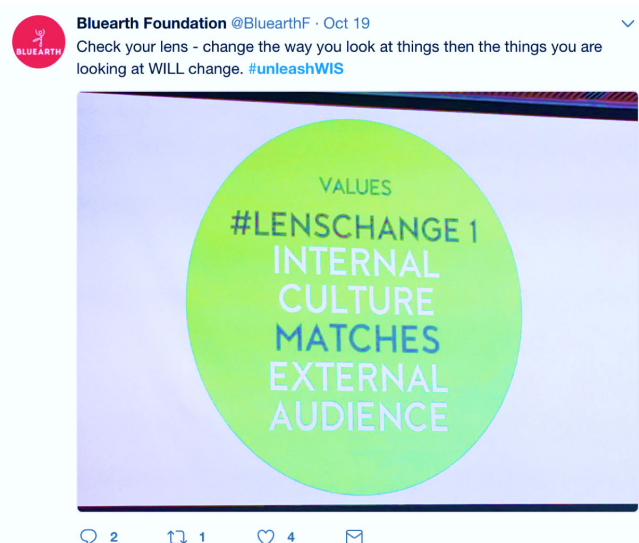
Lendlease. "It's difficult to measure but its priceless," said Courtenay Smith, CFO Property Australia, Lendlease.

"How does being professional help – we can train more, we can be better athletes, we have the time to be role models," said Nicola.

Sometimes the best partnerships seek you out. Marne Fechner, CEO, Netball Australia, said "Suncorp and Samsung came to us with the value proposition – role modelling and building self-esteem in young women. They saw our strength and the opportunity to align with us.

Marne's key take-outs were "Know your strength and map your values. The best partnerships are ones that align with these. Have the right product – sport is entertainment, so make your offering entertaining; and invest in building your own channels."

Understanding yourself and your audience is central to deep partnerships. Bec Brideson, shared some of her insights from working with AFLW and Cricket Australia. The success of Australian women's cricket and women's AFL is due largely to looking at these sports through a female lens. "When you change the way you look at things then the things you are looking at WILL change. Men and women think differently. Build it for them and they will come. True value comes when internal culture matches external audience."

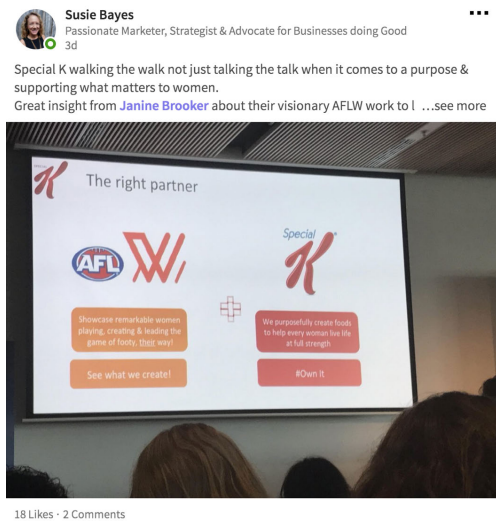


On the topic of value alignment and connection, Janine Brooker presented on the Kellogg's Special K sponsorship of AFLW. "7 out of 10 women have an "I hate my body moment every week" - Kellogg's Own It Campaign is moving away from the perfect body image and wanted to demonstrate our support for strong women.

"AFLW showcases remarkable women playing, creating and leading the game of footy their way. AFLW has been a cultural phenomenon and Special K a key part of it."

"It has worked to generate positive brand impact, said Janine:"

- 65% had better impression of Special K
- 70% believed Special K & AFLW are a great fit
- 50% say Special K inspires them to feel confident



5. WE NEED A NEW YARDSTICK FOR MEASURING VALUE IN WOMEN'S SPORT

"One of the issues is women's sport is being thought of and compared to men's sport, and one of the greatest selling points surrounding men's sport is TV audience & reach; a metric in which women can't yet compete", said Kayla from Nielsen.

"The strength in women's sport lies in other areas. The challenge for brands is leveraging these innate strengths to deliver tangible benefits and identifiable returns in a highly cluttered arena. The competitive advantage offered by women's sport is in the depth of engagement, accessibility and story-telling ability of talent, direct access to grassroots level of sport, and a positive brand association," said Kayla.

Given the greater thirst for continuous behind-the-scenes content and storytelling around events and athletes, digital and social will become ever more important to a rights holder and brand strategy.

"Sport is inherently social, with the power to build and connect communities around the world"

KARREN ROGERS, FACEBOOK

"Sport is inherently social, with the power to build and connect communities around the world. This has been true since well before Facebook," said Karren Rogers, Head of ANZ Media Partnerships at Facebook.

"Facebook entertains, connects and engages people in the world's largest stadium. We believe now is the time to really collaborate. Traditional media consumption is changing with many eyeballs moving to digital. We are committed to collaborating with the industry to work through this transition together," said Karren.

"We trade in memories of powerful, unscripted moments," said Pat Moloughney, Network Director, Sport Sales, Seven West Media as he gave some solid insights into the changing media landscape and what this means for women's sport.

"Approachability is one of the greatest assets of women athletes". Pat gave the example of the true partnership with AFLW, where Seven had to increase content to meet market demand.

"The public and media hunger has never been higher – there is more buzz and eyeballs. We've been captivated by women's sport, and it is igniting stories everywhere. "The future is limitless if we all work together," said Jacqui Mooney, Editor, Australian Women's Health.

Nicole Jeffery, Sports Journalist, The Australian, outlined why women's sport is doing so well on the talkability front. "It's easier to love one person than a whole team. Use your individual athletes as a way to draw people in. Sports in the past have been reluctant to do this due to off-field scandal. Women tend to hold stories better, and are a safer bet."

"Understanding women's and men's sports is an education process. Men shine on strength. Women shine on skill, quality of contest and toughness", said Nicole.

Why is all this so important?

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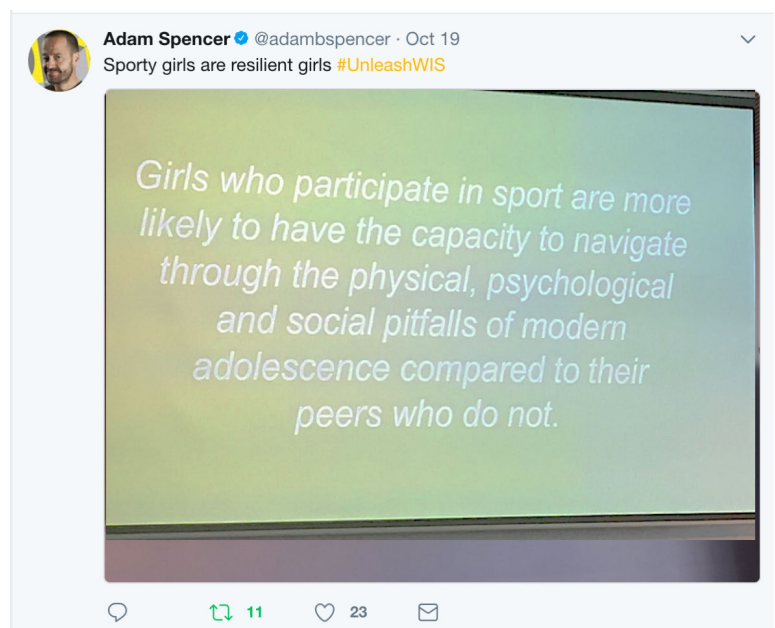
JACQUI MOONEY,
AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S HEALTH

6. SPORTY GIRLS ARE RESILIENT GIRLS

The most powerful tweet of the day was from our brilliant MC, Adam Spencer. "Sporty girls are resilient girls" struck a chord as it is true. Sport helps teenage girls keep it real. In an age where selfie life has become so picture perfect, sports gives kids a chance to find their inner strength, stretch themselves and be part of a team. It was so real hearing Nicola Carey from the Lendlease Breakers, and Amy Harrison, Westfield Matildas, talk about just wanting a clean pitch that you won't roll your ankle on.

"The loss of confidence of girls is a risk affecting their personal wellbeing into the future", said Jenny Hutchison, Manager, Sponsorship, Brand & Marketing, Suncorp Group.

Jenny also spoke of a link between sports participation in girls and longer term financial wellbeing.



Clare McMeniman, former Diamonds captain, reflected on being a 6-foot-tall 12-year-old constantly slouching and trying to fit in. When she started playing netball, self-doubt was replaced with nervous excitement, and she found a place where she could be the most authentic versions of herself. “Sport was where we had fun, where we were inspired by our friends to be our best and where we felt valued. Netball became my tribe.”

A piece, *Letters of confusion & love*, written recently by [Michelle Heyman in Players voice](#) summed it up really well - “They’re drawn to me because they can see I’m happy in my own skin at a time when they’re trying to come to terms with who they are.”

That is why this is all so important!



Photo Source FFA: Katrina Gorry